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Success and Retention of 21st Century Scholars: A Phenomenological Study

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SUCCESS AND RETENTION OF 21ST CENTURY SCHOLARS:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Stanley Severo Duncan

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL
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MASTER'S THESIS
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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Stanley Severo Duncan

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

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Abstract

Since 1990, access to a college education in Indiana has become more accessible, and a significant contributor to this has been the 21st Century Scholarship. This research explores what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution. A phenomenological design was used along with semi-structured interviews to gain insights from nine participants from a faith-based liberal arts university located in the Midwest. These participants expressed themes that recognized the factors that were contributing to and hindering their success and the institution's ability to retain them. Despite this insight, these participants lacked a true understanding of what it meant to be a 21st Century Scholar at this private institution.

Acknowledgments

I sit here grateful. Coming into MAHE, I knew I needed help alongside this journey as I conducted research for the first time in my life. The following is my thank you to all the people who helped me along the way.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is weeks away from May, which means graduation anticipation grows among the high school seniors throughout Indiana. Excitement is flowing through the halls as students are thinking about their post-high school plans. Some students plan to enter the workforce, a few students accept athletic scholarships, and many others pursue more education at post-secondary institutions. Parents and students are looking at their financial aid to cover some of the four-year education costs. Many of these parents desire the next steps for their kids post-high school, but education options are often costly. This story is a common narrative of a student and parents of 21st Century Scholar recipients.

Most of today's college students rely upon financial aid from filing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). The FAFSA is a standard application led by high school guidance counselors to ensure filing rates within high schools. Up to 13 million students and adults in the United States use the FAFSA, which provides up to $150 billion in aid (Staub, 2020). Some students receive scholarships for grades or due to their socioeconomic status. One of the most popular and growing scholarships in Indiana available for students to apply for is the 21st Century Scholarship. "At in-state, public two-year and four-year colleges, the 21st Century Scholarship covers up to 100 percent of tuition, while the scholarship pays part of the tuition at private or independent colleges" (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.).

Many of these scholarship recipients pursue in-state public colleges because of family and friend connections and the amount of aid they would receive—but not all students take this route. Many students use the 21st Century Scholarship to attend in-state private institutions despite only receiving part of their tuition paid with their aid. In 2016, 83% of Scholars attended Indiana public colleges, while 13% attended Indiana private colleges (Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 2017). Students choose to use their scholarships at a private institution for numerous reasons but still find it beneficial and essential to take advantage of their scholarships to enhance their education at a higher education institution.

Statement of the Problem

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE) completes extensive research to understand factors that affect success and retention for 21st Century Scholars at public schools but not at private institutions. (J. Wilson, personal communication, March 11, 2021). The CHE can use these data to further insight into how higher education educators can ensure Scholars' future success and retention. Still, based on 2016 data, 13% of students who attend private institutions need this as well (Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 2017). Private institution attendance becomes an issue for Scholars who choose to participate in private institutions because they do not receive the total amount of their scholarships due to their choice to attend a private institution. One can argue that students attending private institutions should receive even more support and care because of this decision and the cost associated with many private institutions.

According to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (2020) annual College Completion Report, "at public institutions, 42.3% of all Indiana college students graduate on time, and nearly two-thirds (62 %) of all students complete college within six years." Since most of the report focuses on public institutions, the researcher hopes this research will give a clearer picture to 21st Century Scholars at private institutions and provide an opportunity to explore potential factors that hurt or help the success and retention of 21st Century Scholars.

Success

Success for a student can have many different meanings and outcomes depending on what that student is pursuing. An aspect of success to a 21st Century Scholar could be the maintenance of the scholarship. In terms of maintaining the 21st Century Scholarship, success can be defined for the CHE as accomplishing all the requirements such as maintaining a satisfactory academic progress report, completing 30 credit hours per academic year, filing the FAFSA, graduating within four years, and accomplishing the program's requirements. Success can also be measured by students' campus involvement and level of participation in their academic experience (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). Involvement could include their relationships with faculty and staff, student activities or leadership, athletics or intramurals, attendance for the chapel, advisor meetings, or eating on campus at dining halls.

A more broadly accepted definition of success is "a degree or measure of succeeding, a favorable or desired outcome, or the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence" (Merriam–Webster, n.d.). What is the desired outcome for these students? This outcome could be successful graduating, maintaining a certain grade point average,

or participating in multiple co-curricular activities. Success could also combine many of the definitions previously mentioned above to cover desired outcomes. The desired overall success of a 21st Century Scholar would lead to two potential outcomes: The institution will retain that student and graduate within four years, and the student will maintain their scholarship to get the most out of the partial scholarship amount. These outcomes would aid in the student's success because of a private institution's significant benefits.

Retention

Retention directly affects both the CHE and private institutions. Retention is defined as "a student staying in school until completion of a degree" (Hagedorn, 2006., p. 1). The primary goal in retention is that a student attends and graduates from their first institutional choice within four years. Considering the demographics of 21st Century Scholarship recipients is even more important for students who attend private institutions because of the scholarship's lesser amount of aid. Hence, they must receive the benefits of attending a smaller school.

In 2016, the CHE only released data on the retention of Scholars at public institutions. Of Indiana public college students, 71% persisted from the first to the second year at their schools (Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 2017). Although there was research conducted on public institutions by the CHE, there is little to no information for Scholars at private institutions. The relationship between retention and success is significant because it all becomes insignificant if the Scholar does not graduate despite all the factors previously mentioned contributing. So many people's financial aid, institutional resources, and time and effort become forgotten.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to conduct new research that the Commission of Higher Education (CHE) could use to explore better ways to determine the success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at private institutions. As the researcher looked over annual reports, this study could help the CHE learn more about what they can do and what information they could pass to educators at private institutions to lead to more student success and retaining students. This study seeks to address the research question: What factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution?

Conclusion

Success and retention are two factors that ultimately become essential to the Commission of Higher Education's retention goal. Through the retention of students, institutions can obtain more revenue and continue without financial implications. The more institutions can retain students for the entirety of their college degree, the more successful the commission will be and the more benefits the individual student will receive. As the retention numbers at institutions increase, student success will follow, and the commission will continue to increase their numbers of Hoosiers to graduate with college degrees. This research will provide valuable insight to the CHE as they prioritize Scholars at a private institution. This study will further explore the factors that affect success and retention for 21st Century Scholars at a private institution. The next chapter will dive into the research behind promoting success and obtaining retention of college-aged students.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Discovering what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars has never been more crucial for the CHE and educators at private institutions. Ensuring students receive their degree within four years at the same institution is also a high priority. This chapter will define and review the literature base surrounding success and retention with students' context at private institutions. This chapter will also identify the research gap for the CHE and their intentions towards public versus private intuitions for 21st Century Scholars.

Success

Success is a term that lacks a concrete definition. To define it, there must be a specific context. Included in this context would be the importance of the location in which success is being defined, the time, the people, and the environment surrounding the person striving for success. All of these factors are crucial in determining success. There has been the belief that success is striving to be the best in any situation you might be in at a given time. Younger people see famous professional athletes or actors on television or social media, which has embedded the idea that success means receiving public recognition to be successful. Public recognition and its relationship with success are simply not accurate. A broader definition of success is defined by Adu-Wusu (n.d.):

> The status of having achieved and accomplished an aim or objective and being
> more successful means the achievement of desired visions and planned goals.

Furthermore, success can be a certain social status that describes a prosperous person who could have gained fame for its favorable outcome. The dictionary defines it as attaining wealth, prosperity, and fame.

This research on success will be discussed from the CHE's perspective and a broad viewpoint.

What is essential in Adu-Wusu's (n.d.) definition and what best fits this research's background is how he claims success is the status of having achieved and accomplished an aim or objective. For the purpose of this study, success is defined, using Adu-Wusu's definition, as attaining desired visions and planned goals.

As Scholars begin their journey at private institutions, success is defined in terms of how they can be successful, which correlates with retaining their scholarship, but this is not the only way success is defined. What does it look like outside of their scholarship? What exactly is student success? In previous studies on success for a student at a college or institution, engagement indicators are discussed. Kuh (2010) completed these studies. He notes student engagement has two components that contribute to student success:

First, the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities leads to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. Second, the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities. (p. 7)

This study further shows the importance of students' academics and co-curricular activities. Student involvement in and outside of the classroom contributes significantly to their success.

Kuh's (2010) research about academics and participation outside of the classroom is similar and can reflect how the CHE has implemented requirements for all 21st Century Scholars. Researchers recognize academics and campus engagement as two critical keys to student success. Kuh goes on and claims that

> If faculty and administrators use principles of good practice to arrange the curriculum and other aspects of the college experience, students would ostensibly put forth more effort; students would write more papers, read more books, meet more frequently with faculty and peers, and use information technology appropriately, all of which would result in more significant gains in such areas as critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, and responsible citizenship. (p. 7)

Similarly, Tinto (1999), from Syracuse University, wrote *Taking Serious: Rethinking the First Year of College*. In this study, Tinto acknowledges that most colleges prioritize the conversation around increasing student success and increasing student retention but do not take it seriously. Institutions treat this topic as another issue added to a more extensive list of issues (Tinto, 1999). Instead of taking necessary steps to help students struggling to experience success or intuitional retention, schools add a "course" to the academic curriculum. Tinto (1999) uses the example of diversity, and to solve this issue on our campuses, schools add a course around "diversity studies." He proposes the following: (1) What is to be done? (2) What should institutions do to increase success, especially for low-income students? (21st Century Scholars are considered low-income based on their socioeconomic status.) Six conditions within institutions that support student success are commitment, expectations, support, feedback,

involvement, and learning (Tinto, 1999). As seen in Tinto's (1999) study, success can be viewed and enhanced from many different avenues.

Scholar Success Program

The scholar success program (SSP) is a program aimed to increase involvement for 21st Century Scholar recipients that includes activities at the high school and at the college level that help students make that transition to college, ensure career success, and keep them on a four-year path to earn and maintain the 21st Century Scholarship (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). The college scholar success program started with the graduating high school class of 2019, and each of the following college years. The scholar must complete four annual college performance requirements on top of the yearly requirements. From a broader perspective, the SSP (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.) states that a student must; (a) earn at least 30 credits each academic year; (b) file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by Indiana's April 15 deadline; (c) complete the college SSP each year of college to maintain your scholarship; (d) lastly, maintain satisfactory academic progress (SAP) as determined by your college. Maintaining SAP usually includes a minimum grade point average (GPA) per semester and a limit on incomplete and withdrawals from courses. These requirements have developed over the last three years, but ultimately it is in place to prepare students for career and college success. The college scholar success program is based on the successful high school college scholar success program, which has similar intentions of keeping students involved and prepared for next steps. All of the expectations can be navigated on their Scholar track accounts to ensure that the student meets the requirements on a timeline to fit their needs.

The Scholar track system helps students see if they have successfully maintained their scholarship by completing their requirements. These students do this by monitoring their participation within the SSP. Some of these requirements are straightforward. Students across the country, 21st Century Scholars or not, must file the FAFSA to receive federal financial aid, limit their withdraws and incompletes in an academic school year, and maintain a specific SAP requirement. For the 21st Century Scholarship, this is a 2.0 GPA (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). One requirement that is more dependent on the student's self-determination and ability to stay committed are the college performance requirements within the SSP. This requirement involves completing certain activities involved in college engagement and career preparation (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.).

Student Development Theories

Success and retention are two areas built on a student development theory: Astin's (1999) Theory of Involvement. Student Involvement refers to "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Using this definition, educators understand that the more time a student spends on campus and not isolated, their chances of success increase. An educator needs to recognize a holistic approach to students' lives. This approach includes academics, social interactions, campus activities, and many more (Crossing, 2018). 21st Century Scholars must participate in at least two activities in each of the two areas each semester in an academic year. The following activities would qualify as college engagement: bridge program, student orientation, first-year experience/seminar, learning community, campus involvement activities, or study abroad. The following activities would qualify

for career preparation: informational interview, job shadow/career assessment, professional resume help, portfolio, internship, or student–faculty research (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). The purpose of this involvement for a student would be to keep students on campus engaged with their faculty and staff which, as a result, should lead to an increase in the passing rate of SSP and experiencing student success.

The SSP is essential to mention in this study to reinforce what is being done by the CHE to explore what student success looks like and what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution. The CHE initially started the SSP to keep students on track to prepare themselves for each year both in and outside the classroom.

Retention

Retention is highly agreed upon in definition and importance throughout higher education. This commonly agreed-upon term includes similar definitions and the path towards achieving this goal for public and private institutions. A simple explanation of retention is "a student staying in school until completion of a degree" (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 1). This definition is similar to persistence, which is crucial in higher education as well. Persistence is defined as a student's ability to continue to the following term or semester (Spear, 2020). Ultimately, institutions thrive to provide students with resources to persist until they reach their graduation. Previous research on student retention mentions how student retention is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education. Around 40 years ago, student retention finally appeared on higher education institutions' radar (Tinto, 2006). Educators first believed that if institutions struggled to retain certain students, then those students' attributes, skills, and motivation were

substantially lower than those who finished their degrees. In summary, the student failed, and not the institution (Tinto, 2006). In the 1970s, this perspective changed. Higher education professionals began to understand the relationship between the individual and the environment. The view of student retention shifted to consider the role of the environment—in this case, the institution—in a student's decision to leave or stay (Tinto, 2006). Tinto (2006) credits Alexander Astin, Ernest Pascarella, and Patrick Terenzini, whose research allowed past and current administrators, faculty, and staff to see involvement matters for retention. It is crucial during a student's first year of college.

Tinto's (2006) research consists of three main lessons: (1) Institutional action, (2) Implementation for effective action or program implementation, and (3) Moving beyond access; the lesson of student income. Within each of these lessons, Tinto (2006) expands on what we can learn and apply. In his first lesson, he notes, "it is one thing to understand why students leave; it is another to know what institutions can do to help students stay and succeed" (p. 6). He goes deeper into the importance of faculty and student development. It is increasingly clear that faculty's actions, especially in learning environments, become critical components to the institutional effort to increase retention (Tinto, 2006).

In his second lesson, Tinto (2006) stresses, "it is one thing to identify effective action, it is another to implement it in ways that significantly enhance student retention over time" (p. 8). Two components in this action or program are to identify effective action. Still, it is another challenge to implement it thoroughly, and it is one thing to start a new program, but another challenge to see it endure (Tinto, 2006).

The third claim made by Tinto (2006) is about students' equity. Tinto states, "though access to higher education for low-income students has increased, and gaps in access between high- and low-income students decreased, the gap between well-to-do and poor students in four-year degree completion has gotten broader" (pp. 10–11).

Tinto's (2006) last lesson is similar to why CHE started the 21st Century Scholarship. Educators created the 21st Century Scholarship program as an early college promise program designed to help ensure every graduating high school student in Indiana, despite their socioeconomic status, might have the opportunity to pursue a college education (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). Today, eligible students who maintain their Scholar pledges will receive their scholarship for four years up to 100% tuition at an eligible Indiana college university (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.).

Overall, Tinto's research has profoundly affected how we view and approach retention and the importance of reducing the gap of accessibility to post-high school education. Tinto's research and other models have been supported, challenged, and updated over three decades. Today, his work has greatly influenced how past and current researchers and educators approach retention (Swail, 2004).

Research on student retention for higher education has come a long way in the last 100 years. One consistent construct has been the definition of retention, which is still an institution's ability to retain a student's admission until graduation (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). The earliest research done on retention was in the early 1930s. Still, it was solidified with the research from Gekoski and Schwartz (1961), Panos and Astin (1968), Feldman and Newcomb (1969), and Vincent Tinto (1975). Everyone has to contribute to how students persevere and what an institution can provide to retain

students. These studies will continue to evolve, and future studies will only make this much richer with solutions.

Retention of 21st Century Scholars

The 21st Century Scholarship students must graduate within four years or less because the financial aid only covers that timeline for a Scholar. For institutions to ensure the retention of a Scholar, the student must complete college during this time frame. The 21st Century Scholarship provides students the opportunity to use their scholarship within a 10-year window (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). The 10-year window gives students flexibility, yet it is crucial to graduate within four years because a private institution student receives substantially less than a public student. Learning More Indiana (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.) provides the following to Scholars and parents:

> At in-state, public, public two-year, and four-year colleges, the 21st Century Scholarship covers up to 100 percent of tuition and some regularly assessed fees, such as technology, student activity, and health services fees. The scholarship pays part of the tuition at a private or independent college and approved for-profit specialty or propriety schools.

The scholarship pays part of the tuition at a private institution based on this information. Hence, universities need to have the right system and resources to ensure the completion of this.

Then Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education Teresa Lubbers stated in the College Completion Report released by the CHE (2020) that students who turn to the option of dropout or transfer, especially in their later years of college, become experience

more difficulty in transferring credits and covering the cost of fees. Imagine a student—who attends a small private school, completes two years, and decides to transfer to another private or public institution—and the effects this might have on their ability to graduate on time. This student risks adding another semester or year to their college plan, which means paying for an entire year without the 21st Century Scholarship because it is only a four-year scholarship. This situation can also be vice versa, as a student who attends a public school who transfers to a small private might take out student loans and extra years to complete their academic courses. In an ideal world, the student accepts the scholarship, attends a public or private of their choice, graduates within four years, and that institution retains them.

Conclusion

This research will further explore the relationship between student success and retention. It is common to assume that the more success students experience in their overall student experience could increase their retention chances at their original institution. The current literature gap is how the CHE currently lacks original research about 21st Century Scholars and their private institution experiences. Most of the information from the CHE is based on public universities in Indiana. This study explores the research question, What factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution? This study will provide that knowledge forward to private campuses throughout the state to ensure Scholars receive the most effective ways to graduate within four years.

Chapter 3

Methodology

After reviewing previous literature and collaborating with a member of the CHE, there is a clear research gap in the literature looking at specific factors that affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at private institutions. The researcher determined the need for further study. This chapter will detail the study's design, context, participants, procedure, and potential benefits after the research.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology of phenomenological design. "The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description for the nature of the particular phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 147). A phenomenological design with semi-structured interviews was chosen due to the allowance of the researcher to explore what these Scholars are involved with on campus. Within this design, the researcher relied on general semi-structured interviews. The researcher did not restrict the participants' views, while the participants have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Context

The research study was conducted at a small, private, faith-based liberal arts university located in the Midwest. As of 2021, the institution had an approximate enrollment of 2,000 students. Of this undergraduate enrollment, 54 students were classified as 21st Century Scholars, which is 2.7% of the student population. This

institution currently does not have any data on how many 21st Century Scholars they retain on a year-to-year basis.

Participants

The nine participants in this study represented a sample of the 21st Century Scholars at this small, private, faith-based liberal arts university in the Midwest. The CHE classifies a 21st Century Scholar as a student who, during their K–12 years, qualified with the following standards: be an Indiana resident, be enrolled in a 7th or 8th grade Indiana public or private school accredited by the Indiana Department of Education, be a U.S. citizen or eligible non-citizen, and be a member of a family that meets income eligibility guidelines (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). These nine students had the academic status as a sophomore, junior, or senior heading into the 2021–22 academic school year. Therefore, these students had decided to return to this institution after one or multiple years.

The researcher collaborated with the office that directly oversees the 21st Century Scholars students and the financial aid office on this institution's campus during the study. Due to the collaboration, the researcher received access to a list of all 21st Century Scholars on campus and used the list for the outreach of participation invitations.

Procedure

Setting

This research study was conducted from September through October of the 2021–22 academic school year. The research took place with students through a one-on-one interview procedure that was hosted within a conference room on this institution's campus. Through the research process, the researcher offered options for interviews, such

as Microsoft Teams or Zoom, but all participants preferred in-person interviews only when given potential meeting spaces.

Processes

Due to the phenomenological design of this study and the research question exploring what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution, participants were desired for semi-structured interviews about their involvement on campus that would have enhanced their overall success and their institution's retainment of them. These semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for protocol) consisted of a set of basic questions for each participant. Still, these basic questions ensured the Scholar's experiences on their institution's campus would be explored openly and provided flexibility for the participant's answer. When this study received approval from the researcher's Institutional Review Board, participants were identified by the researcher based on student's status as a 21st Century Scholarship and academic status and contacted via email and asked if there was interest in participation in the study. Upon agreement to participate between the researcher and participant, interview times were set up through email. These interview times ranged from September 2021 through October 2021. At the beginning of all interviews, the researcher provided a physical copy of the informed consent document (see Appendix B) to the participant, in which the participant signed. There were no interviews conducted over one of the previously mentioned virtual platforms. Therefore, no participant received an emailed version of the informed consent form. The researcher verbally communicated the details of the document before beginning the interview.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed after the completion of all interviews. The researcher analyzed the data through coding. Coding is a process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). The goal of using coding is to make sense of the data, including dividing it up, moving it to text, images, or labeling it into segments with codes, and seeing any overlaps (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). Once the researcher interprets the data, the goal is for broad themes to emerge. Ultimately, describing and developing themes from the data answers the research question and forms an in-depth understanding of the central phenomenon through the description and thematic development (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). The researcher used the findings of the coding process to ultimately answer the research question: What factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution?

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study is to conduct new research that the CHE could use to explore better ways to determine the success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at private institutions. After analyzing the research data, five themes emerged from the phenomenological approach the researcher took with interviewing 21st Century Scholars from a private institution to gain their experience and perspective. The themes that emerged are: graduation lengths, barriers as a 21st Century Scholar, support systems, Christian foundations, and financial support. These themes allowed the researcher to see what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution.

Graduation Length

The first theme identified was graduation length, which referred to the importance for 21st Century Scholars of graduating from college within four years or less. Eight of the nine participants mentioned the importance of graduating from this particular institution within four years or less. There were multiple reasons as to why these participants never considered going longer than the four years at the given institution, which included previous family members doing more, excess of student debt beyond the four years, and individual programs needing four years to complete, so it was never the expectation to do less or more than four years. Participant #9 stated their specific mindset coming into this private institution by saying,

I don't think I ever questioned going further than four years that I was, that was

the goal, um, knowing that my fourth year I'd be student teaching and then

teaching in a classroom right after that. But yeah, that was the, that was the goal

to be done in four years.

This comment above is similar to many of the responses for this particular question.

These participants came into this private institution believing it was four years or less for

them to reach graduation, fitting the needs of their college search criteria.

Barriers as a 21st Century Scholar

The second theme that emerged became one of the more insightful themes, which

dealt with barriers the participant experienced on their campus due to their status as a

21st Century Scholar. Seven of the nine participants noted they did not experience any

additional barriers that were specifically targeted towards them because of their status as

a 21st Century Scholar or provided a barrier unrelated to the 21st Century Scholarship.

Participant #6 stated,

I don't think so. In terms of, you know, I mean, non-Scholars obviously don't

have the award that I get, so for that, I receive and continue to earn. Um, so no, I

don't think there would be any barriers.

It was clearly seen through the participants' responses that these 21st Century Scholars

were firm about there were not any additional barriers they had to deal with on top of

what the typical college student experiences.

Support Systems

The third theme that emerged from the data was that Scholars noted support

systems within the curricular or co-curricular areas on campus that helped their overall

success and ability to thrive at this institution as a Scholar. Eight of the nine students

mentioned a faculty or staff member, a specific department, or peers that helped them up

until this point. Participant #9 said,

> The ministry department as a whole is extremely supportive, and the professors
>
> have really come alongside me and my fellow student or fellow peers, um, to
>
> know me as a person. And with that, that makes me feel like they want me to
>
> succeed as a person, as a student. One particular professor in line would be my
>
> [professor], he's actually my 21st Century Scholar mentor that I meet with, and
>
> just, I had the opportunity last semester to work with him on a scripture
>
> engagement project he had. Um, so, um, his willingness to integrate me into his
>
> work was something that made me realize he wanted me to be successful and to
>
> learn and to grow into the person I needed to be in order to pursue the career.

It was clear through Scholars' responses that faculty, staff, and peers on campus are

making a difference in the experience 21st Century Scholars have on this institution's

campus.

Christian Foundation

The fourth theme was about the purpose for 21st Century Scholars to use their

scholarship to attend this specific institution. Because every participant had the academic

status as a sophomore, junior, or senior, they could answer the second part of the question

about why they decided to return to the institution after one or multiple years. Eight of

the nine participants credited some aspect of their Christian faith to why they attended

this institution. These aspects could have been solely because of the faith-based part of

campus and wanting to attend a faith-based institution; they had a history of attending

private, faith-based schools or wanted to pursue a career in ministry. The second part of

this question varied. Some expressed faith, professors, education, and community as to

why they returned. Participant #5 described his reasoning:

> Nobody in my family is really a Christian, and so a Christian institution with me
>
> being a Christian, I think would help grow me in my faith rather than if I just went
>
> to a secular school because I already had that secular element like at home, um,
>
> and then what kept me here was I think just being comfortable really. I really like
>
> it here, um, from an academic standpoint. I really like it here, and I really have
>
> grown to appreciate my professors and what I'm actually studying. I feel like this
>
> major is like the perfect major for me.

These participants really reiterated the influence faith had on their decisions to use their

scholarship to attend a private institution.

Financial Support

The researcher's last theme was about the participants stating the scholarship was

financial support and allowed them to attend this faith-based institution. It was clear; their

attendance would not happen at this particular institution without this scholarship. The

researcher's responses for this section were based on asking the participants what

thoughts or feelings come from knowing you are a 21st Century Scholar. Participant #2

said,

> My experience with the scholarship is just each year, um, there is definitely a lot
>
> of relief that comes from it because each year as I try to figure out finances, it is
>
> like, oh, I'm getting $8,000 or $9,000 each year that I just don't have to worry
>
> about. And so, it's definitely been relief. There's really been no negative

association with the scholarship. It hasn't impacted the way I think about myself
as a student or my time, and I have this appreciation for the 21st Century Scholar
program and just understanding how well actually I might not even have been
able to go to any institution, nonetheless, this faith-based institution, if I wasn't a
21st Century Scholar.

The majority of these participants see the opportunity that became available because of
the opportunities the 21st Century Scholarship provided them.

Conclusion

After analyzing the data the researcher collected from the nine 21st Century
Scholar participants, the researcher identified five themes: graduation lengths, barriers as
a 21st Century Scholar, support systems, Christian foundation, and financial support.
These five themes give insight which shows what factors affect success and retention of
21st Century Scholars at a private institution. In the next chapter, these themes will be
taken a step further by being discussed in-depth and recommendations are proposed
based on these discussions. Lastly, there will be insight on how to implement these
recommendations.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter will further discuss the themes mentioned in Chapter 4, answering

the research question of what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century

Scholars at a private institution. It will then further explain the themes of graduation

length, barriers as a 21st Century Scholars, support systems, Christian foundation, and

financial support. This chapter will also include implications for future research,

implications for practice, limitations, and benefits of the study.

Graduation Length

Based on the research presented in Chapter 4, the majority of the participants

noted the importance of graduating within four years or less from this particular

institution. Graduating within four years or less for a 21st Century Scholar is essential for

two reasons. First, eligible students who maintain their Scholar pledges will receive their

scholarship for four years up to 100% tuition at an eligible Indiana college university or

partially covered at an eligible private Indiana college university (21st Century Scholars

FAQ, n.d.). The scholarship will not cover anything after four years. There was a clear

understanding from the participants that there is only up to four years of financial aid

they were getting from this scholarship. Second, this is important because these

participants with this graduation length mindset understand the importance of staying on

task with their grades, courses, and other co-curricular activities. The researcher could

assume that eight out of nine participants better understand the opportunity this

scholarship has given them. Students' understanding of this opportunity relates back to success and retention mentioned in Chapter 2 because this mindset also helps them complete the requirements needed for the 21st Century Scholarship. Two of the requirements are graduating within four years or less and completing 30 credits within a year. Completing 30 credits each academic year would put a 21st Century Scholar right at the required 120 credits needed for graduation at this institution. With this given mindset and awareness of the opportunity at hand, these Scholars could be more willing to be involved on campus. This could ensure retention to the institution if they find spaces, people, and programs on campuses these students feel a sense of belonging. Overall, within this mindset of graduation within four years or less, these Scholars have a better chance of succeeding and staying at this particular institution until completion of the degree, but it comes with barriers.

Barriers as a 21st Century Scholar

Seven out of the nine participants did not experience any additional barriers targeted explicitly towards them because of their status as a 21st Century Scholar or provided a barrier unrelated to the 21st Century Scholarship. This insight is significant because these particular students need their basic needs supported like any other student. They need support services such as financial aid, academic advising, interactions with professors, a sense of belonging out of the classroom, and many other things.

These findings also provide insight into the possibility that this population of students cannot identify further barriers because of the lack of identity they find with being associated as a 21st Century Scholar. Other barriers that could exist on other campuses are prevalent on this particular campus, yet these students did not identify

them. Participant responses indicated that these 21st Century Scholar students expressed no additional barriers to the typical college student's experiences.

Because these Scholars do not identify with a shared identity, the researcher recommends a space on campus where Scholars can share their identity with the 21st Century Scholarship and the barriers that come with it. The institution would not have to create a new space but simply attach the 21st Century Scholarship program and their students to an already established space. There could be peers and further support systems for 21st Century Scholars within these spaces.

Support Systems

Support systems for college students are influential in students' success and persistence. The importance of having quality support systems is no different for students receiving the 21st Century Scholarship. Participants in this institution identified support systems that included a faculty or staff member, specific department, peers, and other personnel across the institution that aided them in pursuing success. Students varied in who, what, and where they found support. Because of this, a recommendation based on these findings would be this particular institution offering a point person to Scholars to help them navigate the support needed in a specific area unique to this population. This point person could be an AmeriCorps ScholarCorps member, which exists on approximately 20 public and private institutions across the state. The ScholarCorps position serves as a support person specifically for 21st Century Scholars to ensure their scholarship retention to the institution. The member would provide programming throughout the academic year to allow connections between 21st Century Scholars.

Astin's (1999) theory of Student Involvement refers to "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Within this theory, these Scholars need to be involved and connect to one another and the institution for further academic success and retention. Overall, the AmeriCorps ScholarCorps position would only enhance Scholar's experience at the private institution the researcher conducted the research at and other private institutions across the state and provide spaces for growth academically, socially, and spiritually.

Christian Foundation

Faith significantly influenced these Scholars' decision to use their 21st Century Scholarship at this particular private institution. Eight of the nine participants credited some aspect of their Christian faith to why they attended this institution. These aspects could have been solely because of the faith-based part of campus or because the student wanted to attend a faith-based institution because they had a history of attending private, faith-based schools or wanted to pursue a career in ministry.

This finding could serve as helpful insight to the institution in marketing and recruitment strategies for this particular demographic of prospective students. There is a clear desire for a faith-based atmosphere for some 21st Century Scholars, and this institution provided for that need. This faith aspect of the institution is unique among the possible faith-based options a student can use their scholarship for, which should capitalize within the recruitment process. Through the 21st Century Scholarship, students were able to attend this faith-based institution that was important to them and their college search and afford this particular institution due to the financial aid given through the 21st Century Scholarship.

Financial Support

As stated in Chapter 4, financial support was a big indicator of student success and retention. It was clear attendance for 21st Century Scholars at this private institution was dependent on financial support received through the 21st Century Scholarship. Financial support was identified by participants and had an impact on institutional retention. Scholars identified this partial scholarship as significant financial aid despite not being the total scholarship amount.

Implications for Future Research

The data collected by the researcher provided insight into what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution. There are many other private institutions with 21st Century Scholars. More specifically, further research could be done with other students at faith-based institutions in Indiana. This was a significant factor for participants at this specific institution where research was conducted. Further research on 21st Century Scholars could also be conducted at non-faith-based institutions in Indiana.

A future researcher could conduct research through the already established AmeriCorps ScholarCorps program across the state. Insight into the AmeriCorps ScholarCorps program could show what impacts the program has had on the success and retention of 21st Century Scholars and what could be further beneficial in aiding these students. The AmeriCorps ScholarCorps program could also give an insight into trends within a public versus private campus setting.

The final implication for future research could be done on 21st Century Scholar alumni. A researcher could look at a specific group of Scholars, those who graduated

within four years or less, or the researcher could look at 21st Century Scholar alumni who decided to transfer. This perspective could show what barriers students had faced and potentially had forced them to leave their institution for other options.

Implications for Practice

The first implication would be having a designated space for 21st Century Scholars to connect and engage with one another. A space for 21st Century Scholars would add an extra layer of unforced community, especially on this campus, where students feel overinvolved and overprogrammed. This space does not need to be new and can be already established within the current campus.

Within this space, a point person for the 21st Century Scholar program could reside and create an area where 21st Century Scholars can connect with other students. This area could host events or programming throughout the year detailed around the Scholar success program, FAFSA filing, and many other things.

The final implication for practice is how this institution is marketing and promoting the faith component and the strengths to recruit more 21st Century Scholars. This student population will continue to increase as the Indiana Commission for Education, and the former commissioner, Teresa Lubbers, noted the importance for more Hoosiers to attain the quality education and training beyond high school with the goal of 60% of all Hoosiers by 2025 (Lubbers, 2021).

Limitations

Although there were nine participants within this study at this faith-based institution, there are many other faith-based institutions in Indiana where 21st Century Scholars use their scholarships to attend. If interviewing at these institutions, further

insight could be gained from answering the question of what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution. The results would have been broader and more data would have been collected.

The following limitation consisted of a lack of association throughout the interviews between the 21st Century Scholarship and the majority of the participants. The researcher proposed the question about barriers these participants have experienced due to their status as a 21st Century Scholar. The researcher further proposed, can a participant identify a barrier as a 21st Century Scholar if they do not associate with the scholarship? This limitation was also present in the other four themes: support systems, financial support, and graduation length. The researcher concluded, how can a 21st Century Scholar answer a question pertaining to the scholarship when they do not identify with it? What benefits could come from this lack of association? As found with one of the researcher's participants, there is a perception that a student who is known as a 21st Century Scholar is immediately thought of as "poor" or "low-income." This particular part of being low-income is true, but only for their family income, not the student's income in college. Without this perception following a student during their journey at their institution, they would have fewer barriers hindering their identity development.

Benefits

This research study would benefit multiple groups, including the CHE, the institution at which the research is being conducted, or any Scholar interested in understanding what involvement could enhance their student success and completion of their degree within four years. All three groups can continue to take that step forward,

prioritizing the effort to help Scholars continue choosing to use their 21st Century Scholarship at private institutions and getting that special holistic education they seek.

Another benefit this research could provide the CHE and other groups is informing them of the true benefits of a small private, faith-based liberal arts university and how it can help cultivate 21st Century Scholars that are looking for this type of environment. Eight of the nine participants credited some aspect of their Christian faith to why they attended this institution, and it played a role in why the institution had retained them. Even though these students understood the financial complications of using their scholarship at a private institution instead of a public, what would this look like to help promote the small, private, faith-based liberal arts university as an option to 21st Century Scholars, just like options that include public or state school? The end goal should be finding the right fit for the student, with the primary purpose of graduating.

Conclusion

The 21st Century Scholarship program was created as an early college promise program designed to help ensure every graduating high school student in Indiana, despite their socioeconomic status, might have the opportunity to pursue a college education (21st Century Scholars FAQ, n.d.). As more Indiana residents become 21st Century Scholars, there will be an increase in students using their financial aid to pursue post-secondary education. Due to this statistic, it is essential to identify what helps students succeed and have high retention at given institutions. Findings from this study will aid private institutions in identifying factors that promote success and retention and offer suggestions to help students thrive, including promotion to niche desires of students,

providing space for students to belong, and employing personnel specific to helping

students.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introduction: Thank you for taking part in this research study and agreeing to meet with me. The purpose of this study is to explore what factors affect success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution, and ultimately for The Indiana Commission for Higher Education and educators to use the research findings to explore better ways to determine and promote the success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at Private institutions. I want you to know that you can stop at any time and you can decide not to answer specific questions. Your participation will be kept confidential and at no time will your name or any identifying information about you be reported to anyone outside of the research group.

All interviews are being audio-recorded, transcribed, and themed. A digital audio recorder will be utilized and hand-written notes to assist in accurate transcription of the responses. During the time of this study, the audio recording will be kept on a password protected device stored in a locked office space. You have the right to withdraw from this study if you choose to not be audio recorded. You can end your participation in this study at any time during this interview or by contacting me after the interview.

If at any time during the interview you have any questions, please ask. Do you have any questions before we begin?

- As we start, can you give your academic status/year, sex, and major at this time?

- Describe your experience as a 21st Century Scholar.

  o How does being a scholar make you think and feel?

- What drew you to this private institution?

  o What keeps you here?

- What programs/people help ensure your success at this institution?

- What barriers do you have as a 21st Century Scholar at this institution?

- How important is it to you to graduate within 4-years or less private institution?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution. You were selected as a possible subject because you had the academic status of a sophomore, junior, or senior. I 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 Stanley Duncan – MAHE Student at Taylor University.

STUDY PURPOSE
The purpose of this study is to conduct new research that the Indiana Commission for Higher Education and educators across the state could use to explore better ways to determine and promote the success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at Private institutions.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
If you agree to participate, you will be one of 10 to 12 subjects who will be participating in this research. If you agree to participate you will be asked to conduct an individual interview with the primary researcher. No participants in this study are under the age of 18.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:
If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:
1. Agree to participate in a semi-structured interview with the researcher, lasting 15-30 minutes.
2. Agree to have your responses recorded during the interview.
3. Agree to be quoted and/or have your experience referenced in the results of the researcher's study under a pseudonym.
4. This study will take place during the Fall 2021 semester, but your participation will simply consist of your individual interview.

RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
There is minimal risk involved with taking part in this study. While participating in this study, there is the risk of discomfort or an emotional response associated with reflection of institutional decisions. While completing the interview, you may tell the researcher if you feel uncomfortable and/or do not wish to answer a question.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
The benefit to contribute to the research on success and retention of 21st Century Scholars at a private institution. Other direct benefits are unknown.

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 or presentations given. You will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym. If you decide not to select one yourself, the researcher will ascribe a pseudonym of his choosing with the intent to protect your identity. All recordings will be kept on a locked device in a locked office setting; Only the researchers will have access to the recordings of the interviews or focus groups, and the recordings will be deleted following the completioncompletion of the research study.

COSTS
There is no cost to participate in this study.

PAYMENT
You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.
.
CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
For any questions at any time concerning this research study, contact the researcher Stanley Duncan at 812.431.5034 or Stanley_duncan@taylor.edu, or in his office first floor of Euler Science Complex.

Inquiries regarding the nature of the research, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to your participation as a subject can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at IRB@taylor.edu or the interim IRB Chair, Edwin Welch, at 756-998-4315 or edwelch@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 or any of the researchers involved in this study

SUBJECT'S CONSENT
In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. A copy of this form will be given to me for my personal records. I have had the opportunity to read this consent form, ask questions about the research project, and am prepared to participate in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____   **Date:** _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ Date**:** ___