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Exploring the Experiences of Higher Education Students Involved with the Development of a Responsive and Student-Centered Learning Support Program

Debra Park

George Fox University, dpark08@georgefox.edu

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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS INVOLVED
WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESPONSIVE
AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING SUPPORT PROGRAM

By

DEBRA PARK

FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE:

Chair: Terry Huffman, PhD

Members: Sue Harrison, PhD and Gary Tiffin, PhD

Presented to Doctor of Education Program and the College of Education,
George Fox University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

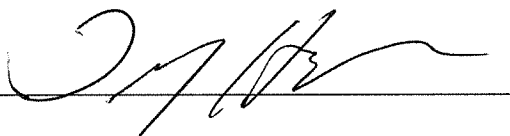
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“EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS INVOLVED WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESPONSIVE AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING SUPPORT PROGRAM,” a Doctoral research project prepared by DEBRA PARK in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in the Educational Foundations and Leadership Department.

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by:


5/12/15 
Date Terry Huffman, PhD

Committee Chair

Professor of Education

5/12/15 
Date Gary Tiffin, PhD

Associate Professor of Education

5/12/2015 
Date Sue Harrison, PhD

Assistant Professor of Education

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of students with college support services. The researcher identified and presented training for students who had been involved with student support services for more than one academic year, to act as focus group facilitators. Another group of students who had received support services for less than one academic year, was involved in the study as focus group participants. Two general themes and five subthemes emerged from the data analysis. These include the general theme Supportive Campus Environment (three subthemes: feeling isolated and alone; open academic and personal support; and visibility/availability of support services), and the general theme Student-Faculty/Staff Interaction (two subthemes: concerns with stigma; awareness and empathy). Data derived from the focus group sessions clearly demonstrates that interaction with faculty and staff and the visibility and availability of services are vital toward enhancing the use of support services. Additionally, obstacles such as time constraints, awareness of services, and concerns with stigmatization present barriers to seeking service. The findings of this research are compared to similar, important studies previously conducted in Alberta, Toronto, and Surrey, United Kingdom in order to draw significant conclusions about potential opportunities to create student centered support services.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The real challenge lies in listening carefully to what students are telling us, reflecting upon it, learning from it, and leading change with them by our sides.

Dr. Russell Quaglia

Higher education students with accessibility needs are unique and complex. In addition to being students with identified learning disabilities that may co-exist with various conditions including attention, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2002), these students may also be in their first-year, first generation college attenders, mature students returning to learning, from another culture with English as their second language, or students who did not complete high school and have remedial courses to complete prior to pursuing a program of study.

A number of research studies have been conducted regarding students with learning disabilities (Albert & Fairweather, 1990; Avramidis, & Skidmore, 2004; Bloom, Bryant, Hutson, He, & Konkle, 2013). Support services are extremely important for students with identified challenges affecting their learning, such as diagnosed learning disabilities or mental health conditions (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). These students often have a much more difficult time completing degrees in post-secondary institutions. One particular study commissioned by the Government of Alberta in 2004-2005 (hereafter referred to simply as the Alberta study) is especially helpful as it provides a status review of post-secondary services and student accessibility needs across the province (Russell, 2005). Thirteen post-secondary institutions

chose to participate in this study, which consisted of both student and accessibility provider focus groups. The students involved with the focus groups were identified as being 59% female and 41% male and an age range of 18 to 48 years of age, which is very similar to the students served at Medicine Hat College. This large, year-long study provides not only a model for future study, but also identifies effective and ineffective services using students' perspectives as well as documenting the views of service providers (Russell, 2005). An additional Canadian study providing a useful comparison was a five-year effort by University of Toronto (hereafter simply referred to as the Toronto study) that utilized student focus groups to gather detailed information regarding areas of need (University of Toronto, 2010).

Given the variety of needs, as well as individual strengths, diverse programs of study and interests, challenges abound for the students when their support services department operates as a "one size fits all" program. In addition, when programs are identified from a problem-base, such as being specifically titled as disabilities or mental health services, students may be hesitant to connect with supports due to prior stigmatizing or even bullying experiences.

Programs delivered as being strength-based and presented in a positive manner, such as Student Success Centers or peer mentoring based supports, may be more likely to be accessed by all students, and be especially appealing for the student with learning challenges (Seligman, 1990). Examples of services and accommodations that are commonly provided in college and university accessibility services offices include additional time for exam completion, alternate format textbooks for accessing audio capabilities, and learning style and strategy planning individually. Services that include opportunities to build connections and supports with other students can help students overcome obstacles they may experience in their education, and increase their ability to operate (Seligman, 1990).

As a part of a strong and responsive program, many colleges and universities are adding a peer mentoring component to increase connections and engagement. Increasingly, programs are being developed to be student-centered and sustainable through student perspective and voice and these efforts have been shown to lead to comprehensive and multi-tiered systems of support for all students. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has committed significant resources and energy into the concept of comprehensive student support services in higher education, including their coordination of the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education held in Paris. Guided by the efforts of Dr. Mary Louise Kearney, Director of External Relations and in Higher Education, UNESCO created a manual addressing the need for post-secondary institutions to provide services “designed to enable and empower students to focus more intensely on their studies and their personal growth and maturation, both cognitively and emotionally” (UNESCO 2002, p. 2). The manual also stresses that programs must be student-centered, and recognizes that students must be equal partners in the development of programs and services in higher education to those employed by each institution.

The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) has identified eight conditions that make a significant difference in student academic, personal, and social potential. These conditions include: Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun and Excitement, Curiosity and Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership, and Responsibility and Confidence to Take Action (Quaglia, 2014). Based on more than two decades of research, these conditions emphasize relationships, engaged learning, and students' sense of purpose. Student engagement has been a term frequently found in educational research and innovation ranging in studies of dropout, school completion, and graduation rates. QISA has conducted research for many years,

initially focused in higher education, but subsequently expanded to K-12 education. The professionals at QISA provide resources with the perspective that “students are the potential, not the problem, in today's educational system” (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007, p. 1). Their work has identified conditions in each student's educational environment which contribute to student aspirations and increased relevance and relationships.

While there are a few studies related to services with a number of specific populations which are helpful by focusing on improving services for students with identified learning disabilities (Powell, 1997; Thompson, 1991; Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007), there is a lack of research on programs where students are key members in the development and delivery of student support. This lack of study is especially apparent in higher education (West, 1993). Thus, this qualitative study is an attempt to explore the perceptions and experiences of higher education students involved with the development of a responsive learner support program.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of higher education students identified as having learning challenges and receiving support services. Using a focus group approach, I conducted a qualitative study to discover the participants' perceptions of and experiences with support services. My objectives for this effort were to gain better understanding of the current strengths and opportunities in order to improve or enhance resources to support our students. As such, this study contributes to both basic and applied research aims. Student voice and the findings of this study provide an important perspective as the college attempts to build a student-centered development focus.

Research Questions

This was an exploratory investigation. There were number of specific questions I sought to examine in order to establish foundational information and insight. Three research questions served as a framework for structuring the research:

1. What are student perceptions and experiences with support services?
2. What are the factors which lead students to be engaged with support services?
3. What are the factors that hinder students' involvement with support services?

Key Terms

Accessibility: The degree to which persons with disabilities can access a device, service or environment without barriers. Accessibility is also a process; it is the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers to persons with disabilities (McMaster University, 2014).

Appreciate inquiry: Is a group dynamic process that focuses on asking questions and gathering information in a positive manner for strategic planning. It is based on “the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 245). Appreciative Inquiry is often paired with the SOAR Framework (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results).

Aspirations: The ability to set goals for the future while engaged in the steps to reach these goals (Quaglia, 2007).

Disabilities Services: Provide on-campus academic support for college and university students with disabilities at public and private post-secondary institutions in Canada (Canadian Association of Disability Service Providers in Post-Secondary Education, 2004).

Engagement: Degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to

learn and progress in their education. It also includes the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, and extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education (Glossary of School Reform, 2014).

Eight Conditions: Quaglia Institute term for the conditions that make a difference for student success. The Eight Conditions are: Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun and Excitement, Curiosity and Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership, and Responsibility and Confidence to Take Action (Quaglia Institute of Student Aspirations, 2013)

Learning Disabilities: Learning Disabilities refer to a number of disorders, which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding, or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency. Learning disabilities may co-exist with various conditions including attentional, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2002).

Learning Strategies: Efforts designed to provide structure and organization so that learning can be accomplished more effectively and efficiently (Alberta Learning, 2002).

Mature Student: A mature student is usually someone who has been out of school for at least one year. Applications by mature students are evaluated differently from applicants who have just finished high school (Ontario Settlement Organization, 2015).

Self-Determination: A combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's

strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998).

Student-Centered: Programs constructed to place the student in the center of the learning process. In student-centered learning, students are active participants in their learning. That is, learning is more individualized than standardized. Student-centered learning develops learning-how-to-learn skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and reflective thinking. Student-centered learning accounts for and adapts to different learning styles of students (National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, 1999).

Limitations and Delimitations

This qualitative study utilized one focus group with trained student facilitators and student participants. Specifically, I used a series of facilitator trainings followed up by three focus group sessions to elicit a significant amount of information. This design presents a limitation in the ability to generalize findings to any group of students in the larger population or the populations of other colleges. The small size of the focus group, combined with non-probability sampling did not allow statistically significant generalization of responses to a larger population. Also, the voluntary nature of focus group participation and challenges with student time and commitments resulted in some attitudes and input to not be shared in detail. The risk of incomplete data challenges all social researchers and is especially vexing for qualitative researchers (Maxwell, 2005).

Delimitations included the process utilized to identify students included in this study. Student facilitators for the focus groups were returning students who had received services for at least one full academic year and who completed the initial group facilitation training. Effort was made to reduce this limitation of using student peers as group facilitators by supervision and

continued support provided by myself and our college counselor. The student participants for the focus groups included students eligible for accessibility services who at least utilize exam accommodations. There also were some potential participants who left the school due to a number of factors including academic or life challenges prior to the beginning of the focus groups.

Due to concerns raised by the host institution regarding the potential dual role had I been both the primary focus group facilitator as well as providing direct accessibility services to the participants, the decision was made to use trained returning students as facilitators. These students volunteered to be involved in sessions during the summer of 2014, as well as prior to the focus group sessions beginning in 2015. I provided training in focus group facilitation using the SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) framework of Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is also being used as the foundation for the host college strategic planning, so was an appropriate resource for student leadership development. Though this addition did address the concern of the host college ethical board, it also created a limitation, as well as a delay, in the launch of the project.

Summary

The transition into post-secondary education has many challenges for all students as they adjust to an environment that requires them to be much more self-directed and have increased responsibility for their own learning. For the student with learning challenges (including those identified with learning disabilities, a mental health diagnosis, and/or who may be non-native English speakers), this transition can be especially difficult. In many institutions, students must have the skills and the confidence to self-identify as a student with a specific learning disability, mental health diagnosis, or other possible skill deficiency or challenges, and then to locate

needed services on their own. This additional responsibility, without outreach and established support prior to beginning courses, can add new independent learning requirements, including how to organize these strategies and resources. These added burdens can cause many students to struggle more than is necessary (Mrazik, Bender, & Makovichuk, 2010).

There is an emerging framework, however, that is changing this paradigm from one that is problem or challenge focused to one that is appreciative, strengths-based, and utilizes student experiences and voices in order to create a more welcoming and open system of support (Bloom, Bryant, He, & Konkle, 2013). This first chapter thus provides an overview of the motivation for and purpose of this study. Chapter 2 containing the literature review will explore key components of research that have focused on both specific and general groups of students who transition to post-secondary education with examples of particular programs to provide support. Chapter 3 outlines the fundamental methodological processes and research ethics. Chapter 4 presents the major findings including themes and subthemes as well as integrating these insights into summary answers to the three research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a discussion on the implications of the study, recommendations for action, and suggestions for future study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Student engagement is of foundational importance in order to positively impact student success. There are numerous conceptualizations of engagement. For the purposes of this study, my use of engagement follows closely to the definition proved by Sinner and Pitzer (2012) which regards engagement as a: “complex concept which consists of four distinct sections or nested levels identified as (a) Engagement with Pro-social Institutions, (b) Engagement with School, (c) Engagement in the Classroom, and (d) Engagement with Learning Activities” (p. 22). Student engagement is a term frequently found in educational research and innovations including public education studies of dropout, and/or school completion, as well as a specific data point regarding graduation rates and higher education enrollment (Powell, 1997; Thompson, 1991). The massive, *The Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* produced by the National Center for Response to Intervention (2012), by its very breadth, indicates how important this topic has become not only on a national scale but on a global scale too. This extensive document addresses multiple areas of past study and identifies possible gaps for future research. A number of studies cited in *The 2012 Handbook for Student Engagement* focus on the issue of resilience. For example, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) linked student engagement and resiliency, as well as the importance of relationships with instructors, peers, and parents. This study provided an early strong resource for my own study due to the specific focus on the increasing importance of positive peer connections in all areas of student learning and development. Discovering the Alberta study from 2005, which focused on identifying effective and ineffective disability

services across thirteen post-secondary institutions, made a significant difference in my confidence in the importance of this work. The host college for this study, Medicine Hat College, was not involved in this 2005 study, nor were staff aware of the recommendations for service delivery. Administrators were especially interested in learning what students' experiences have been and how best to respond to those experiences. One of the strongest areas of consensus among the students involved in the Alberta study was that as learners with accessibility needs, there is a desire to be much more engaged in active communication regarding effective services and opportunities to support each other.

A variety of programs have been implemented across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to impact student engagement. Moreover, a number of research studies in this area include those by organizations such as Search Institute which has centered its focus on developmental assets (Benson & Scales, 2011), and the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA), whose work has been founded on the importance of student voice (McNulty & Quaglia, 2007). Also, researchers have found that peer support and student leadership positively impact attitudes toward school and lead to improved academic achievement (Powell, 1997; Thompson, 1991). Although there are a few studies conducted on post-secondary mentoring and support from the 1970s to the early 1990s focusing on student retention and success (Goldschmid & Goldschmid, 1976; Whitman, 1988), higher education interest began to increase for these types of programs over the past 15 years. Budgetary reduction has been identified as one challenge that caused post-secondary institutions to expand student support in creative and cost-saving ways. It is often common for these innovations to include peer mentoring and learning strategy programs (Topping, 1996). A report from the University of Dundee, Scotland references past thematic discussions regarding social interaction theory and the importance of peer mentoring and support

in the development of learning (as well as reinforcement of cognitive abilities and social skills for both mentors and mentees) (Topping, 1996).

This review of literature primarily focuses on the general theme of services for students with identified disabilities and their accessibility needs. With that said, I divide the review into five specific sections: support for students identified with learning challenges; first year student support; mature students returning to learning; support for students of a specific cultural group; and innovative efforts to develop student support programs.

Support for Students Identified with Learning Challenges

Expanded opportunities along with legislation designed to assist students with learning challenges such as reading or math based learning disabilities; diagnoses including attention deficit and autism spectrum, brain injury, and mental health conditions, has resulted in a significant increase in the number of students seeking higher education. In addition to transition difficulties, students with learning challenges experience an assortment of obstacles and needs (Gregg, 2007; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002; Wehman, 2006). Their requirements for support have resulted in post-secondary institutions finding it necessary to develop and enhance comprehensive student support programs. Some studies have reported a steady increase in the number of students with learning challenges. Indeed, it is likely that these individuals average about 10% of campus enrollees (Adelman & Vogel, 1993; National Center on Education Statistics, 1999; Sitlington, 2003). The increase in student attendance, however, does not result in significant success for all these students. A study in 2002 focused on comparing degree completion rates for students with a diagnosis to those without, found that 80% of students with diagnosed conditions had not graduated after five years (Capps, Henslee, & Gere, 2002). Issues such as a new environment, increased responsibility, numerous instructors who have varied expectations,

and the reality that students must seek interventions on their own due to personal responsibility and confidentiality, can cause many students to be at additional risk of academic failure. This is especially true when it may have been their parents, teachers, or school counselors who ensured they received support in secondary school (Gregg 2007).

Higher education students under confidentiality laws are considered adults and records are not automatically shared among programs at the institution (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Wehman, 2006). One of the barriers identified by students as most challenging is that post-secondary staff expect them to be able to articulate the impact of their disability as well as the most effective strategies to meet their needs. Yet, most secondary program services are driven by professional opinion and decision making, rather than teaching students how to understand and articulate their own needs (Mrazik, Bender, & Makovichuk, 2010). Many students report they are unsure what their diagnosis really means, have limited understanding of the supports that would be most effective, and hesitate to make general statements about courses they have not yet begun. Misunderstanding and frustration from and with instructional faculty is frequently identified as contributing to the students' reluctance to seek the supports necessary for their success (Albert & Fairweather, 1990; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales 1995; Wehman, 2006; Mrazik, Bender, & Makovichuk, 2010).

First Year Student Support

One of the most common forms of student support in higher education is directed toward first year students as they transition into a new level of education. Transitioning to post-secondary education has been identified as challenging for all students due to the many changes they experience, including residency and living arrangements, social life and connections, increased financial responsibilities, and general uncertainty for course of study and career

aspirations (Wehman, 2006). Jacobi (1991) discussed the challenges of researching the effectiveness of programs offered to assist first year students due in part to the great variety of programs, but also that the goals and objectives frequently are completely different from one university to another. Current research clusters into three primary types of transitional support. These types include: 1) formal large scale programs intended to support an entire group of first year students; 2) formal programs targeted for students who are identified as being at risk for academic challenges; and 3) less structured programs that are initiated through student request alone.

A study conducted at the University of Western Ontario by Rodger and Tremblay (2003) utilized an experimental design to explore whether involvement in a support program impacted academics and retention of first year students, as compared to other first year students who did not receive this additional support. These authors focused their research in three areas they believed could potentially be impacted by peer support: academic/cognitive, motivation, and social. This study involved a large group of students (537 participants) who were grouped as either those applicants who were randomly selected to receive support (which included mentoring), applicants randomly selected who did not receive this support, and first year students who did not apply for any support. The researchers found a positive impact in the areas of focus, especially among those students with the highest levels of participation in the support sessions.

Mature Students

Age is an aspect of diversity that may not often receive the level of attention or specialized services that eligible disability or language learning engenders. However, particular focus on older students entering post-secondary education is an emerging area of concentration. An extensive study conducted by the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom (hereafter referred to as the Surrey

study) sought to discover from the perspective of mature students what was needed to be successful in their studies (Newson, McDowall, & Saunders, 2011). This effort encompassed the many factors that can affect older students including learning disabilities, complicated financial obligations, family responsibilities, and limited experience with educational technology. Personal interviews were used for this study and included coding for common themes that led to program and policy re-design or development for the university.

A number of post-secondary institutions are developing specially designed resources including webpages and orientation for the mature students. One example is the work being done by Lethbridge College that includes a specific webpage dedicated to mature students (<http://www.lethbridgecollege.ca/admissions/what-describes-you-best/mature-students>). This particular webpage includes a welcome that reflects the life challenges that these students often face. “Challenges like paying the mortgage, raising children and continuing to work full-time or part-time while attending school demand you find a life balance to succeed. We can help maximize your experience and minimize your anxiety” (<http://www.lethbridgecollege.ca/admissions/what-describes-you-best/mature-students>).

Support for Diverse Students

Andrews and Clark (2011) conducted a study of support programs designed at five universities that included a strong mentoring component. They identified the issue of numerous definitions and lack of consistency in program design as challenges to their comparative study. In an effort to overcome the lack of conceptual definition, the authors included the work of Topping (1996) as a guiding principal for mutually beneficial mentoring. Nevertheless, conceptualizations of services and needs for diverse students remains a challenge not only for researchers but for student support services staff as well.

Programs specifically developed to support students from an identified minority group are an area of significant growth. This increase, particularly in the United States, has both led to and been enhanced by the development of U.S. federal funding opportunities. The College Access Challenge Grant is one of the most familiar federal funding programs to specifically support first generation college students, particularly those who are Latin-American, Native-American, or African-American. The funding received from this grant is the primary source for programs such as TRIO and Upward Bound which provide services and transition support for secondary students and student support services on post-secondary campuses. These are United States Federal funding and training programs intended to develop outreach and student services programs that identify and provide services for individuals from backgrounds described as “disadvantaged” (U.S. Department of Education). Many community colleges and universities which receive these program funds utilize a mentoring model to connect higher education students, first with secondary students in their attendance area, and then to operate learning support centers for students identified as disadvantaged as they transition into college. The 2012-13 Program Performance Measure for Student Support Services focuses on program of study persistence and completion of post-secondary studies. The overall persistence rate for students involved in these programs was 87.3% and the degree completion rate was 50.4% (US Government Department of Education, 2013). Each of these percentages exceeded the target rates for participating institutions.

A study completed by Native American doctoral candidates from University of Oklahoma acknowledges that despite significant gains, Native American students are the lowest participation group in higher education (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007). This qualitative study provides a personal perspective from the small group of students through the use of

individual interviews and focus groups. Important factors associated with retention identified by these researchers were personal and relationship-based, consisting primarily of the peer mentors' connection and conveyance of care for their mentee, and the subsequent responsiveness and appreciation from the mentee to their supporter (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintron, 2007).

Development of Student Support Programs

The development of student support programs driven by student voice and strong involvement is of particular interest. These types of programs have the potential to assist in identifying students holistically. That is, in a manner that includes the broadest sense of their needs including year in their studies, cultural identification, as well as social and academic strengths and needs. It had been common in the past that educational professionals, operating without student voice, create specific structure and focus for their higher education institutions in one area such as disability services, or first generation students, without fully connecting supports designed to meet the diversity of student needs. Students are contacted when the program design is complete and are expected to seek these supports on their own. Bringle and Hatcher (1990) focused on student-driven service learning program development in higher education. The authors summarize recent presentations and efforts that stress the evolving mission of institutions of higher education to develop multifaceted approaches committed to career development and students' growth. Many service learning programs, including peer mentoring, are established solely as voluntary activities, but these authors recommend that, whenever possible, the institution should consider offering credit for these efforts as a means to convey the value of student service.

Significant decline in school involvement and engagement was documented by numerous studies as students' transition from high school to post-secondary education. Special discussion

is made on the even greater decrease in activity for students who are not in residence, such as community colleges. Early activities and efforts should be less complicated in order to have a high likelihood of success to support students as they gain confidence and experience by providing support and actively engaging in leadership endeavors.

The National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs sponsored an investigative study to explore the status of leadership capacity development across higher education (Dugan, & Komives, 2007). This was an extensive effort that included 52 post-secondary institutions and data gathered from over 50,000 students. This investigation intended to examine the significant increase in studies and articles related to student leadership, service learning, and higher education climate that had been noted since 1990. It was an important effort that introduced the concept of student voice and input for the development of support programs in higher education. In the past, development of support programs had primarily been led, either initially or completely, by professionals often with limited involvement of students until they are recruited and trained as mentors, or targeted as mentees. Additional studies that focus on the experiences and perceptions of students engaged throughout the development and implementation of support programs are needed and timely. One of the strongest supporters of student voice has been the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, and their website and resources provide essential information and understanding of the best procedures and programs to impact motivation and engagement (Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, 2015).

Mrazik, Bender, and Makovichuk (2010) hypothesize that the use of diverse peers as mentors would provide a safe and less intimidating support to help students with disabilities to share the story of their learning challenges, as well as realize their abilities. Recommendations included an early course for students to understand their own disabilities and facilitate strategies

that would be most beneficial. This is increasingly reflected in the presence of learning strategists and orientation courses for students with disabilities as they transition into higher education. These offerings provide a more personal and individualized support than traditional assistive technology and alternative format materials alone. The issue of perceptual differences is one of the challenges that can develop when a program is not formally structured with the opportunity for students to express their goals and interests. In contrast to prior studies, Mrazik et al. (2010) were very specific in identifying the types of challenges (academic, organizational, and social) faced by students with disabilities in post-secondary education.

Conclusion

While reviewing literature for this study, I found that there was an increase in the diversity of students attending many post-secondary institutions. Canadian colleges and universities are experiencing increased numbers of students with identified learning disabilities, mental health diagnoses, and students who are non-native English speaking. Additionally, the recent downturn in the oil industry, and subsequent company layoffs (particularly in southern Alberta), has resulted in an increase in the number of older learners seeking to return to post-secondary education in the hope of finding another area of employment. Though many students in higher education would benefit from additional support, it has been very common for services to not be easily accessible, multi-faceted, or utilized fully. When programs are developed with input and significant student involvement, there is a correlated increase in engagement and motivation (Quaglia Institute of Student Aspirations, 2015). Students who seek additional supports in college are often a combination of first year students, students from another culture for whom English may be a second language, and students with an identified learning disabilities or mental health diagnosis. They are students involved in a variety of programs of study with

unique personality and learning profiles, that deserve to have support programs designed in a student centered manner that best meets their needs. The addition of peer mentors who are also diverse students with like experiences and who receive specialized training and ongoing support, provides a personalized and real-life example for new students with challenges, which can be the most impactful support received.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

This qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of college students identified as having learning challenges and receiving support services. Prior to the 1990s, the vast majority of research conducted in the area of post-secondary services for students with learning challenges had been quantitative in nature, and most frequently compared students with disabilities to their non-disabled peers (Pena, 2014). There have been a small number of qualitative studies that focused on the perceptions of disability service professionals as well as a few studies that explored the perceptions and experiences of students with disabilities (Capps, Henslee, & Gere, 2002; Wehman, 2006). It is clearly demonstrated that students with learning disabilities experience greater obstacles and needs compared to students without learning disabilities (Gregg, 2007). These studies have had significant impact on the manner in which services are developed, delivered, and evaluated, although equal attention has not been given to the perspectives of the student themselves (Bastian & Myers, 2010; Stage & Milne, 1996; Troiano, 2003).

The Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education study from 2005 gathered perspectives of both students and service professionals, which provided a useful regional resource for this qualitative study. Committed to exploring the perceptions and experiences of students given the opportunity to be involved in the development of a college learning support program, my study began by identifying students who had received support services for at least one full academic year. All students who utilized a minimum of exam accommodations were initially contacted in

the spring of 2014 with an invitation to be involved in facilitator training and learn about the Appreciative Inquiry and SOAR (Strength, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) methods. These two methods were introduced as the foundation for the design for the college strategic plan, and employees were also involved in workshops on these resources. Interested students were brought together for two training and introduction sessions during the summer of 2014 with materials derived with permission from the Omni Group Focus Group Toolkit (Omni Group, 2014), in addition to the Strength, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results (SOAR) method.

Initial application for ethical discussion was presented to Medicine Hat College early in 2014, but concerns about dual role for me as the primary researcher, facilitator of focus groups, and a service provider for student support caused a re-write of the proposal over the next several months. Upon full approval by the ethical review boards at Medicine Hat College and George Fox University, contact was again made with the students who had expressed interest in being involved in the study as facilitators. Three training sessions were conducted to both increase the student facilitators' comfort and confidence in focus group facilitation, as well as to plan activities that supported the three research questions. Participation agreements were signed by all facilitators prior to communication being made with participants (see Appendix A).

As mentioned in chapter one, three research questions served to structure this investigation:

1. What are the student perceptions and experiences with support services?
2. What are the factors which lead students to be connected with support services?
3. What are the factors that hinder student's involvement with support services?

Research Design

The methodology of this exploratory study followed recommended qualitative research guidelines for investigation focused on detailed descriptions of observations and information gathered from participants. A number of studies on disabilities services in higher education were gathered that utilized a qualitative format that included interviews and focus groups, though these were mostly directed toward service professionals rather than students. In addition to the Alberta study, another helpful example utilizing a student-centered design, was an investigation by Hicks-Coolick and Kurtz (1997). These researchers were interested in discovering the perceptions of disability services providers as to which characteristics were common among students who succeeded. Prior to learning of the Alberta study, this resource provided initial ideas for my own planning and reinforced the important concepts of motivation, preparation and self-advocacy in students (Hicks-Coolick & Kurtz, 1997; Kohler & Field, 2003). These studies strengthened my interest in gaining students' own perspectives and experiences.

The configuration of this study was one focus group with nine participants that met for three sessions. There were six trained student facilitators present for each of the focus group sessions. These facilitators were set into pairs and responsible to lead one session each. I chose to utilize focus groups for a number of reasons, including the opportunity to bring together students from a variety of backgrounds as a community of focus to share their perceptions and experiences with support. An additional motivation was to offer students who have experienced challenges in post-secondary education an opportunity to support and learn from each other.

The purpose of the data collection was to gather student perceptions and insight. In order to gain more detailed information on a personal level and to address concerns by the host college, focus group sessions were conducted by returning student leaders who had received

support services, with guidance and oversight by the college's counselor and myself. These students were identified during the 2013-14 academic year and received training in focus group facilitation (see Appendix B). Additionally, a PowerPoint presentation on the theme of "Celebrating what is right with the world" supplemented the training (Jones, 2012). Six students representing five different programs of study with an age range from age 19 to 52 were trained as focus group facilitators. To assist in both the training and the data collection/analysis process, I kept a research journal throughout this study to organize important thoughts and impressions. The journal included such considerations as any thoughts about the data being gathered, questions that arose, and connections or themes as they began to appear.

The kaleidoscope metaphor provided a visual guide for the research design planning of this proposal (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). As suggested by this model, it was helpful to view the data collected through a qualitative study, as bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. Using the visual image of a kaleidoscope where pieces gather and blend to create pictures (or themes), helped to build a conceptual framework for the data. The intention of this research study was to give voice, autonomy, and value to the perceptions and experiences of higher education students with learning challenges overall, and to understand more about the unique, yet complex, needs as well. Thus, the kaleidoscope approach proved appropriate and, ultimately, beneficial.

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study was a small college in southern Alberta – Medicine Hat College. Students included those eligible for accessibility/disabilities services who at least utilized exam accommodations. The study ultimately included six student facilitators and nine student participants. The make-up of these students included six males and nine females,

represented nine programs of study, seven different types of learning challenges, a grade point average range from .6 to 4.0, and an age range of 19 to 54. Eight of the students received only accessibility services, an additional four received both accessibility and counseling services, and the final two received support as both accessibility and non-native English speaking students. In regard to academic program involvement for remediation or English Language Learning, five students received these types of support prior to pursuing specific programs of study. An unanticipated component that became a significant finding was that all but two of the students were identified as “mature students” due to being over the age of 21 when they entered the college.

As previously discussed, arising from concerns regarding my potential dual role if I was both the primary focus group facilitator as well as providing direct accessibility services to the participants, the decision was made to use trained returning students as facilitators. These students volunteered to be involved in two training sessions during the summer of 2014 on focus group facilitation using the SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) framework of Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry is used as the foundation for the host college strategic planning, so it was an appropriate resource for student leadership development. Student facilitators for the focus groups were returning students who had received services for at least one full academic year and who had also completed the initial group facilitation training that occurred prior to the study. The focus group sessions were then facilitated by a group of returning students who have also received support for their learning challenges. These students reflected the diversity of the participants in age, program of study, and learning profile, and will receive portfolio letters regarding their assistance with this study. Guidance and support for these focus group facilitators was provided by the college counselor and myself. The student

participants for the focus groups included students eligible for accessibility services who at least utilize exam accommodations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Initial connections were made with students through an introductory communication (see Appendix C). Students who expressed an interest in being involved in this focus group completed a consent for participation. The focus group facilitators also completed a consent for participation form and confidentiality agreement based upon the Alberta FOIP guidelines. The focus groups used the guide included in the appendix section as well as ideas developed during the focus group facilitator trainings. These trainings were also video recorded, transcribed and coded for response themes. Demographic and educational history data were gathered on all student facilitators and participants (Table 1).

Video recordings of each session were made and activity materials, such as small group or partner visual representation and brainstorming, were collected and these responses codified and tabulated (see Appendices D, E, and F). I chose to utilize assistive technology resources that I routinely share with students needing support. These resources included *Sonocent* for audio recording and transcription, and the *Dragon Dictate* phone app for speech to text processing of ideas. These two technologies helped to increase the efficiency of my work, as *Sonocent* audio note-taking is set up in columns where audio is presented as sound bites that can be edited, color-coded and organized by topic or theme, and linked with images or text for a complete process. *Dragon Dictate* allowed me to quickly and efficiently brainstorm ideas and themes with speech to text. The text could then be edited, organized, and cited in reduced time, which was very helpful to efficiently capture the many perceptions and experiences. In addition, this was an

important process that modeled for students the types of assistive technology tools that are available to them.

I followed the recommendations of established qualitative study procedures and paid particular attention to multiple data collection sources including audio, transcription, flip chart brainstorming by research question, and activity materials developed by the facilitator and participants in order to strengthen credibility (Creswell, 2007). Data interpretation occurred through a process of first open-coding with the transcribed audio, then with the materials developed by the facilitators and participants. The next step was to gather the codes into patterns and conceptual relationships using all of the data collected through the facilitator trainings and focus group sessions. Themes and subthemes were identified and then compared first to the 2005 Alberta study and the 2010 University of Toronto study. Additional comparison was done with the 2011 University of Surrey study on issues specific to mature students (see Appendix G). Stakeholder checks with the participants and college counselor has also been utilized during and since the completion of the last focus group session to establish transparency and trust with the participants as well as for clarification of information gathered for accuracy.

Research Ethics

The foundation for the ethical considerations of this study was first those established by the George Fox University to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Initial ethical review was conducted and approved by Medicine Hat College for approval of a research study involving student participants (see Appendix H). Subsequently, the Institutional Review Board at George Fox University approved the research review conducted by the Medicine Hat College research ethics oversight board. A student consent agreement was completed prior to the focus group beginning. Student names were replaced with a pseudonym chosen by the

students themselves. The identification key is kept, along with all other research materials, in a locked file cabinet. Video recordings were made of each focus group, with great care taken to keep all participant names from any transcription. These recordings will be destroyed by the researcher after a period of three years following the completion of this study. The transcripts of the focus group session recordings use only pseudonyms in reporting the findings. It was clearly communicated to the students that their participation in this study was voluntary and they were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. Students were also given the opportunity to remove data pertaining to themselves. This option was also reiterated at the beginning of each focus group session by our counselor and me, as well as discussed by the student facilitators.

Role of the Researcher

I am a graduate student completing this study to meet the requirements of the Doctor of Education degree from George Fox University. I hold a position as a Learning Strategist at Medicine Hat College in Alberta, Canada. My educational history began with a Bachelor's degree in education from Pacific University. My Master's degree in counseling was completed at Oregon State University, and I then continued with an administrative license and work toward the doctoral degree in education from George Fox University. The majority of my career as an educator has been as a school counselor and coordinator of student support teams for K-12 school districts. I have long been dedicated to responsive student support that provides young people opportunities to discover their strengths and leadership abilities, so this area of research is of great interest to me. It was an added benefit to be in a higher education position as a Learning Strategist where the primary focus is supporting students as they utilize their strengths, learn strategies to overcome their challenges, and build connections with other students. I was

committed to ensuring that any bias that I had because of prior connections with some students would not influence data interpretation or analysis, which was strongly reinforced by the student facilitators for the focus groups.

Potential Contributions of Research

Research utilizing the perspectives of college students receiving learning services is sparse. I anticipated that a conceptual model of student centered learning support might be constructed as a result of this effort. A goal of this effort was that such a model would be of assistance and beneficial primarily to my college in the development and sustainability of student support programs. Interest in this study has been expressed by the leadership of the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS). Indeed, the theme for the May 2015 CACUSS is “Whole Campus, Whole Student” and includes focus on responsive planning for student support. Such emphases as these underscores the need for this research.

Table 1
Facilitator and Participant Characteristics

| Pseudonym | FG Role | Program | Service Reference | Diagnosis | DOB | GPA |
|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Batman | Facilitator | Social Work-UC | Accessibility | Physical-Cerebral Palsy | 1987 Mature Student | 4 |
| Megan K | Facilitator | Ust-Education | Accessibility/Counselling | LD-mild general with Dyslexia | 1993 Mature Student | 3 |
| Marie | Facilitator | UT-Education | Accessibility | ADHD | 1995 | 2.56 |
| Christine | Facilitator | Ust-Nursing | Accessibility | ADHD | 1988 Mature Student | 3.87 |
| Jesse | Participant | CADD | Accessibility | PTSD | 1966 Mature Student | 2.3 |
| Alli C | Participant | UT Education | Accessibility/Counselling | Anxiety and Depression | 1991 Mature Student | 3.41 |
| Jodi | Facilitator | Nursing | Accessibility/ Counselling | Anxiety and Depression | 1979 Mature Student | 2.89 |
| Sierra | Participant | Social Work | NNES/Accessibility | Anxiety and Depression | 1986 Mature Student | 2.92 |
| Paul | Participant | Bus Admin | NNES/Accessibility | Adjustment Disorder | 1990 Mature Student | 0.58 |
| Wings | Participant | GTAM | Accessibility | Anxiety and Depression | 1980: Mature Student | 3.34 |
| Flower | Participant | GTAM | Accessibility | ADHD | 1991 Mature Student | 3.74 |
| Colleen | Participant | Nursing | Accessibility/Counselling | Anxiety and Depression | 1969 Mature Student | 3.93 |
| Cotton | Facilitator | City Planning | Accessibility | TBI-concussion | 1982 Mature Student | 2.24 |
| John | Participant | Paramedic | Accessibility | TBI-concussion | 1995 | 3.19 |
| Roger | Participant | Social Work | Accessibility | Stroke | 1963 Mature Student | 2.45 |

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

In order to explore the perceptions and experiences of college students identified as having learning challenges and receiving support services, three focus group sessions were conducted, one for each specific research question structuring this investigation. These sessions provided opportunities to gather student experiences with and perceptions of support services during their time at the host college. Their responses were analyzed in a three stage process specifically designed for the purposes of this investigation. The first stage involved the initial coding of responses in which data were organized for more refined analyses. The second stage included focused coding to identify themes and subthemes. Finally, I used a comparative approach to examine themes and subthemes with findings reported in prior similar studies conducted in Alberta, Toronto, and Surrey (UK).

Facilitator Planning Meetings and Focus Group Sessions

During the facilitator planning meetings, two of the facilitators who described themselves as being more quiet and identified as being “listeners rather than talkers,” raised the concern that we needed to make sure that everyone’s voice was heard. Cotton led this discussion by sharing his own experiences with seeking support. He talked of being both an older student and as a person whose learning challenges are a result of a concussion based brain injury. This injury has caused a significant change in his life, as his plan was to pursue a career in sports. Cotton shared that it was uncomfortable to ask for help and to admit that he has any trouble. He then discussed what happened when he was able to connect with supports and related that “over the course of

the past 18 months I gained confidence to the point of being able now to share my story with the young athletes that I coach, and with other students, too.” He said that his leadership style is quieter and soft spoken, which was unique to the group of facilitators, but others expressed appreciation for how impactful his input was to them.

The first focus group session began with an activity led by the student facilitators. They shared after the sessions that they were quite nervous to be the ones in charge, but quickly realized that the student participants were probably nervous as well. One of the facilitators, Jodi, related that she was pleased because starting with the activity provided a way for everyone to have a less intimidating way to engage with the topic. Marie felt that having dinner while the students were directed to find a picture or pictures that represented their experiences and perceptions of student support services at the college “was much more comfortable and created an easy rapport.” The facilitators had each table group discuss among themselves and then shared with the entire group. This approach seemed to lessen discomfort, and resulted in the discussion both at the tables and with the whole group quickly becoming quite animated. Some of the words used by the students to describe what their first experiences on campus were:

- Alone, anxious, nervous
- Foreign and far away from home
- Lost
- More questions than answers
- Out of place
- Tense and uncertain

When the topic turned to discussing feelings the students experienced as they were connected with services the energy increased as the students shared their thoughts. Prominent among these sentiments include:

- Never give up
- Not alone anymore
- Able to ask questions
- It is possible to succeed
- I'm okay with being a bit of a pain to get what I need
- I want others to feel more supported from the start

The first session went an additional fifteen minutes because the students were very engaged in discussing their experiences and perceptions. The openness of the question and the activity with visual representation that the facilitators planned seemed to be engaging with neither inherent bias nor influence. The data from the sessions indicated that although the students individually had many differences and were unique individuals, there were common experiences that included early feelings of uncertainty and being alone, and shared hope and determination that was reinforced when connected with at least minimal support.

The second and third focus group sessions were active and the students seemed eager to get started, as rapport had been previously established in session one. Jodi, a facilitator, expressed appreciation that the introductory email for participants had included all the research questions ahead of time, so they seemed ready and eager to discuss these two topics. We discussed during facilitator training how these questions could be more emotionally impactful, and, again, it was beneficial that both the facilitators and participants had connection with support, because it seemed to create an open and understanding environment. The facilitators

used flip charts to record thoughts for each question, first as an open invitation for brainstorming, and then with requests for additional detail. Discussion developed quickly and the environment seemed informal with comfortable rapport.

One of the male students, John, who had been rather quiet during session one, in subsequent sessions shared his experience seeking help just for headaches due to his brain injury. He shared that initially he “was angry and reluctant to receive much support.” John went on to say that he “now has an interest in being a resident assistant in order to help others in the next year because many students are uncomfortable asking for help.” Jodi, Christine, and Megan, who all have children, shared that they were relieved to have someone help them, but still felt torn by their family obligations and responsibilities, so they did not always feel able to access all that was available to them. Batman, Megan, Marie, and Jodi, who were all facilitators, shared after the three focus group sessions were complete, how positive it was that a balance of personalities and leadership styles existed. This allowed for the needs of all students—both quiet and talkative, to be addressed.

Results

Two general themes and five subthemes emerged from the data analysis. These include the general theme Supportive Campus Environment (three subthemes: feeling isolated and alone; open academic and personal support; visibility/availability of support services), and the general theme Student-Faculty/Staff Interaction (two subthemes: concerns with stigma; awareness and empathy).

General Theme 1: Supportive Campus Environment

The first general theme relates to perceptions and experiences with the degree of supportiveness on the campus environment. A number of important subthemes associated with

how the students regard the campus environment surfaced during the analysis of the data. Specifically, I identified the subthemes of feeling isolated and alone; open academic and personal support; and visibility/availability of support services as connected to the students' views of the campus environment as either supportive and, at times, unsupportive.

Subtheme: Feeling isolated and alone. More than half of the students (nine) involved with this study identified feeling isolated and alone as a significant experience when they first arrived at the college. This sentiment was expressed by a diverse group of students, including Jodi and Colleen who are mature students, Megan and Allie, who transitioned directly from high school, as well as Paul and Sierra, that were non-native English speakers. Common descriptive words used by these students to describe their experiences when first arriving on campus were isolated, nervous, lonely, feeling out of place, confused, uncertain, and overwhelmed. Although many of them attended the new student orientation on campus and did feel that it was helpful, they also shared that they felt uncomfortable seeking to learn more about services. Many felt their academic programs did not reinforce the importance of or encourage the utilization of support. This theme echoed one of the primary themes of the Alberta 2005 study in which many of the respondents in that project also explained they felt socially isolated on campus, despite attending orientation.

Subtheme: Open academic and personal support. Having an open academic and personal support system is important to the students in this study. This subtheme emerged, in response to the students' discussion that an open college culture, where support is encouraged for all students. It was important to these students that anyone, whether they have an identified disability or mental health diagnosis or not, feel that supports are available when they need them. Flower said that "the addition of the learning strategist being in the library every day made a

difference not only for students who are identified with a learning disability, but for any student to ask for help.” One of the nursing students, Jodi, who was also a facilitator, said that she “regularly brings other students to the library to see [*name of resource person*] because it is easy and non-threatening and she will help you get connected to whatever you need.”

Subtheme: Visibility/Availability of support services. The desire for visible and available support services is connected to the subtheme open academic and personal support. However, the visibility/availability of support services is conceptually different as the discussion indicated that this is a key component for enhancing services and student utilization. The students were eager to share ideas for how the college could improve support visibility. Sierra, Paul, Cotton, and Batman, who had attended other post-secondary institutions, expressed being perplexed or uncertain about how to seek supports because it was not evident that campus student services were a priority. An example shared by Sierra (that was then heartily agreed with by the others) was that “there did not seem to be signs and posters around campus that encouraged students utilizing resources.” Christine concurred that the daily schedule of the learning strategist’s presence in the library made a positive difference on all students realizing that there “was one easy to find and non-stigmatizing resource for academic support.” It was reported that the library staff were often very willing to help students find the supports they needed, but at times the requirements of appointments and people not being available or easy to find was discouraging. This perception matches a primary response documented among the participants in the 2005 Alberta study. Namely, it was not unusual, even for learners with disabilities, to be unaware of the full range of service options. Participants in both the Toronto and Surrey studies reported that the majority of students who connected with services, did so as after struggling through their courses without support.

General Theme 2: Student-Faculty/Staff Interaction

The second general theme relates to experiences and perceptions associated with student relations with faculty and staff at the college. The analysis of the data led me to identify two subthemes under this general theme: 1) concerns with stigma and 2) awareness and empathy.

Subtheme: Concerns with stigma. Misunderstanding and frustration from and with instructional faculty was identified by all of the facilitators and students as contributing to the students' reluctance to seek the supports necessary for their success. This experience is consistent with the findings reported in a number of previous studies (Albert & Fairweather, 1990; Greenbaum et al., 1995; Wehman, 2006; Mrazik et al., 2010). A number of students, including Jodi and Christine in nursing, and Batman and Megan in social work and education, shared that faculty or program leadership have told students that "they need to wean themselves off of any supports or accommodations because this would not be available in the real world." Participants and facilitators quickly added that "this includes programs of study in areas considered helping professions including social service, health, and education." Jodi and Megan asked the group "why does this happen?"

Batman, Sierra, and Roger expressed similar concerns. Batman stated that it was a "general announcement by some of the faculty in the social work program that accommodations were not to be relied upon, and that students needed to stop using them to be ready to transition to a career." Roger added how disappointing it was when he first began the program and had instructors be very critical of his physical challenges. To him this was a clear indication that they held no real desire to help others. Batman also explained that many in the college did not understand that accommodations and coping strategies were rights for individuals to be able to succeed despite physical or learning challenges.

A majority of students discussed that these concerns began for them in high school because of bullying or criticism, but also that the attitudes of faculty and peers made them more hesitant to seek support during their first year on campus. Megan, a facilitator admitted that she has had to be “tenacious and comfortable being a pain to get what I need.” This led to reassurance by the rest of the group that it is alright to have supports not be afraid to press for address for their needs. John contributed that “if the college leadership insists on faculty respecting students needing support, it is more likely to happen.”

Subtheme: Awareness and empathy. It was important to the students that the college community convey a clear message of appreciating the shared as well as the unique challenges for students who require support services. Listening to their stories richly colored with emotion connected in a powerful way with the posters with pictures and words from focus group session one, when they identified feeling first alone and uncertain, then the gratitude and relief when support was offered. Allie said that “we all have a need for people to recognize us as people.” Jodi discussed that “coming back to college to study nursing after being in the world of work for a few years, I just felt really old. I had kids and my life seemed so very different from the other students. I wasn’t sure that I belonged. Then a faculty member realized that I was struggling and helped me connect with support services. Everything changed after that and I’m so grateful that they saw that I needed help and reached out.”

Three nursing students who were also mothers, Christine, Colleen, and Jodi, related that a real disadvantage was being extremely tired because of the many responsibilities of taking care of children and working. A number of students shared that these extra responsibilities, in addition to being a student with the requirements of homework and studying, caused them to feel that they could not fully focus on their own learning. One student said that she “often was not

as prepared for my own exams, or felt like I had not done my best on my own papers, because I had helped my kids do their best on their assignments . . . that's being a mom.” All of the students who were mothers, agreed that they sometimes regret that they did not have the ability to come to the college and meet with study groups or be involved in practice sessions. Too often the study sessions were held in the late afternoon or evening when they needed to pick their children up from school, then had to go home to fix dinner, and help their kids with their homework before settling down for their own studies late in the evening.

Conversation about experiencing fatigue sparked involvement with other students in addition to those who had children. Sierra shared, with emphatic agreement by the other non-native English speakers, that it could be exhausting to think and speak in English, and that having the ability to talk with others in their own language was a relief.

This discussion associated with this subtheme was some of the most engaging of the focus group sessions as the students shared their individual stories, but also discovered that the feelings and challenges they faced were common. The gratitude was palatable and the positive emotion, as well as some tears were evident when the students described their feelings when a faculty member or someone in the college reached out to them and helped them secure some of the supports that fit their individual need. Wing's words summarize this important subtheme when she added that “overall we all hope that someone will share similar experiences with them, and be willing to share their understanding.”

Research Questions

The focus group sessions produced richly textured discussions resulting in the identification of general themes and subthemes. These insights are important as they provide a framework of understanding the personal perceptions and experiences of the fifteen student

facilitator and participants involved in this study. These insights can now be applied to provide general answers to the three research questions that structured this investigation.

Research Question #1: What are student perceptions and experiences with support services?

Analysis of the data revealed that the students in this study evidenced common feelings of uncertainty, isolation, and nervousness when transitioning into post-secondary education. In addition, the students expressed similar feelings of relief, gratitude and confidence when they were able to connect with services, either through outreach from others or their own tenacity. An opportunity for enhancement was for the outreach efforts to occur before students first arrived on the campus and that orientation and transition support address specific student groups such as mature students, students who are non-native English speakers, as well as students transitioning directly from high school. Thus, the initial experiences were frequently difficult because of feeling uncertain and alone, but once students were able to connect with appropriate support the experiences became more positive.

Research Question #2: What are the factors which lead students to be engaged with support services?

Data derived from the focus groups clearly demonstrates that interaction with faculty and staff and the visibility and availability of services were vital toward enhancing the use of support services. It is interesting to note that many of the responses to this question were reactive as a result of challenges and even crisis events, rather than proactive and preventative. This finding links with the students' responses to research question #1 and reveals an opportunity to improve early outreach for students, perhaps before they even reach the campus.

Research Question #3: What are the factors that hinder students' involvement with support services?

Obstacles such as time constraints, visibility and awareness of services available, and student perception that services are only for students who have, or are willing to identify diagnoses were also factors that created barriers to accessing support. Significantly, students also expressed apprehension about perceived stigma attached to support services. The students identified an aspiration that the college would increase resources for all students while positively impacting the interactions between students and the faculty and staff.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The use of a focus group approach with student facilitators and participants provided a means to gain better understanding of the current strengths and opportunities to improve student support services and resources. Student voices and reflection of their individual and collective experiences offer an important perspective as the college develops a student development focus.

The examination of evidence including audio transcription, video recordings, and materials developed during focus group session activities reinforced that higher education students with accessibility needs are both unique and complex. In addition to being students with identified learning disabilities or mental health diagnoses, generally these individuals are also mature students returning to learning, from another culture that may speak English as their second language, or students experiencing significant life change leading to their involvement with higher education. The variety of strengths, as well as needs for support, programs of study, and interests sometimes can be a challenge for the students when the support services department is one-dimensional and not responsive nor individualized. Further, when programs also are identified from a problem-base, such as being specifically titled as disabilities or mental health services, students may be hesitant to seek assistance either due to prior negative experiences where they had been stigmatized or fear that the use of student services will lead to stigmatization.

Programs delivered as being strength-based and presented in a positive manner can be some of the most impactful resources for student success. These types of programs (including

this research effort based upon student leadership and voice) exemplify the conditions identified by the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations by creating a sense of belonging for students involved, providing opportunities to have a sense of accomplishment, and empower students by increasing their confidence to take action (Quaglia, 2014). Peer supports, especially when available and open for all students, may result in greater access to support with more comfort and ease. The data from this study illustrates the importance of creating a supportive college environment responsive to students.

Additional Considerations

In addition to the general themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis, the findings also yielded other considerations important to the development of a student-centered support services effort. Most notably, it is crucial for specific attention and understanding to the unique needs of mature students, non-native English speaking students, and students transitioning directly from high school to college.

Mature Students

One of the most impactful findings for additional consideration is that the majority of the students, all but two, identified themselves as being over the age of twenty one when they entered the college. The students identified that being an older student was one of the most impactful experiences or components to their time as a college student. This consideration is consistent with the findings reported in the University of Surrey study.

Non-Native English Speaking Students

Students who were also non-native English speaking expressed that they felt more comfortable and confident in their native language and with the previous supports they received before coming to their present college. Among their concerns was that in Canada all of their

textbooks, lectures, exams, and writing assignments had to be in English. As a result of their struggles with the language, they begin to question their own intelligence.

Students Transitioning from High School to College

For the younger students who entered college straight from high school, the feeling of inadequacy was derived from the difficulties with transitioning to a circumstance that required greater degrees of independent learning, organization, and self-determination. This is similar to findings reported in the literature. Specifically, researchers have found that issues such as a new environment, increased responsibility, numerous instructors who have varied expectations, and the reality that students must seek interventions on their own due to personal responsibility and confidentiality, can cause many students to be at additional risk of academic failure (Gregg 2007; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). This is especially true when it may have been their parents, teachers, or school counselors that ensured that they received support in secondary school.

The data gathered during this research identified initial feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy and lack of confidence similar to the experiences of participants in the Alberta study. Whether it is the transition from high school, or enrolling in post-secondary education after a period of employment, moving from a college setting to a university setting, or transitioning from an undergraduate program to a graduate program, learners with disabilities report frustration and concern about a seamless delivery of services. The data strongly suggested that a supportive campus environment and positive interactions between students and their faculty and staff encourages all students to utilize support services at a higher level. Moreover, the use of the Appreciative Inquiry SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) method provided a way to express both positive and negative experiences in a productive and forward thinking manner. The students report that the Appreciative Inquiry approach helped them to not

get stagnated in a cycle of merely complaining, but to be active about what opportunities and aspirations they had for the future.

Implications and Recommendations of the Study

The real challenge lies in listening carefully to what students are telling us, reflecting upon it, learning from it, and leading change with them by our sides.

Dr. Russell Quaglia

The quote above by Russell Quaglia opened this dissertation because it provides a guiding message for this research effort. I chose to remind the reader of the quote once again as it is crucial for student service efforts to genuinely listen to and reflect on the perceptions of students. That however, is only the first step as it is also essential to learn from the wisdom of students and work in partnership with them when developing support. As stated in the opening chapter of this dissertation, UNESCO understands the importance for post-secondary institutions to provide services “designed to enable and empower students to focus more intensely on their studies and their personal growth and maturation, both cognitively and emotionally” (UNESCO 2002, p. 2).

Supportive College Environment

One of the strongest aspirations voiced by the students is the necessity for a supportive campus environment which is competent to provide organized outreach and connection for students. This effort must begin by providing initial opportunities for students to connect and have a safe haven with students who have obvious and primary likenesses to them as they transition into their post-secondary experience. Examples offered by the students included: students from the same cultural background or primary language, mature students such as mothers raising children, students who are adults who have been laid off so must reenter the

workforce in a different capacity, and students who are transitioning from high school directly to college. It was also noted as important, however, to then have opportunities for broader connection because issues and aspirations of diverse students can be common and beneficial to build relationships and appreciation across the college as well.

Another important recommendation includes the need to increase visibility of support services along with realistically addressing the factors that hinder students from connecting with services. This includes a way to engage in dialog and create actions to prevent stigmatizing those who require student services. For Medicine Hat College, this recommendation includes looking at online resources like the website for the University of Texas, Austin called “Wayfinder.” Connection has been made with staff at the University of Texas, Austin to learn more about how they created this resource and permission has been granted for our college to use this model as a guide, as well as to develop their own version of “Longhorn Ready”.

An additional resource example from the University of Texas, Austin for new student orientation and outreach is the creation of a sustainable team of students across programs and representing the student body. This team would be charged to provide outreach and support to new students before they arrive on campus. The team would subsequently stay connected with students throughout the full academic year.

Specific to students with identified learning disabilities and mature students, the Alberta and United Kingdom studies recommended the use of peer support/mentors that reflect the diversity of students can make significant impact for students in higher education. New student orientation leader training has begun to take place with the broadest representation of students by age, program of study, and cultural diversity that Medicine Hat College’s recruitment team has experienced. An indication of the impact of empowering students through opportunities to share

their perceptions and experiences is that a number of the facilitators as well as participants of this study signed up to be involved as new student orientation leaders.

The focus group sessions also revealed the importance of an online toolbox of resources for students for both academic and personal support. It was important to the students that this resource be online and readily available so that when they need assistance while they are at home, they can access what they need. Subsequently, there has been consensus among the staff involved with educational technology, as well as web development, to initiate the development of this resource.

Student-Faculty/Staff Interactions

A number of examples from the scholarly and professional literature review were shared with students. This was done so that they could see different efforts by Canadian colleges to address the theme of student-faculty/staff interaction. The 2010 comprehensive effort by University of Toronto entitled, “In Their Own Words: Understanding Undergraduate Student Experience at the University of Toronto,” was identified by the students as the most appealing. In their estimation, the project represented a clear and tangible effort to engage the entire college community in a manner that showed commitment by the faculty and staff. This study utilized an innovative and capacity-building effort at the initial planning phase, as they asked each division of the university recommend a Division Liaison to take the lead on organizing and facilitating focus groups within their areas. These liaisons then continued on in an advisory capacity for the Council for Student Experience after the focus group sessions were complete. The established council dedicated to student experience was described as inspiring because the students believed it provided a very visible commitment to be student centered (University of Toronto, 2010).

The students involved with the research effort at the Medicine Hat College have become empowered to continue to share their voice. For example, in addition to those who have since volunteered to be involved in orientation leadership, several of the student facilitators also ran for and were elected to the student association for the college. They identified their involvement in this research effort as helping them to realize how important student voice is to developing a strong college.

Suggestions for Further Study

This research study supports the need for Medicine Hat College to increase efforts to thoughtfully engage with student groups as a new student development focus is developed. Student responsive and centered support is reliant on a commitment to listening to what students say. Nevertheless, quality development that has the best probability of increasing utilization of services and supports for all students must involve leaders and program development staff learning from and working side by side with students in a sustainable manner. The demographic of students in Canadian higher education is changing and to address the increased diversity of students both in and outside of the classroom will require coordinated effort to identify key components and to provide opportunities for students to be involved in planning. As such, suggestions for future efforts include:

1. A focus group effort with students who are considered “Mature Students Returning to Learning”
2. Students with a C average, exploring utilized support services as well as enhancing connections with additional resources to raise academic performance and strengthen ability to pursue further education or career opportunities.
3. Diverse students, and Non-Native English Speaking Students exploring their

- experiences and perceptions.
4. Students who are experiencing strong academic success, to explore their post-secondary journey and awareness of resources available in the event that they would need additional support.

A Final Word

Recently, one of the students involved with this study asked me what I wanted others to learn about them as a result of this work. I responded that it was the wisdom and strength of the students themselves that was most important for others to understand. Asking students what they think or have experienced through surveys are quite common in education, and does provide a level of information. The significant piece of knowledge, and example that I hope that this effort conveys to others, is the power and impact that is possible when educators and students are side by side to lead change.

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APPENDIX A
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE OF STUDY:

*EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS INVOLVED WITH
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESPONSIVE AND STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING
SUPPORT PROGRAM*

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions necessary to be sure you understand what your participation will involve. This research study is being conducted by Debra Park, Learning Strategist with support from Michele Meier, our College Counselor. This study will also be meeting the research requirement for the completion of Debra's Doctoral Degree of Education from George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the engagement and experiences with support services of higher education students with challenges that may impact learning, and to provide opportunities to share recommendations for program design and delivery.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR PARTICIPATION

The setting for this study will be here at Medicine Hat College. Potential participants of this study will include students connected with the disabilities/accessibility services department. This study will consist of one focus group of 8-10 students that is expected to meet for two sessions.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF RESEARCH

This is an area of limited prior study, so it is expected that a conceptual model of student centered learning support will be developed as a result of this effort. I hope that such a model will be of assistance and benefit, first, for Medicine Hat College for future development and sustainability of student support programs. An additional desire would be that this study would benefit other higher education programs that seek to design a more responsive learning strategy and support programs.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The foundations for the ethical considerations of this study are those established by the George Fox University Institutional Review Board to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Additional review will be conducted by Medicine Hat College for approval of a research study involving student subjects with adherence to the Alberta Freedom of Information and Personal Privacy Act (FOIP). Student names will be replaced with a pseudonym and the key will be kept with all other materials in a locked file cabinet, following the guidelines of Medicine Hat College, where this study is to take place. Video recordings will be made of each focus group session, and these recordings will be destroyed at the completion of this research oral defense. The transcripts of the focus group session recordings will also not include names.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. A choice not to participate will not impact services that you are eligible to receive, or your future relations with the college.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions about the study as described herein. Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you agree to participate in this study. You have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant (please print)

Date

Signature of Participant

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINES

This focus group will consist of approximately 8-10 students that have volunteered to participate in a research study. This group is expected to be facilitated by a team of returning students who have received training and will be supervised and supported by Debra Park and Michele Meier. Two focus group sessions are expected for 45 minutes to one hour each, as participants schedules allow.

Focus Group Introduction and Script:

Note: The recording device will not be turned on for this initial portion of the focus group.

1. *Welcome:* Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. Your willingness to participate and share your experiences and insight about being a student connected who has experienced some learning challenges here at Medicine Hat College is greatly appreciated.
2. *Participant Introductions:*
3. *Purpose of Focus Groups:*
 - a. We are holding these focus groups as a part of Deb Park's research study exploring the perceptions and experiences of students who receive accessibility services.
 - b. Learning supports should be set up to meet the needs of students as they pursue their post-secondary studies, and in order to have the best possibility of the resources being helpful, your voice and input is essential.
4. *Goal and Process of the Focus Group:* The goal of these groups is for you, the

participants, to do most of the talking. We may call on individuals if we have not heard from one of you for a bit because we want to get everyone's input.

- a. Each of you has experiences and opinions that are important to helping our college best support our students.
- b. Confidentiality is important, so we will not use names during these groups. Also, what each of you share in this group needs to stay in this group. Please do not discuss things shared outside of this group either with each other, or with your own family or friends.
- c. We will be video recording the comments this group makes when we begin the questions and discussions. Your name will not be on the transcripts, as Deb is setting up pseudonyms without specific details about each of you to ensure your anonymity.
- d. We may ask some additional questions to clarify what you share or to gather more details.

Concluding the Focus Group: One of the moderators will be keeping track of our time and will let the group know when we are approaching the end of our session. We will then turn off the recorder, thank you all for participating, and confirm our next focus group date and time. This will be a time that you can also ask any questions about the process or what happens next.

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INFORMATION AND INVITATION

Research Study Title: *Exploring the experiences of higher education students involved with the development of a responsive and student-centered learning support program.*

Dear _____,

My name is Debra Park. I am the Learning Strategist here at Medicine Hat College, as well as a doctoral candidate at George Fox University. I am conducting a research study to explore the engagement and experiences of higher education with support services, and to provide opportunities for them to share their recommendations for program design and delivery of a comprehensive and multi-tiered system of support. This study is a part of the requirements of my degree in education, and I would like to invite you to participate. The outcome of this study is the development of a service recommendation model for student support.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to be involved with a focus group of students. The focus group is anticipated to meet for two sessions that address the following areas:

1. What are student perceptions and experiences with support services?
2. What are the factors which lead students to be engaged with support services?
3. What are the factors that hinder student's involvement with support services?

The focus group sessions will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and space here at Medicine Hat College, and should each last for about an hour. The focus group sessions will be video recorded so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by me to transcribe and analyze them. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym for transcription and will not be included in the study reporting. Both the recordings and transcriptions will then be destroyed at the completion of my oral defense.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept by me in a secure location at Medicine Hat College. Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you decide not to. You may also quit being in the study at any time, or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering. Participation, non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your connection with Medicine Hat College or support services in any way.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 403-502-8433, or my supervisor Erin Penzes at 403- 529-3928 if you have study related questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please complete the attached document and return it to the Accessibility Services Office in the included envelope.

With kind regards,
(Signature)

Debra Park
Learning Strategist
Medicine Hat College
299 College Drive SE
Medicine Hat, AB
T1A3Y6

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP SESSION 1 ACTIVITY

Words that Represent Experiences/Perceptions with Support Services

| Student Pseudonym | Early | After Receiving Support | Quote |
|-------------------|---|---|---|
| Cotton | Alone Anxious Confused Nervous | Fit In At Ease Helping others Relaxed | Had someone in my corner |
| Marie | Older | Flourishing Relaxation New beginnings | Take 1 step at a time Go with the flow Constantly changing |
| Sam | Vision Exhausted Lonely Hopeful | Hopeful Energetic | Want to be able to meet people outside of my cultural group |
| Wings | Determined Uncertain | Growth Peace | Able to ask questions Missing pieces |
| Flower | Courage | Strength Seeing Eye-Safe and supported Loyalty | Not alone anymore Need more hands on learning |
| Margie | Lost Sheltered Hidden Not known Not publicized Embarrassing | Believe Confidence Understanding Better Understand | Didn't realize that supports were available, but know that there are too many afraid to ask for help. |
| Lindsay | Lone Ranger Fatigue Stigma Tension Out of Place Disconnected | Strengths Empowered Confident Determined Tenacious Focused | Never Give Up |
| Roger | Overwhelmed Inadequate Limited Frustrated Old | Supported Hopeful | It is possible to succeed |
| Megan | Determined Tenacious Overwhelmed Frustrated | Driven to lead Confident Empowered | Okay with being a bit of a pain to get what I need |

| | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|--|--|
| | Relieved by one person helping | | |
|--|--------------------------------|--|--|

| Student Pseudonym | Early | After Receiving Support | Quote |
|-------------------|---|---|---|
| Allie C | Hopeful Stressed Anxious | Relieved Roller coaster Happy Sad | I want others to feel more supported from the start |
| Christine | Determined Passionate | Torn Busy | I'll do what I can to help younger students in my program get the help that they need |
| John | Don't need help Then the headaches became unbearable | Still hesitant Getting more comfortable with individuals I trust | I want to do it on my own, so sometimes I don't ask for help when I should |
| Batman | Hopeful Nervous Perplexed | Confident Want to help others Frustrated with limited resources | A bit like falling backwards into a pool—you need to trust. |

Student Suggestions

| Brainstorm Suggestions for Impacting "Readily Available" |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Culture/Environment that all students can access support when needed = No Stigma ❖ Student would utilize support without second guessing if this was better. ❖ If supports were widely acceptable, then it would seem safer. ❖ Focus/Message that the college wants everyone to have the support to be successful. Not a messages about "weeding out" or that "students come and go", or that "students need to wean themselves of off services/accommodations before they go into their careers." ❖ Extra responses would be developed to meet students' needs. ❖ Website: example of University of Texas at Austin "Wayfinder" ❖ Learning Community for first year: University of Texas at Austin "360 Connect" |

APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS 1 & 2 RESPONSES

Research Question 2: Factors that led you to services

- ❖ Unanswered questions
- ❖ Practicum student experience discovery
- ❖ Dr. Referral/Medical Referral
 - Headaches/Physical Symptoms
- ❖ Hoping to reduce stress and anxiety
- ❖ Support: having someone to talk with:
 - Seek Advice for academics and/or life
 - Have an ear to listen to my needs
 - Wanted to be more comfortable
- ❖ Athletic Study Hall participation
- ❖ Faculty/Instructors who suggested
- ❖ Experiencing a Crisis/Tragic Event that impacted life as well as academics
- ❖ Financial Challenges
- ❖ Previous experiences at other post-secondary institutions
 - Though the other places services were much more visible (Signage)
- ❖ Program clubs that offer tutoring
- ❖ Library was the “Safe Zone to go to first and then we knew Deb had hours there every day.
- ❖ Upstairs in Disability Services “though just a bit for paper edits”.
- ❖ Academic Advisors: “a bit, but they are very busy.”
- ❖ Having a breakdown/Last Resort
- ❖ Academic Probation/Dismissal: “though not many students feel comfortable seeking services even then.”
- ❖ Mental Health Diagnosis
- ❖ Learning Disability Diagnosis
- ❖ Past support for disability: “though many do not want to because of fears of negative stigma.”
- ❖ Popcorn at tables with information

Research Question 3: Factors that hindered you from connecting with services

- ❖ Stigma/Social Stigma
- ❖ Lack of Confidence
- ❖ No Common Cohort
- ❖ College Culture that is not supportive of asking for help/other students
- ❖ Change is difficult
- ❖ Hesitant to speak up in class or on campus
- ❖ Lack of encouragement from instructors
- ❖ Feeling set up to fail rather than succeed
- ❖ Accessibility/Visibility
- ❖ Embarrassment/Pride
- ❖ Schedule: Life is complicated
- ❖ No signs that make it clear and open to know where to go for help.
- ❖ Lack of an information zone or “hub” for students.
- ❖ No “What is Happening at _____” reader board daily
- ❖ No comfortable and safe place that is all about student needs.
- ❖ Library is not currently a hub for student support, though students do go there first in many cases.
- ❖ Not truly student centered. The words are spoken, but it does not feel like it to us.
- ❖ Advertising/Communication about resources and happenings. . . maybe texts
- ❖ Labeling and criticism
- ❖ “Too many students feel unequal or unworthy.”
- ❖ Tools and resources do not seem readily available
- ❖ Most services are available only from 8-4 or 9-5
- ❖ Website does not have resources and tools available (including webinars, videos by students for students)

APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP SESSION SUMMARY USING SOAR FRAMEWORK

STRENGTHS

- ❖ Some supports are readily available: exams, learning strategist, library APA
- ❖ Friendly and welcoming
- ❖ Student Outreach-SA
- ❖ Working to reduce stigma for seeking support
- ❖ Academic Transfer Program
- ❖ Accessibility Staff
- ❖ Small Classes
- ❖ Most faculty are accommodating and approachable
- ❖ New willingness to be innovative and progressive

OPPORTUNITIES

- ❖ Increase information about getting involved (clubs, activities)
- ❖ Planning for increased opportunities to meet and connect
- ❖ Increased opportunities for faculty to share knowledge and experience with students outside of class
- ❖ Awareness/Communication about resources available
- ❖ Student Led Initiatives
- ❖ Increase technology based communication

ASPRIRATIONS

- ❖ Enhance relevancy of courses and electives
- ❖ Increase awareness about learning challenges and reduce stigma
- ❖ Resources clearly identified and communicated
- ❖ Increase activities and resources for Brooks Campus
- ❖ Increase a community feel for campuses
- ❖ Connecting with students at a “grass-roots” level
- ❖ Successful transition in and onto next steps: career and university transfer

RESULTS

- ❖ Decrease in stress for students and faculty/staff
- ❖ Improve student grades
- ❖ Increase graduation rate
- ❖ Happy Students = Recruitment and Retention

APPENDIX G
COMPARISON OF THEMES

| Primary Theme | Related Subtheme | AB 2005 Study | U of T 2010 Study | U of Surrey Mature | Park Dissertation |
|-----------------------------------|--|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Student-Faculty Interaction | Students must initiate support | X | X | X | X |
| | Appreciate needs and diversity important but not consistent | X | X | X | X |
| | Empathy and Awareness | X | X | X | X |
| | Faculty hours are limited | | | X | X |
| | Small group Q & A opportunities | | X | X | |
| | Speakers series by faculty for students across programs | | X | X | X |
| Supportive Campus Environment | Welcome and Orientation | X | X | X | X |
| | Feeling isolated and alone | X | | X | X |
| | Disconnection after orientation | X | X | X | X |
| | Outreach before arriving | | X | X | X |
| | Opportunities with common and mixed | | X | | X |
| | Resources and support for all students | | X | | X |
| | Academic and Personal Support | X | X | X | X |
| | Visibility and Availability | X | X | X | X |
| | Signage to identify supports | | X | X | X |
| | Concerns about stigma and censure | X | X | X | X |
| | Flexible time and online resources | X | X | X | X |
| | Feelings of inadequacy | X | | X | X |
| | Importance of mentors | X | X | X | X |
| Enriching Educational Experiences | | X | X | X | X |
| | Opportunities to interact with students/faculty across programs | X | X | X | X |
| | Time constraints and scheduling challenges: most during 9-5 time | | | X | X |
| | Financial barriers to involvement | | X | X | |
| Communication | | X | X | X | X |
| | Student Voice and Input | | X | X | X |
| | Increased use of technology and social media- and training | | X | X | X |

APPENDIX H
MEDICINE HAT COLLEGE RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW APPROVAL



**MEDICINE HAT
COLLEGE**

299 COLLEGE DRIVE S.E. MEDICINE HAT, AB T1A 5Y6

Approval Form

Date: January 27, 2015

Applicant: Debra Park

Project Title: Exploring the Experiences of Higher Education Students Involved with the Development of a Responsive and Student-Centred Learning Support Program

Approval Expiry

Date: January 27, 2016

Dear Debra,

Thank you for submitting the above research project to the Medicine Hat College Research Ethics Board. Your application, including revisions received on January 23, 2015, has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your project still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application. On behalf of the REB, I wish you the best of luck with your research endeavors.

Sincerely,



Walter Garrison
Chair, Medicine Hat College Research Ethics board