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The Relationship Between Students' Perceptions of Academic Support and Their Willingness to Seek Support

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC
SUPPORT AND THEIR WILLINGNESS TO SEEK SUPPORT

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Lance Vanderberg

May 2013

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Lance Vanderberg

entitled

The Relationship between Students' Perceptions of Academic Support
and Their Willingness to Seek Support

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how students' perceptions of academic support impact their willingness to seek support from an academic support center at a small, faith-based, liberal arts university. Eight students were interviewed for the study, with an even divide of four students who had voluntarily sought academic support and four non-support-seeking students enrolled in an individualized probationary course. A major finding related to the importance of developing need recognition for academic support among individual students. Research showed that students' perceptions of academic support were closely tied to their perceived need of services. It was also clear that positive academic support experiences bred positive student perceptions and a willingness to seek support in the future. Implications for future practice include further utilization and assessment of the university's probationary course format and further examination of student need recognition for academic support services.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Academic support is a relevant and important field within higher education. It includes focused efforts to enhance student learning outcomes, increase retention rates, and improve accessibility, all of which relate to student and institutional success. In terms of positive impact, a small but growing body of research demonstrates the success of academic support programs that are undergirded by a strong developmental philosophy (Boylan, 2002). Most academic support is also voluntary in nature, but it is clear that students who would benefit the most from support are often the least likely to seek it (Karabenick, 1988). This trend creates a need to understand more completely support-seeking perceptions and behavior in order to effectively reach students. The purpose of the present study was to examine student perceptions of academic support and the relationship those perceptions have with support-seeking from an academic support center at a small, faith-based, liberal arts university of approximately 1,900 students.

The study provides higher education professionals with a deeper understanding of a field that is closely related to important outcomes of higher education. Although the field of academic support has not been widely researched, it is clear that it is relevant to student and institutional success. For example, academic support is relevant to degree completion across the spectrum of higher education. Approximately 4 million undergraduates began higher education courses as freshmen in the 2003-04 academic

year (Skomsvold, Radford, Berkner, & National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Only 50.5% of the students who began college in 2003-04 at a four-year institution had achieved a Bachelor's degree from the first institution they attended by the spring of 2009 (Skomsvold et al., 2011). Academic support addresses prominent issues like these through a variety of services described through the existing body of research.

In order to examine the relationship between student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking, it is first helpful to examine the general field of academic support in order to develop an understanding of typical and effective services related to student and institutional success. According to a 2004 ACT national survey that questioned chief academic officers from a large sample of colleges and universities, support services that helped keep students in school and increase accessibility for at-risk students fell into three main categories: first-year programs, academic advising, and learning support (ACT, 2010). Much of the existing body of academic support research concerns the effectiveness of services that fall within these categories. For example, paired courses can occur during the first year and have been shown to be effective (Gudan, 1994). A study at Schoolcraft College found that students enrolled in a developmental reading course paired with a psychology course performed better than the control group did in the overall psychology course (Gudan). Within the category of advising, appreciative advising is a positive and action-oriented form of advising that increased feelings of self-worth and accomplishment among students due to the positive nature of the advising relationship in this context (Truschel, 2008). Within the category of learning support, a study appearing in the *Journal of College Reading and Learning* found that tutoring is an effective intervention. Students who were tutored demonstrated

higher retention rates than those who were not tutored. Tutoring also enhanced the academic and social integration of the students involved in the study (Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011).

While some research has been conducted regarding the types and impact of academic support, it is clear that more research is needed in the area of student perceptions and the willingness to seek academic support. If academic support is effective, the role that student perceptions play in support-seeking will enhance professional understanding of how and why support services are utilized. Examining the relationship between student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking would therefore assist professionals as they shape and emphasize services committed to the academic success of students. By effectively emphasizing these services, students who need support the most will be surrounded by an environment that is able to reinforce academic success and support to the student body as a whole. Such institutional outreach potentially could create enhanced involvement in successful programs that are rooted in research.

In summary, the purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking behavior through an academic support center. If academic support is as beneficial as research suggests, then a study relating to how this support is perceived and sought by students is essential. This is especially evident when considering the fact that students who potentially would benefit from academic support often do not seek it (Karabenick, 1988). With a better understanding of students' perceptions of academic support and support-seeking behaviors, educators can better equip students by providing meaningful and effective

support. Therefore, the present research sought to benefit educators by exploring how students' perceptions of academic support influence their willingness to seek support from an academic support center.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

A small but growing body of literature exists concerning academic support, or developmental education, and its relationship to higher education. This literature review presents trends within academic support and their connections with theories of involvement and learning. Research covers specific topics such as support-seeking behavior and intervention effectiveness, and broader topics such as retention and accessibility. This information below provides a framework of knowledge that is important in establishing the need to examine the relationship between student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking.

Student Perceptions and Support-Seeking Behavior

Support-seeking behavior, or the examination of how students utilize academic support services, is a relevant topic within higher education that has not been widely researched. Academic support professionals provide services that are rooted in research, but these services often do not require mandatory student participation. When students utilize academic support, it is important for academic support professionals to understand individual goals in support-seeking and outline the basic needs and functions of support-seeking interactions with students (Karabenick & Newman, 2006). However, many students do not voluntarily seek support. In general, those who need help the most are often the least likely to seek it; there was a curvilinear relationship between support-

seeking and need in one support-seeking study (Karabenick, 1988). The present study sought to contribute to an understanding of how student perceptions of academic support impact the willingness to seek support from an academic support center.

Theoretical Basis

Two prominent theories impact academic support within higher education: Astin's theory of involvement and Kolb's experiential learning theory. First, Astin's theory of involvement called for greater attention to how students commit to and invest in the academic and co-curricular activities within institutions of higher learning (Schroeder, 2003). His theory placed great emphasis on understanding the principal objects on which students focused their energies (Astin, 1999), and is therefore relevant to professionals within higher education as they seek to foster growth through student involvement (Schroeder). Within the field of academic support, involvement relates to the initiative taken by students to invest in the educational process and the academic support services available to them. Therefore, a practical application of Astin's theory (1999) is to benefit at-risk students by promoting academic involvement. While positive student involvement relates to investment in academic support services and the educational process, Astin stated that lack of involvement can be observed when students leave college (Bloland, 1993). In an age of increased focus on retention within the field of academic support, the necessity of fostering student involvement and its connection to student and institutional outcomes should be apparent to educators. A study focused on student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking could foster involvement by adding to the knowledge base used by academic support professionals to reach students.

Kolb's theory of experiential learning enhanced educators' abilities to provide challenge and support by establishing a cycle of learning that creates different learning styles (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The cycle of learning consists of a progression through concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1985). Kolb's theory can be used by educators to create learning outcomes that promote accessibility and variety through the recognition of individuality within the steps of learning. It is also particularly relevant to academic support professionals because of its emphasis on individual challenge and support. Providing challenge and support on an individualized basis connects with many of the academic support services discussed in this study.

In general, the theories put forth by Astin and Kolb promote student involvement, individuality in the learning process, and the importance of providing both challenge and support. When these theories are viewed within the realm of academic support, they help define the nature of both support-seeking and the support services available to students. When academic support research is combined with this theoretical base, it culminates in a framework for researching student perceptions and support-seeking behavior.

Academic Support Resources and Trends

In addition to support-seeking research and an understanding of the theories of Astin and Kolb, further research exists that contributes to the framework of understanding for the present study. Within the field of academic support, effective services are outlined through a variety of resources within a developing body of research. Literature ranges from general best practice resources to research studies focused on specific institutional services. Broader topics such as retention and accessibility are also

related to these services to demonstrate the importance of effective interventions. Additionally, the literature occasionally includes information concerning student perceptions of specific services, which contribute to the present study's focus on the relationship between perceptions and support-seeking.

Basic professional development resources. Before examining the relationship between student perceptions and support-seeking, it is first beneficial to gain an understanding of academic support in general. *What Works: Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education*, by Boylan (2002), is a general resource for professionals within academic support. A field of best-practice institutions was narrowed down by a study team through several rounds of analysis and review, and case studies were created as sources of information on what constitute best practices in developmental education. Boylan defines developmental education as “courses or services provided for the purpose of helping underprepared college students attain their academic goals” (Boylan, 2002, p. 3). The centralization of developmental education programs within an institution is shown to be helpful in fostering consistency and program growth, and academic support centers that are given high institutional priority are shown to be the most successful (Boylan). Within this context, Boylan emphasized that developmental education programs should provide a variety of interventions undergirded by a well-established developmental philosophy. The quality of classroom instruction was particularly emphasized as important, including the best-practice approach of instructing students through paired courses, which is discussed later (Boylan). These best practices are important in creating programs that are rooted in quality and therefore more capable of creating a positive impact during the support-seeking process.

The National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) provided further resources for professionals within academic support that particularly focus on proactively shaping the quality of developmental education. The organization promoted best practices in several publications, including coursework, program, and tutoring guides (Clark-Thayer & Cole, 2009). The association has also published an organizational strategic plan detailing multiple habits of effective developmental educators, including the importance of proactive behavior and the use of professional development opportunities such as yearly conferences (Arendale, 2001). The opportunities for proactive professional growth shape the quality of academic support services across higher education, which may impact student perceptions of these services.

Like the NADE publications, proactive behavior is also the focus of a general handbook titled *Promoting Postsecondary Education for Students with Learning Disabilities*. This resource included best practices for working with students with learning disabilities, and it made the important point that campus leaders need to be proactive in establishing multiple service-delivery options and technological aids while maintaining course standards (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1993). Proactively shaping academic support is important for educators because the quality of services within an institution may impact student perceptions and use of academic support. Institutionally, the quality and level of utilization of academic support services also impacts the outcomes of retention and accessibility efforts, which are a point of focus within higher education and a consideration of academic support professionals.

Role of retention and accessibility. Researching student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking behavior must involve a discussion of the growing

relationship between academic support, retention, and accessibility. Enrollment management has increased in focus across the spectrum of higher education, which creates institutional accountability within colleges and universities and further places emphasis on the role of academic support. Educators have seen an increase in college and university accountability for student success and a rise in the overall focus on institutional rating systems (Williford & Wadley, 2008). The ratings systems often take enrollment figures into account, which creates a focus on student and institutional outcomes that are tied to retention and accessibility efforts (Williford & Wadley).

Retention concerns have become a reality for the field of academic support. Since academic support professionals work with at-risk students, these professionals are intricately tied to a high level of accountability for student success and the realities of institutional efforts to become highly ranked institutions that attract and retain students. In general, engaging students in their academic endeavors has been shown to be important in retention efforts (Crossling, 2009), supporting Astin's focus on the importance of active involvement, since engaging students will protect against lack of involvement. The clearest expression of lack of student involvement is withdrawal from an institution (Bloland, 1993).

In addition to retention, accessibility is also important to consider within the field of academic support because these efforts remove barriers to student learning through the recognition of individual learning needs. In addition to disability services, accessibility efforts are often linked to newly successful instructional styles that focus on multiple ways to represent or express material, or differentiation (Roberts, Park, Brown, & Cook, 2011). Differentiated learning has become a focus within certain instructional styles that

are gaining prominence (Roberts et al., 2011). It is supported by Kolb's focus on experiential learning because it focuses on individuality within multiple learning styles. Like retention, accessibility efforts contribute to the quality of academic support services, potentially impacting student and institutional outcomes and the perceptions students have of these services.

Considering the role of academic support in achieving positive student and institutional outcomes, efforts should be made to identify the types of research-based and successful services that generally comprise the field of academic support. A 2004 study by ACT, Inc. questioned chief academic officers from two and four-year institutions and summarized retention and accessibility efforts into three categories: first year programs, academic advising, and learning support (ACT, 2010). The following section describes specific services within these categories and provides a framework of understanding that is important when studying student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking behavior.

Types of academic support services. Student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking behavior depend largely on the nature of services available at an institution. Paired courses, advising, tutoring, academic coaching, and disability services all provide examples of the academic support services that are described through research. This section provides a broad overview of these services and draws from a small but growing body of research. These interventions are also supported by the theories of Astin and Kolb by providing opportunities for individual engagement and involvement in a one-on-one or group setting. Research describing the implementation of these services can be utilized by academic support professionals to shape learning, and

this research is useful to the present study by providing a backdrop for student perceptions and support-seeking.

Before examining specific services, it is important to recognize that academic support is a necessary component of both highly selective institutions and open-door institutions (Hodges, Simpson, & Stahl, 2012). Furthermore, the support services that comprise developmental education do not only serve targeted groups through testing and placement, but also advanced learners hoping to improve and enhance learning (Hodges et al., 2012). The following services, therefore, can be utilized by a wide variety of students.

First, paired courses are unique courses that promote learning skills that are sharpened and developed through a partner course. These courses work best when two faculty members cooperate to determine how each course can complement the other while still maintaining distinct course goals, and paired courses can reinforce a variety of skills (Sills, 1991). For instance, Schoolcraft College paired a developmental reading course with a psychology course in order to enhance reading, study, and test-taking skills. The students in the paired course performed better than the control group did in the overall psychology course (Gudan, 1994). The students in the paired course had higher course grades and a 14% lower withdrawal rate than the students who did not take the paired course (Gudan). The successful outcomes associated with the paired courses at Schoolcraft College were one example of why many institutions utilize paired courses, particularly as programs within the first year.

Advising is another type of service within the field of academic support, which is utilized by academic support professionals to meaningfully connect one-on-one with

students. In particular, an intervention known as appreciative advising was an example of a method that was particularly well-received by students in a sample study. Appreciative advising is positive and action-oriented in nature, and student interviews showed positive perceptions of this method in one study done at a public, regional university (Truschel, 2008). The students involved in the study experienced increased feelings of self-worth and accomplishment due to the positive nature of advising in this context (Truschel). It was also clear that student satisfaction with advising was important for retention and students' overall experiences at an institution (Hale & Johnson, 2009).

Tutoring is another form of academic support that leads to improved student and institutional outcomes according to specific studies. While it must be understood that tutoring success is partially dependent upon the quality of the tutor, research exists on the effectiveness of this intervention as a whole. A study appearing in the *Journal of College Reading and Learning* tracked first-time, full-time, degree-seeking undeclared freshman for four years to measure tutoring effectiveness. Tutoring had a significant impact on retention, but not on GPA or time to select a major (Reinheimer & McKenzie, 2011). However, one study on drop-in tutoring showed that tutoring had a positive impact on GPA (Cooper, 2010). Students who visited a college tutoring center more frequently had higher rates of persistence and higher GPA's (Cooper). Overall, studies like these demonstrate examples of the positive implications of a well-utilized tutoring program.

Academic coaching provides another avenue for academic support that is one-on-one in nature and has been shown to be effective. These one-on-one sessions can focus on important topics such as study habits, student involvement, and planning, and this method has become increasingly important for the millennial generation of students (Robinson &

Gahagan, 2010). These students value individual mentorship and connection, which makes one-on-one academic coaching an effective intervention (Robinson & Gahagan).

In addition to tutoring and academic coaching, disability services comprise an important portion of learning support efforts within colleges and universities. The groundwork for disability services was established by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Although it was not an act specific to higher education, it called for accessibility within institutions of higher learning regarding educational policies and physical layout. It was not an entitlement program; rather, it created the need for reasonable documentation and related services that enhance access to the educational environment and go beyond simple physical access (Gordon, 1998). Students who qualify for services can take advantage of accommodations such as extended test-taking time and note-taking services, but self-advocacy is a crucial component of these services because students must individually seek out this assistance. In general, self-advocacy of students with disabilities is important for individual college adjustment as a whole and can be encouraged by disability services professionals (Adams & Procter, 2010).

Connecting Effective Services to Student Perceptions and Support-Seeking

As the literature demonstrates, there are a number of effective interventions available to students within the realm of academic support. According to a meta-analysis, roughly 66% of developmental studies programs reported positive outcomes and indicated improved retention rates (Burley, 1994). The importance of researching student perceptions and support-seeking becomes apparent when one considers the variety of services available, the benefits of support, the relationship of academic support to retention and accessibility, and the fact that students who need support services often do

not seek support (Karabenick, 1988). In the process of the study, information was uncovered concerning general student perceptions of the efforts made by academic support professionals and how these perceptions relate to support-seeking. Since academic support relates to active engagement and experiential learning, research involving why students choose to utilize or pass on these services helps to better understand the impact of academic support within colleges and universities.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Basic Design and Definitions

The present study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to measure student perceptions of academic support and the willingness to seek support from an academic support center. A qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen for the study due to the richness and depth of response it allows through the student interview process. By approaching the study from a qualitative phenomenological design, the essence of student perceptions and the support-seeking experiences could be understood most clearly. Since students seek academic support for a number of individual reasons, individuality was reflected best in interviews that allowed students to give in-depth answers that could not be obtained in a survey. The richness and depth of the interview process justified the sample size, as it provided information that was grouped into themes. Furthermore, the lack of a quantitative research tool necessitated a qualitative approach. The study provided a base for further quantitative possibilities, including the potential development of a research tool to measure support-seeking behavior.

Special attention must be given to defining the terms associated with the study, since these definitions impact the consistency of participant understanding and the relevance of responses among participants. For the purposes of the study, perceptions referred to an awareness or judgment of a specific topic or entity, in this case academic

support and its specific components. Willingness to receive support was defined as whether or not students would voluntarily seek support services from an academic support center. The research was not primarily designed to examine student attendance at mandatory academic support sessions. Within the context of the study, voluntary academic support referred specifically to tutoring, provisionally accepted student advising, disability services, and academic coaching from academic support center faculty and staff. Mandatory academic support referred to paired courses, proficiency courses, and probationary courses through an academic support center. Probationary courses offered at the institution studied were unique one-on-one learning experiences that occurred between students on academic probation and academic support center faculty or staff. The study primarily focused on student involvement in the voluntary components mentioned previously, although responses may reference prior or current involvement in mandatory courses. These voluntary and mandatory components provide examples of common services that relate to student perceptions and the willingness to seek support in the future.

Context and Participants

The research took place at a small, faith-based, liberal arts university of approximately 1,900 students. Tutoring, provisionally accepted student advising, disability services, academic coaching, paired courses, proficiency courses, and individualized probationary courses were the available services guided by faculty and staff members in the academic support center. A sample was sought that included two groups of students: those who have voluntarily sought academic support and those who have not. Four students from each group were randomly selected to participate in a semi-

structured interview, but the two groups had different qualification requirements and separate processes for inclusion in the study.

The sample for the support-seeking group was drawn from a university students-of-concern list, which identified students who were struggling academically in one or more courses. The students-of-concern list was ideal for the study because it narrowed the student population to those who could benefit the most from academic support based on current academic progress. Students in this group must have had sought voluntary academic support during the previous semester. Initially, students in the support-seeking group were also required to have a 2.0 GPA or below at the time of inclusion on the students-of-concern list. The 2.0 GPA requirement was chosen because it represented the final cutoff for academic probationary status for upperclassmen. Since the sample could not be filled, one student was chosen whose GPA fell slightly above the 2.0 threshold. Additionally, student involvement in required paired, proficiency, or probationary courses must have occurred before the fall of 2012 for the support-seeking group. In order to ensure validity, students in this group were also required to have had no prior relationship with the researcher.

Like the support-seeking group, the non-support-seeking group was also required to have had no prior relationship with the researcher. However, this group had separate qualification requirements pertaining to mandatory course involvement and was drawn from a different student list. Students in this group were chosen because they were currently on academic probation. These students did not seek voluntary academic support during the previous semester, and they were also currently enrolled in an individualized

probationary course. These students were ideal for the study because of the clear potential for benefit that could be gained from voluntary academic support.

It is also worth noting that the researcher originally sought ten participants for the study, with five students in each group. Due to difficulties securing student participation, the final number of eight participants was determined to be the most feasible option.

Instrument and Procedures

Qualitative interviews were used to gather information for the study. The interview protocol focused on student perceptions of academic support and the willingness to seek support from an academic support center (see Appendix A). The interviews were semi-structured to allow for clarification, elaboration, and depth of response. Interviewees were contacted by e-mail from the students-of-concern list and the probation list, and once the sample limit was filled the interviews were conducted in a classroom of the university library. An audio recorder was present so that a neutral individual could later transcribe the interviews.

Analysis

Responses were analyzed both within and between the support-seeking and non-support-seeking groups. Common responses within each group were developed into a set of themes pertaining specifically to the support-seeking or non-support-seeking students. These themes were then compared between the groups to determine whether there were differences regarding perceptions of academic support and the willingness to receive support from an academic support center. Additionally, common themes shared by each group were analyzed to determine similarities. Member-checking was also utilized before results were published.

Summary and Benefits

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to determine the specific ways in which students perceived academic support and how these perceptions impacted support-seeking from an academic support center. It featured an even sample of students who had either sought support or not sought support from the center. Common themes in perceptions and subsequent willingness to receive support both within and between each group were examined. The richness and depth of response allowed by the study provided meaningful information which can be used by higher education professionals to better serve students. The information contributes to efforts to advertise and promote the academic support center to students with the hopes of increasing involvement in support services. An increase in involvement would benefit both the students and the institution as a whole due to increased outcomes in student achievement, retention, and accessibility. It would also provide a basis for further quantitative research concerning student perceptions of academic support and support-seeking behavior.

Chapter 4

Findings

The findings of the study included interview responses from two student groups: those who had voluntarily sought academic support in the past and those who had not. Responses were examined for common meaning by coding significant statements into themes, which were categorized as major or minor according to the number of individuals who contributed significant statements. Two major themes were discovered for each of the support-seeking and the non-support-seeking groups. Additionally, four major themes and two minor themes were discovered to be shared by both groups. To ensure anonymity, the names of the participants were changed throughout the presentation and discussion of the research findings. Table 1 illustrates the major themes of the support-seeking group. Table 2 highlights the major themes of the non-support-seeking group. Table 3 showcases the major and minor themes shared by both groups.

Table 1

Support-Seeking Themes

Theme (Type)	Description
Presence of Need Recognition (Major)	Students perceived a personal need for academic support in order to be academically successful.
Existing Positive Perceptions (Major)	Students positively perceived the academic support center before utilization.

Table 2

Non-Support-Seeking Themes

Theme (Type)	Description
Initial Lack of Need Recognition (Major)	Students did not initially perceive a personal need for academic support in order to be academically successful.
New Positive Perceptions (Major)	Students positively perceived the academic support center after involvement in an individualized probationary course.

Table 3

Shared Themes of Support-Seekers and Non-Support-Seekers

Theme (Type)	Description
Care and Concern (Major)	Students verbalized the demonstration and importance of care and concern from faculty and staff regarding their academic growth.
One-on-One Support (Major)	Students described the benefits and importance of one-on-one academic support.
Positive Recommendations (Major)	Students would positively recommend the academic support center to others.
Future Support-Seeking (Major)	Students indicated a willingness to seek support from the academic support center in the future.
Time Involvement (Minor)	Students saw the time commitment involved with academic support as significant yet beneficial.
Initial Discomfort (Minor)	Students were initially uncomfortable seeking academic support.

Support-Seeking Themes

Students in the support-seeking group voluntarily sought academic support for a variety of reasons. However, the students had two themes in common that related to support seeking: the presence of need recognition regarding academic support and the existence of positive perceptions of the academic support center.

Major theme 1: Presence of need recognition. Students within the support-seeking group expressed a basic perception of personal need for academic support in order to be fully successful. The presence of need recognition occurred *before* the students voluntarily sought academic support from the academic support center. For example, Maggie stated:

I have ADD, and so learning in certain ways is hard. So, I know that the [academic support center] helps you find new ways to learn and new ways to study and stuff like that. So I guess I came with the intent of finding a new way to help me study and help me learn things in an easier way for me.

Overall, four out of four respondents indicated a basic recognition of personal need for academic support, although their specific reasons showed variation.

Major theme 2: Existing positive perceptions. Students had positive perceptions of the academic support center before voluntarily seeking support. These positive perceptions related to the impact of the academic support center. For example, even though Kyle had not previously utilized the academic support center, he “figured it would be helpful” and sought it out after recognizing a personal need for support. Another student, Amy, was impressed as a prospective student by the university’s presentation of its academic support center during her visit. She said that “it was noticeable that they share about it” and indicated that she viewed academic support as an important component of her academic success. While individual levels of knowledge concerning the academic support center’s services differed, four out of four respondents related positive views regarding academic support that strengthened their willingness to seek voluntary support.

Non-Support-Seeking Themes

Students in the non-support-seeking group did not seek voluntary academic support during the previous semester. These students were currently enrolled in a mandatory individualized course for students on academic probation after falling below a GPA threshold. The students had two themes in common: an initial lack of need recognition regarding academic support and the development of new positive perceptions of the academic support center.

Major theme 1: Initial lack of need recognition. Students in the non-support-seeking group did not believe they needed academic support in order to be successful during the previous semester. For example, Nicholas said, “I just never really considered it...I thought I could do it on my own. I mean, it was my first year, my first time.” After describing his lack of academic support utilization in high school, he also said, “I’ve kind of been the type of person that didn’t really want to seek out help. I just kind of wanted to do it on my own. So that’s probably why I never really came.” Overall, four out of four students indicated that they did not think they needed academic support before being enrolled in the individualized probationary course.

Major theme 2: New positive perceptions. Despite initial lack of need recognition, students in the non-support-seeking group indicated that positive perceptions of the academic support center developed after being involved in the individualized probationary course. For example, Kelly said that she thought voluntary use of academic support would cause her academics to be “impacted greatly” in a positive way. She also said that the probationary course was “making me sit down and study and do my work and if I do need help, I’ll seek that out.” There were no significant perceptions of the

academic support center prior to need recognition among the non-support-seekers, but four out of four students developed new and positive perceptions of the academic support center after being enrolled in the probationary course and recognizing their personal need for support.

Shared Themes of Both Groups

There were several themes that pertained to both the support-seeking and non-support-seeking groups. These themes varied in strength and scope, with four major themes and two minor themes becoming apparent according to the prevalence of common responses. Each involved student perceptions or support-seeking behavior in some way.

Major theme 1: Care and concern. The demonstration and importance of care and concern from university faculty and staff regarding academic growth was a prevalent theme among all eight participants. First, all four members of the support-seeking group verbalized the ways in which the academic support center faculty and staff demonstrated care and concern. For example, Michael said, “They wanted you to be in the classes you would do best in. They wanted you to be in situations where you would do your best. They really do show a lot of care and stuff like that.” Amy also said, “They have been very welcoming, and they are very flexible, and they have been willing to figure out some things that can work, and that’s really important to me to know that I have academic support.”

While the non-support-seeking group could not reference voluntary support-seeking experiences, all four participants stated that care and concern from university faculty and staff regarding their academic growth was important to them. For example, Nicholas stated:

I mean, I probably wouldn't take a class as seriously if I know the professor wasn't taking the class seriously. And if I see a professor cares more about a class, it makes me want to do better in the class just for the purpose of the professor caring for us.

Ralph also summarized this feeling with the phrase "if they care, I'll care." Students in the non-support-seeking group also indicated that the same level of care and concern from professionals was evident in their mandatory academic support experiences.

Major theme 2: One-on-one support. The value of one-on-one support was referenced directly by all four support-seeking students and by three of the four non-support-seeking students. First, the support-seeking students often mentioned the benefits of one-on-one meetings with academic support center faculty and staff. Referring to one-on-one meetings with the coordinator of the academic support center, Michael said:

It helps me see the long-term stuff and helps me get on the right path and heading towards a goal, especially in the middle of the semester when you kind of hit that slump. He helps you get through it and see where you are struggling.

The non-support-seeking group also valued one-on-one support. When describing the university environment in general, Kelly said, "It's easy to get to know the professors one-on-one and they will work with you, which is really nice." This was similar to what two other students in the non-support-seeking group stated regarding the benefits of one-on-one support. It was also evident that all four of the non-support-seeking students valued the probationary course, which is one-on-one in nature.

Major theme 3: Positive recommendations. All eight participants stated that they would recommend the academic support center's services to other students. Kyle, a support-seeking student, stated:

I would definitely recommend it if a friend of mine was struggling in a class. I'd say it's not a big deal, just go talk to him for like an hour or something like that. I'm very open with my friends that I've been there and talked to [the director of the academic support center] and how helpful he's been.

Heidi, a non-support-seeking student, had similar positive remarks after being enrolled in the individualized probationary course. When asked if she would recommend the academic support center to others, she said, "Absolutely. I mean, take advantage of anything you can. I mean, [the university] wants you to succeed, which is different from other colleges I've attended."

Major theme 4: Future support-seeking. All eight participants indicated a willingness to seek voluntary academic support in the future. Maggie, a support-seeking student, said that she would seek further voluntary help "because it's been such a great help so far that I wouldn't see why I wouldn't want to continue coming here and getting more help." Her response was representative of the support-seeking group as a whole.

Although the non-support-seeking group had never sought voluntary help in the past, all four participants spoke of their willingness to do so in the future. Nicholas, a non-support-seeking student, responded to the question of whether or not he would seek support in the future by saying, "Yes, for sure now." He also said that if he had not taken the individualized probationary course he "probably wouldn't have come to seek help at all" and he "might have gotten a tutor, but it probably wouldn't have happened."

Minor theme 1: Time involvement. A minor theme that emerged from both groups through the interview process was the recognition that the time commitment involved with seeking academic support was significant yet beneficial to academic success. Two support-seeking students and two non-support-seeking students indicated that they viewed academic support in this time-intensive way. Referring to the amount of time required to seek academic support, Michael, a support-seeking student, said:

I would view it positively just in the sense that you have to put time into stuff in order to get help out of it. I think it's hard for our culture to understand that because we want immediate results out of something.

Regarding her mandatory academic support through the individualized probationary course, Kelly, a non-support-seeking student, said, "I think it's worth the time. There's more of a time commitment than I would like, but I think in the end that it's definitely going to be helpful to me."

Minor theme 2: Initial discomfort. The second shared minor theme related to the discomfort students felt with initially seeking academic support, such as embarrassment or not wanting to feel reliant on others. Two students spoke of this initial discomfort. Maggie, a support-seeking student, said:

Some people might be embarrassed to go ask for help, and I know I used to be that person. I used to not want to ask for help and be very individual, but I don't think there is a single thing wrong with asking for help.

Kelly, a non-support-seeker, also had discomfort regarding her initial involvement with the mandatory support-seeking required by the individualized probationary course. She said, "You might have personal problems with going onto the academic probation or

going to the [academic support center] because you think that you should be able to do it, but in reality you aren't." She later followed up that statement by remarking that "if you jump over those hurdles you will see that [the academic support center] is really helpful."

Chapter 5

Discussion

Interview responses revealed two primary differences between students who voluntarily sought academic support and those who did not. One difference between these groups involved need recognition, or the realization that academic support was important to an individual's academic success. Support-seeking students displayed this need recognition prior to involvement with the academic support center. Additionally, differences were evident in the timing in which students developed positive perceptions of the academic support center. The support-seeking students held positive perceptions prior to seeking academic support. Regarding both need recognition and positive perceptions, non-support-seeking students developed these perceptions after involvement in the individualized probationary course. Knowing that there is a curvilinear relationship between support-seeking and need, the non-support-seeking students' initial lack of involvement was not uncommon or unexpected (Karabenick, 1988).

In addition to differences between groups, the research revealed a great deal of similarity between the support-seekers and non-support-seekers. Due to mandatory involvement in the academic support center, non-support-seeking students were given an enhanced perspective of the role that academic support can play in student success. It was clear that these experiences contributed to positive perceptions and the willingness to seek academic support in the future. In this way, many of their responses were similar to

those of the support-seeking students. Considering that Astin's (1999) theory of involvement placed great emphasis on understanding the principal objects on which students focus their energies, it was clear that the probationary course was increasing the initiative taken by non-support-seeking students to invest in the educational process and the academic support services available to them.

Taking these differences and similarities into account, a phenomenological essence of this research became clear. The phenomenological essence was informed by all separate and shared major themes and by both shared minor themes. Specifically, it was evident that positive academic support experiences bred positive student perceptions and the willingness to consider future support.

Interaction of Separate Major Themes

The support-seeking and non-support-seeking groups had two major themes each. For each group, one theme involved need recognition and the other theme involved perceptions of academic support. First, it was clear that support-seeking students recognized a personal need for academic support while the non-support-seeking students initially did not. It was also clear that the support-seeking students viewed academic support as personally beneficial at an earlier stage in the support-seeking process.

Since the support-seeking students were already regularly involved with positive and ongoing experiences within the academic support center, the phenomenological essence of the research was already fully apparent for these students. Regarding the non-support-seeking students, it was clear that positive academic support experiences were at least breeding positive perceptions of support. These students, who previously saw no personal use for academic support, were now viewing these services in a personal and

positive manner due to their involvement in the individualized probationary course. The presence of these new positive perceptions indicated that such learning intervention was effective for non-support-seeking students.

Interaction of Shared Major Themes

The research also revealed four shared major themes between each group: care and concern, one-on-one support, positive recommendations, and future support-seeking. Each of these shared major themes lent support to the phenomenological essence of the research.

Care and concern. This shared theme was interesting in that it showed both the experiences of the support-seeking students and the general values of the non-support-seeking students. On the one hand, the support-seekers described specific ways in which the academic support center faculty and staff demonstrated care and concern for their academic growth during voluntary academic support experiences. On the other hand, the non-support-seeking students spoke in general terms regarding the importance of feeling cared for as students by university faculty and staff. Since these non-support-seeking students also indicated satisfaction with the individualized probationary course and a willingness to seek voluntary academic support in the future, it seemed that the demonstration of care and concern by academic support center faculty and staff played a role in this outcome.

One-on-one support. The shared theme of one-on-one support also showed similarities between groups in a similar fashion as the shared theme of care and concern. All four support-seeking students referenced positive one-on-one experiences with academic support center faculty and staff, while three of the four non-support-seeking

students spoke directly about the value they placed on one-on-one support. Since academic support involved a great deal of one-on-one support and the individualized probationary course supported this format, it was clear that such support bred positive perceptions and may have contributed to the willingness of students to seek academic support in the future. The importance of one-on-one support is also validated by research on the millennial generation, which has found that today's students value individual mentorship and connection to a high degree (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010).

Positive recommendations. Positive recommendations suggested positive perceptions, and this shared theme was illustrated by eight out of eight participants, indicating that they would recommend the academic support center to others. This was particularly remarkable for the non-support-seekers, since these students had previously not seen a personal need for academic support. It was clear that their perceptions changed after enrollment in the individualized probationary course, which led to perhaps the most interesting shared theme of future support-seeking.

Future support-seeking. The phenomenological essence of the research was supported strongly by the fact that all eight students indicated that they would consider returning to the academic support center voluntarily in the future. This was not a particular surprise for the support-seeking group, but was quite notable for the non-support-seeking group. These students saw firsthand the impact that had been made by positive academic support through the individualized probationary course and consequently were willing to return voluntarily in the future. This was also notable considering the potential barriers to academic support involvement that were discovered within the minor themes of the research.

Interaction of Shared Minor Themes

The phenomenological essence of the research involved the impact of positive experiences on student perceptions and the willingness to seek support. It was important to note that the experiences were positive enough to overcome some students' views on time commitment significance and initial discomfort with seeking support, which were the two minor themes of the research. Despite the time commitment being viewed as significant by some, it was always viewed as beneficial and did not hinder students from indicating that they would voluntarily return in the future. Certain students also referenced initial discomfort when seeking support or utilizing services, but this was also overcome once students recognized the benefits and welcoming environment of the academic support center. Such a finding supported the notion that positive experiences bred positive perceptions and involvement. Promoting involvement widens the positive impact of academic support that is demonstrated through research, since the majority of developmental studies programs reported positive outcomes and indicated improved retention rates (Burley, 1994).

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The present study revealed important implications for academic support professionals as they seek to foster involvement with academic support. First, qualitative results showed the importance of developing positive academic support experiences for students that include demonstrated care and concern and one-on-one support. Based on student experiences, it was clear that the university's academic support center was functioning effectively in these areas. For one non-support-seeking student, her valuable

one-on-one experiences at the academic support center enhanced her need recognition and created new positive perceptions. Heidi said:

At past schools they weren't very friendly about their academic support, like here it is. It wasn't positively promoted like it is here. So until I had to kind of come and look into it, I just didn't really think that I would need it. But it's a nice thing to know that it's available for me.

It was clear that the demonstration of care and concern and the presence of one-on-one experiences enhanced Heidi's need recognition and willingness to seek future academic support. These positive experiences also created positive recommendations from students such as Heidi, which will potentially benefit other student involvement.

While the presence of care and concern and one-on-one support from professionals may have enhanced positive recommendations and future support-seeking by students, a major implication of the research existed in the fact that students' need recognition must be present before growth can occur. For support-seeking students, the need recognition occurred in conjunction with general positive perceptions of academic support. For non-support-seeking students, initial lack of need recognition inhibited prior significant perceptions. However, the research revealed that mandatory involvement in positive academic support experiences enhanced need recognition and led to the development of positive perceptions for the non-support-seeking students. Therefore, a major implication of the research was the importance of need recognition to the development of positive perceptions and the willingness to seek academic support.

In addition to the continued use of a mandatory probationary course, need recognition could be generated among the student body through the use of student

testimonials focused on perceived need for academic support. Academic support professionals could also partner with campus leaders to educate faculty and staff concerning common student viewpoints regarding academic support. It was clear that the academic support center could benefit from finding new ways of making students aware of one-on-one support opportunities by educating others and speaking to student recognition of need. It would be beneficial to capture the message in a way that promoted voluntary support-seeking and enhanced need recognition among the student body as a whole. Since positive experiences promoted involvement, attracting more students through effective marketing could lead to increased ongoing support-seeking relationships.

Regarding future practice, it would also be helpful for the academic support center to further assess the individualized probationary course, especially considering the fact that differentiated learning is gaining prominence within education (Roberts et al., 2011). Qualitative results indicated high student satisfaction with the course, but it would be beneficial to capture the overall results of the course in a way that could be presented comprehensively among academic support professionals. It might seem that the course should continue based on student perceptions alone, but comprehensive assessment of the course that could be disseminated among others would validate its effectiveness.

Future Research

The most significant recommendation for future research would be to study other courses for students on academic probation. Academic support is not a widely researched field, but its growing level of importance demands more materials focused on best practices. Probationary courses fall into an important category of academic support, since

research has identified learning support as a key component of retention and accessibility efforts (ACT, 2010).

Concerning the growth of academic support research, it would also be beneficial to develop a quantitative tool to directly measure support-seeking. Currently, no comprehensive tool exists that can measure perceptions and support-seeking behavior. Such a tool would allow academic support professionals to gather information regarding support-seeking on a larger scale, particularly as a means for determining how to enhance need recognition for academic support among students.

Regarding further qualitative possibilities, it would be useful to explore perceptions of other academic support interventions that are not one-on-one in nature. One example would be paired courses, which have been shown to reinforce a variety of skills (Sills, 1991). Since the students in the present study mostly discussed their one-on-one experiences with the researcher, more information on group involvement would add both scope and depth to the understanding of perceptions and support-seeking.

A final recommendation for further research would be the validation of the study's assertion that need recognition is a crucial component of student involvement in academic support services. A more detailed analysis of the relationship between need recognition and student perceptions of academic support would be beneficial in assessing support-seeking behavior.

Research Limitations

The most significant limitation of the research was the sample size, since eight students represented a relatively limited pool of experience. The research was also conducted at a small, faith-based, liberal arts institution and therefore cannot be

generalized to a large variety of colleges and universities. For example, academic support centers at large institutions may operate differently due to higher student demand.

Participants were also students who had achieved a relatively low GPA and had significant academic support needs, so the research cannot be generalized to all students.

One example would be that high-achieving students may not exhibit the same support-seeking behavior as students with more significant academic support needs. Additionally, researcher bias may have impacted the interpretation of student interviews and was therefore a potential limitation. Finally, student self-report also limited the study because of the possibility that responses were misrepresented to the researcher.

Conclusion

Academic support is an important and developing field that enhances student success and development. The present research demonstrated the impact of positive support experiences on student perceptions and the willingness to seek support services in the future. Students experienced care and concern and the value of one-on-one support through both voluntary and mandatory experiences, leading to common themes among students who previously would have found themselves at opposite ends of the support-seeking spectrum. Need recognition was also shown to be a crucial component in perceiving and seeking academic support. Academic support professionals can take encouragement from the fact that a meaningfully crafted support environment may lead to positive perceptions of value and the willingness to seek support in the future.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Opening Question: Have you voluntarily sought academic support services from the academic support center in the past?

If the answer to the opening question is “yes”:

- 1) Why did you decide to seek services from the academic support center?
- 2) What services are you aware of that are offered by the academic support center?
- 3) Have you utilized tutoring services from the academic support center?
- 4) Have you utilized advising services from the academic support center?
- 5) Have you utilized one-on-one academic coaching from the academic support center?
- 6) Are there any other voluntary services you have utilized from the academic support center that you would be willing to share?
- 7) How were you made aware of the voluntary services you have utilized?
- 8) Have you ever been enrolled in mandatory courses offered by the academic support center in the past, such as Applied Learning Techniques, Academic Reading, Foundations of Critical Thinking, or English and math proficiency courses?
- 9) Describe your experiences with each of the voluntary services provided to you from the academic support center, including general amount of use and overall impact on your academics.

- 10) How did you believe your voluntary academic support experiences would impact your academic success?
- 11) Describe your experiences with academic support in high school.
- 12) Do you regularly seek help from others, such as your professors or other students?
- 13) How do you view the time commitment required to seek voluntary academic support from the academic support center?
- 14) Would you recommend the academic support center to others, and to whom would you recommend it?
- 15) How did the academic support center faculty and staff demonstrate care and concern regarding your academic growth, and is this important to you?
- 16) Describe the mission, or purpose, of the academic support center.
- 17) Describe the benefits of seeking support through the academic support center.
- 18) Describe the drawbacks of seeking support through the academic support center.
- 19) How does academic support relate to your calling as a student?
- 20) Would you willingly return to the academic support center for assistance in the future? Why or why not?

If the answer to the opening question is “no”:

- 1) Describe why you chose not to seek support services during the fall semester.
- 2) What services are you aware of that are offered by the academic support center?
- 3) Has the academic support center contacted you about support?
- 4) Do you know others who have utilized the academic support center’s services, such as tutoring or one-on-one academic coaching?

- 5) Has the academic support center been positively recommended to you by others?
- 6) Has the academic support center been negatively described to you by others?
- 7) How do you believe your academic success would be impacted by academic support?

Explain.

- 8) Have you ever been enrolled in mandatory courses offered by the academic support center in the past, such as Applied Learning Techniques, Academic Reading, Foundations of Critical Thinking, or English and math proficiency courses?
- 9) Describe your experiences with academic support in high school.
- 10) Do you regularly seek help from others, such as your professors or other students?
- 11) How do you view the time commitment required to seek voluntary academic support from the academic support center?
- 12) Despite not utilizing voluntary services, would you recommend the support center to others? To whom would you recommend it?
- 13) Is it important to you that care and concern regarding your academic growth is demonstrated by faculty and staff?
- 14) Describe the mission, or purpose, of the academic support center.
- 15) Describe the benefits of seeking support through the academic support center.
- 16) Describe the drawbacks of seeking support through the academic support center.
- 17) How does academic support relate to your calling as a student?
- 18) Would you willingly seek assistance from the academic support center in the future?
Why or why not?

Appendix B

Consent Form

TAYLOR UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT

The Relationship between Students' Perceptions of Academic Support and Their Willingness to Seek Support

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding academic support. You were selected as a possible subject because of your prior involvement or lack of involvement with the academic support center. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Lance Vanderberg, Academic Enrichment Center graduate assistant. It is for a master's degree thesis for Taylor's Master of Arts in Higher Education Program.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to determine how student perceptions of academic support relate to the willingness to seek support.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of ten subjects who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

- Take part in an approximately one-hour interview regarding academic support and support-seeking.
- Be given the opportunity to check your responses before results are published.

RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

While on the study, the risks are:

- Discomfort when answering questions.

-While completing the survey, you can tell the researcher that you feel uncomfortable or do not care to answer a particular question.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

The benefits to participation that are reasonable to expect are an increased understanding of the academic support center.

ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

Instead of being in the study, you have the option to not participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and the databases in which results might be stored. Recordings will be deleted after transcription by a neutral third party individual.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Taylor University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, Dr. Scott Gaier, and (as allowed by law) state or federal agencies, specifically the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) etc., who may need to access your research records.

PAYMENT

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

COMPENSATION FOR INJURY

In the event of physical injury resulting from your participation in this research, necessary medical treatment will be provided to you and billed as part of your medical expenses. Costs not covered by your health care insurer will be your responsibility.

Also, it is your responsibility to determine the extent of your health care coverage. There is no program in place for other monetary compensation for such injuries. If you are participating in research which is not conducted at a medical facility, you will be responsible for seeking medical care and for the expenses associated with any care received.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

For questions about the study or a research-related injury, contact the researcher Lance Vanderberg at 765-998-5598. If you cannot reach the researcher during regular business hours (e.g., 8:00AM-5:00PM) or after business hours, please call 231-557-0391.

To contact Taylor University's Institutional Review Board, e-mail IRB@taylor.edu.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to

which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Taylor University.

SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study.

I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

