Voices of persistence: Stories of success from one urban public charter high school

Diane Joy Maodush-Pitzer

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Voices of Persistence:
Stories of Success from One Urban Public Charter High School

by
Diane Maodush-Pitzer

Dissertation
Submitted to the Department of Leadership and Counseling
Eastern Michigan University
in partial completion of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dissertation Committee
Dr. Ronald Williamson, Chairperson
Dr. Nelson Maylone
Dr. Theresa Saunders
Dr. Jaclynn Tracy
November 9, 2015
Ypsilanti, Michigan
Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. \textit{Matthew 11.5}
Acknowledgments

How fortunate I am to have been surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses to grace, encouragement, and love during the many years of this project's unfolding. Their willingness to hang in there with me is a testament to their fortitude. Without them this work would not have been possible. Great thanks to Dr. Ronald Williamson, the chairperson of my dissertation committee, who patiently and faithfully inspired the completion of this research. His support, prodding, and direction have been invaluable. To the members of my committee, Dr. Nelson Maylone, Dr. Theresa Saunders, and Dr. Jaclynn Tracy, I extend my deepest thanks for your wisdom and guidance throughout the dissertation process. To Dr. Norma Ross, whose editing makes all things clear, I offer my thanks. To the students and staff of Gary Comer College Prep, thank you for sharing your stories and, in so doing, helping all of us to see how truly important are our connections to one another.

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My women—Suzanne, Ruth, Darla, Kama, and Cara, whose support in life and in death has touched me deeply; you all have been the hands and heart of the Divine in both the moments of celebration and in the hours of sorrow. Liala, with wit and wisdom, you have kept me up-to-date on my horoscope and the implications for the completion of this dissertation. What a gift you are to me.
Having been born into a family with amazing stories to tell, the importance of the
telling and the hearing was made known to me from an early age. My dad, born in 1912 to
immigrant parents who did not speak English, came into this world weighing two and half
pounds. His first home was an incubator in an amusement park on the south side of Chicago,
the only machine available for such a tiny soul. With my mom, who died at the very
beginning of the dissertation process, he offered trust in my path and encouragement for my
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we support you. You are amazing!” My brother, Dan, who died as I was completing this
work, had the most incredible stories of all. They were all true—at least in his mind—and we
will miss hearing him tell great tales as we continue to hold him close in our hearts. My
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brother, is amazing in every way. Her support of this work in ways great and small has been
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of it all, has been nothing short of life-giving.

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chosen on my own; for your gentle spirit that sees this world as a place of connections that
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filled with great stories from young lives whose voices we need to hear. Listen well.

Finally, Rudi, my constant companion throughout the writing process. Always beside me with tail wagging and the question lingering, “When will you be done so we can go for a walk?” It's time. Let's go, Buddy.

For the gift of this life and the path unfolding, I give thanks.

In Loving Memory

Daniel Maodush 1912-2003

Tena Wiersma Maodush 1920-2008

Dan Marc Maodush 1948-2015
Abstract

Concerned about high school graduation rates in the United States, researchers have worked for the past three decades to identify the factors that lead toward student disengagement and dropping out before graduation. Much of the work has been theoretical and focused on deficits. Student perspective and student strengths are necessary components of this continuing conversation. In the semi-structured interviews in this qualitative case study, students who have graduated from an urban public charter high school self-identified factors and processes that fostered persistence toward high school graduation in the midst of a low socio-economic neighborhood where less than 50 % of students complete 12th grade.

Analysis of the data revealed the importance of relationships at the heart of each of the interviewee's responses with a family member or neighbor who encouraged and supported at home; a principal who encouraged them to consider a specific high school and then continued to follow them through their high school experience; an advisor who guided them during all four of their high school years; teachers, who not only challenged, supported, and encouraged during classroom hours, but also opened the door of their classrooms before and after school to be in deeper relationship with their students; or a community program that welcomed and mentored students. Relationships were perceived to be key to the students’ ability to persist. Rigorous academic programs were important; they encouraged the development of personal knowledge and skills and pushed students beyond their own perceptions of ability. The student voice heard in this study makes clear, however, that it is relationships that have the potential to keep individuals engaged and persisting on the path toward graduation even in the face of great adversity and overwhelming odds.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

In the early 1990s, Jonathan Kozol (1991) wrote that in the City of Chicago eighth-grade graduation is a time for celebration much like twelfth-grade graduation would be in the suburbs, “For many it is the last thing they will have to celebrate” (p. 47). With a graduation rate of less than 50%, students were as likely to drop out as they were to graduate (Luppescu, Allensworth, Moore, de la Torre, Murphy, & Jagesic, 2011). Twenty years later, utilizing the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), which provides a uniform method of calculating graduation rates across states, Chicago Public Schools (CPS, 2013) self-reported a record high school graduation rate of 65.4%. (This number is reported by Illinois Report Card (2014) as 70%)—an improvement, and yet a statistic that is far from where one might hope it would be 20 years after Kozol's (1991) observation.

With 664 schools and over 400,000 students, 112,029 of whom are in high school, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a district where 85% of its student body is eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches (Chicago Public Schools, 2014). Poverty, student mobility, and racial ethnic diversity are just three of a larger group of factors that define this urban school district (Illinois Report Card, 2014).

Greater Grand Crossing is a low-income, African-American neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, located near the junction of the Chicago Skyway and the Dan Ryan expressway, which encompasses 3.555 square miles and has a population of 41,337 (Greater Grand Crossing Neighborhood, 2014). The median household income is $29,659, with 40.4% of individuals living below the poverty level. Fewer than a third (30.8%) of children
older than three years are in K-12 schools. Almost one in five (18.9%) of adults is unemployed (Greater Grand Crossing Neighborhood, 2014). About 18% of adults have not achieved a high school diploma or equivalent certificate (crime.chicagotribune, 2014).

Ranking 10th for violent crime among the 77 community areas in this urban, Midwestern city (crime.chicagotribune.com), gangs populate the neighborhoods. Pocket Town that claims to be EBK (Everybody Killers, no allies), Pocket Town Kuttershrots, some of whom are GDs (Gangster’s Disciples), Tommy World (GDs), Sircon City (rivals of Pocket Town, and a faction of GDs along with Black Mob and Lakeside (GDs) stake out their territory (Glanton, Rodriguez, & Gorner, 2014; Mack, 2012; Moser, 2013). When a teacher at Gary Comer College Prep, a local, urban public charter high school, asked his students how they know who and where the gangs are located, a student answered, “You have to know.”

Two high schools, Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP) and Emil Hirsch Metropolitan High School (Hirsch), exist just over one mile from each other. Hirsch is one of 96 high schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), a district that historically has struggled with both image and performance. In 1987 Education Secretary William J. Bennett identified the schools in this district as the worst in the nation and encouraged parents to consider private schools for their children (Chicago Public Schools, 2014; Knowles, 2014; Banas & Byers, 1987; “Schools in Chicago,” 1987). With a dropout rate of nearly 50% in the early 1990s, Kozol (1991) quoted a city alderman as saying, “Nobody in his right mind would send kids to (a Chicago) public school” (p. 53).

Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP) opened its doors in 2008 and is one of 16 public high schools in the city that are part of the Noble Network of Charter Schools, an open
enrollment, multi-campus, charter public high school network that is the city’s largest and highest performing network of public high schools (Noble Mission and History, 2014b). The mission of GCCP: “To be the best high school in the country at graduating low-income minority students from college” (Noble Efforts Change Lives, 2014a). Table 1, created from data reported by the Illinois Report Card (2014) reflects general characteristics of GCCP and Hirsch, two high schools in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood alongside those of Chicago Public Schools.

Table 1.

School Year 2012-2013: Student Population & School Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>GCCP</th>
<th>Hirsch</th>
<th>Chicago Public Schools (CPS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>395,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Class Size</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial-Ethnic Diversity: Black</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>87.8%</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Student Mobility</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Chronically Truant</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>***Student Attendance Rate</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-year Graduation Rate</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>****Graduates from 2013 Enrolled in College</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Student Mobility measures the percentage of students who transfer in or out of the school during the school year, not including graduates.
**Chronically Truant includes students who miss 5% of school days per year without a valid excuse.
***Student Attendance indicates the average daily attendance at the school.
****Measures the percentage of graduates who enroll at colleges and universities.
Whereas CPS serves a high percentage of both Black and Hispanic students, GCCP and Hirsch comprise primarily Black students (Illinois Report Card, 2014). Like the district of which they are part, both schools reflect the district’s percentage of students coming from low-income families (Illinois Report Card, 2014). GCCP has almost twice as many students as Hirsch (Illinois Report Card, 2014). The average classroom size at GCCP is much larger than Hirsch and slightly larger than the average in CPS (Illinois Report Card, 2014). Comer has a rate of student mobility that is half of the average in CPS. Hirsch, on the other hand has a rate that is more than double the district’s. More than half of the students at Hirsch either transfer in or out of the school during the school year (Illinois Report Card, 2014). Similarly, Comer has a slightly lower than district rate of chronic truancy, which is defined as students who miss 5 % or more school days without a valid excuse (Illinois Report Card, 2014). Hirsch reports a rate of 100 %. This is reflected in the average daily attendance at Comer being 95 %, Hirsch 66 % and CPS 93 % (Illinois Report Card, 2014).

Several similarities and differences are notable between the two neighborhood schools and the district in which they reside, but one of the most startling statistics is the primary distinction in graduation rates. The graduation rate at GCCP is 100 %, almost triple that of the 38 % reported for Hirsch, and almost a third higher than the 70 % rate reported for CPS (Illinois Report Card, 2014). In an attempt to accurately calculate and report graduation rates throughout schools districts and across states, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) established regulations which defines the *four-year adjusted graduation rate* as the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who entered high school four years earlier, making adjustments for students who transfer in and out, émigrés and deceased students. This guideline was utilized
by the State of Illinois beginning with the 2010-2011 school year. In the same neighborhood, just over a mile apart, two high schools serve a similar population. Yet the percentage of students who persist to graduation differs dramatically.

**History and Background**

Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP) is one of 16 Noble Network of Charter School campuses educating over 10,000 students in 70 Chicago communities (Noble Efforts Change Lives, 2014b). Thirty-six percent of the primarily low-income students enrolled in Noble schools can expect to graduate from college. This compares with 11% of students in the same income bracket citywide (Killing the Golden Goose, 2014). In 2012 Noble operated 9 of the 10 top non-selective high schools in the City of Chicago based on school-wide ACT composite scores. Eighty-three percent of the 2012 graduating class from all Noble schools enrolled in college (Noble Network of Charter Schools, 2014).

The Noble Network launched its first open enrollment high school campus in 1999. Opening their 15th and 16th campuses in fall of 2014 their goal was to “serve at least 15 percent of the projected public high school population by 2020” (Noble: Mission and History, 2014). Noble schools currently serve a student population that is 98% minority and 88% low income through a program that schedules longer class periods, a longer school day, and an extended school year, which allows them to provide more instructional time than a traditional public high school in CPS (Noble: Student Demographics & Achievements, 2014). With more than 6,000 applications for only 3,000 student seats, the Noble Network chooses students by random lottery. Any student who has completed grade 8 and resides in the city limits of Chicago is eligible to apply. Student test scores, grades, or special needs are not factored into the admission process (Enrollment FAQ’s, 2014).
Schools within the Noble Network intentionally work to recruit strong teachers, to support them in their work, and to retain them for the benefit of the individual school and the network as a whole. The Noble schools provide school-based and network-wide professional development and sharing of resources. By design, the network is data-driven but focused on individuals, staff, and students. Resources and best practices are shared throughout the network, as each of their schools focuses on "strong leadership, meaningful use of data and a high degree of accountability" (Noble's Approach, 2014). In 2014, eight of the top ten open enrollment public high schools in Chicago, as identified by ACT scores, were Noble Network schools. In addition, 100% of their 2013 graduates were accepted to colleges throughout the United States (Noble Represents, 2014).

Opened in 2008 with its first class of high school freshman, Gary Comer College Prep graduated its first senior class in 2012. Under the Noble Network charter, GCCP is one of the resources built in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood with funding from the Comer Science and Education Foundation (CSEF), which is a private philanthropy created by and named for the late founder of Lands’ End, Gary Comer (Whitaker, 2010). Comer grew up in the neighborhood that surrounds the area where GCCP is now located. The foundation with his name has given more than $75 million to support and provide resources for the 15-block region of Greater Grand Crossing. Comer’s desire was to share his wealth and provide resources and opportunities for those who were not as fortunate as he. He saw the interconnection between poorly performing schools, substandard housing, and inadequate health care (Fishman, 2013). In response, he utilized his resources to do a number of things that have provided support to the neighborhood. Through philanthropic gifts, he was able to expand the children’s hospital at the University of Chicago Hospital just a few miles away
(now named Comer Children’s Hospital). He donated money and technology to support Paul Revere Elementary School, the public grade school he attended as a youth. He became involved in an affordable housing initiative in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood. Comer also built the Gary Comer Youth Center, which offers a variety of community programs including a safe afterschool environment for children in the neighborhood, a community garden, special events for children and their families, and a clinic where vaccinations are available to the community (Whitaker, 2010).

In his later years, Comer focused on attempting to create a better learning environment for the youth growing up in this community (Whitaker, 2010). Working with the University of Chicago, he developed a strategy for reaching out to community stakeholders—parents and non-parents—regarding the importance of working together for the betterment of the entire community. With local high schools reporting graduation rates of 50% or lower, Comer decided he wanted to be part of building a charter high school that would be publicly funded but privately administered. Gary Comer College Prep opened in 2008, with its first freshman class as one of the schools in Noble Network which maintains its status as the highest performing group of charter schools in Chicago. In 2010 GCCP moved into its state-of-the-art facility designed by Chicago Architect, John Ronan. Sharing a campus with the Gary Comer Youth Center, the LEED certified building was designed with two glazed walls in each classroom. Designed to both reflect transparency and accountability, the interior wall offers those in and outside of the classroom a view of the learning going on in the corridors and classrooms. The exterior walls of building, while offering an almost unobstructed view to the world from which the students and staff have come and go back out into, is covered by a corrugated and perforated stainless scrim which
provides shade but also camouflage to prevent students from becoming targets of drive-by shootings (An Interview with John Ronan, 2014; Roberts, 2011).

When parents or guardians choose Gary Comer College Prep with or for their child, they are made aware through the information session prior to applying and during the orientation process that the expectations will be high not only for their child, but also for themselves as parent or guardian. It is expected that parents/guardians of GCCP students will:

- Attend quarterly parent/student/teacher conferences or when asked by a staff member, which includes picking up the student's report card;
- Sign and support the parent/teacher/student pledge to make their child's academic excellence a primary focus for the school year;
- Participate in the Parent Advisory Council at GCCP;
- Hold their child accountable to Noble's expectations, which includes nightly homework;
- Read, sign and return the weekly newsletter and expect progress reports every two weeks (Why Choose Noble, 2014, n. p.).

Teachers and advisors give parents and students their cell phone numbers to encourage open dialogue when questions or concerns arise.

From their first contact with the school, students are apprised of expectations.

Students are expected to:

- Attend and arrive on time every day with all required materials;
- Follow school and classroom rules;
- Work diligently and do homework nightly;
• Accept responsibility for their behavior;
• Work on improving or maintaining health and physical fitness;
• Help maintain the school building by participating in clean-up activities and keeping the school clean.
• Serve all detentions or suspensions that are earned;
• Treat GCCP faculty, staff and other students with respect (Expectations of Students, 2014).

In-coming students are placed in an advisory, grade-based small group or cohort of 12- to-15 students who gather together at the beginning of each school day for purposes of attendance, announcements, academic planning, career exploration, and implementation of school standards. In addition, the advisor to each advisory is responsible for monitoring the student's readiness for the school day by checking alignment with the uniform dress code, assignment books, homework completion, and required school supplies. The advisory and their advisor stay together for the student's four-year experience (Advisory & Town Hall, 2014).

The Noble Network and Gary Comer College Prep are not without critique. Founded on principles including strong leadership, meaningful use of data, and a high degree of accountability, the network schools are committed to creating a culture of high expectations for students, where each student is expected to continue his or her education in a college environment (Noble’s Approach, 2014). These principles lead to a competitive school environment where disciplinary infractions, such as dozing off in class, wearing a belt that is the wrong color, chewing gum, having an untucked shirt, or having uncompleted homework, will result in LaSalles or demerits, silent detentions, disciplinary fees being assessed,
behavior improvement work, or maintenance chores (Ahmed-Ullah, 2012; Warren, 2012). In January, 2014, a teacher at a local psychiatric hospital appeared before the Chicago Board of Education at a meeting where the board was considering a plan for the Noble Network to add three additional schools to their network of schools (Chicago Board of Education, 2014). She reported the following:

...a disturbing pattern among patients coming from the schools that are part of the Noble Street Charter School Network of schools. We have seen an alarming number of students being admitted to the hospital with depression, severe anxiety, and increasingly with actual suicide attempts all directly tied to these schools’ discipline, academic and retention policies (Osgood, 2014, p.1).

Having heard her report, the board went on to approve the requests for the Noble Network to add two more schools to their network; the third school proposal required the submission of additional information regarding facility plans (Chicago Board of Education, 2014).

**Problem Statement**

Two high schools exist in the same neighborhood just over one mile apart in the City of Chicago. Whereas both schools comprise students who are demographically in line with the general population of students in Chicago Public Schools, one high school’s graduation statistics are significantly below the district, state and national averages. The other is an urban public charter high school with graduation statistics much above the district, state and national averages (Illinois Report Card, 2014).

This qualitative case study investigated how students who have graduated from one urban public charter high school self-identified factors and processes which led to persistence toward high school graduation.
### Purpose of the Study

Reform of public high schools is one of the most important faced by educators today (Noguera, 2002; Rodriguez, 2008). Urban public high schools are most often large, complex organizations in even more complex districts (Louis and Miles, 1990). Dropout and failure rates have earned urban high schools distinction in what has been labeled the “persistent high school dropout crisis” (Left Behind in America: The Nation’s Dropout Crisis, 2009, 5.).

The purpose of this study was to explore the processes, programs, practices, and other factors that students from one urban public charter high school self-identified as having encouraged their persistence toward high school graduation. The hope was to provide a rich, in-depth understanding of the persistence factors at work that encourage students to overcome adversity and continue on the path toward high school graduation, a path which is in stark contrast to the alternative taken by their peers in a neighboring high school marked by much higher dropout rates and lower college entry rates. The stories collected through this research were not only meaningful for those invested in the education process today, but also for their potential to serve as encouragement for those who follow and contribute meaningful information to the field of urban education reform.

### Significance of the Study

This qualitative case study was designed to give voice to factors that encouraged students in their persistence toward high school graduation in the midst of a neighborhood where less than 50 % of students complete 12th grade. This study moved the research away from primarily deficit identification toward strengths-based research. This study continues to clarify the construct of persistence, which often focuses primarily on academic processes and
procedures and does not consider other such factors as social-emotional areas for being significant regarding academic success (Mulloy, 2009).

Student voice offered participants the ability to make meaning of their own experience and offer wisdom to the greater community. Individuals speaking for themselves and unfolding their own story of success gave credence and value to the individuals’ experience. Through their stories, they now become part of the wisdom that may be transferable to other places and other people who long for success. They become true participants in the ongoing work of education reform (Freire, 1993; Hadfield & Haw, 2001; Deal, 1990).

Why This Study is Important

This study is important because it offers insight, not theoretical, but from lived experience into the factors that encourage students to persist in the face of what might be perceived as overwhelming odds toward high school graduation. The decision to drop out of high school can be dangerous with life-long impact. Studies have shown that dropouts are much more likely than their graduating counterparts to face unemployment, a life in poverty, be reliant on public assistance, face prison time, and even death row (Bridgeland, 2006). For many, education is the only hope that families have of stopping the cycle of poverty that reproduces itself generation after generation (Noguera, 2002).

Much of the work that has been done over the past three decades has focused on deficits. Researchers have looked at the impact of gender, social class, poverty, and classroom structure (Conchas, 2006; Garrison, Jeung & Inclan-Rodriguez, 2009). Little is known about those who succeed in spite of or in the midst of the most challenging life conditions (Conchas, 2006). Few of these studies have been done from the perspective of
student voice (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2007). Much of the work has been done by researchers who ground their studies on professional and thoughtful assumptions about students, education, and the questions that must be asked.

Cook-Sather (2006) challenged the method of research from the outside in and encouraged the development of methods where students are central to the educational research and reform. Terrence Deal (1990) on school reform quoted a principal in Briar Cliff, New York, as she speaks to the importance of student voice, “The only thing worse than not hearing any stories is having stories to tell and no one to hear them,” (p. 7). Students who have found a path of persistence to high school graduation in the face of incredible odds have a story to tell and it is our job to listen. Paul Glazer (1991) wrote that as we consider the path of learning, we need to consider a holistic view of the student, which includes not only aptitudes measured through test scores and grades but also the emotional and spiritual components of learning. The real challenge of education—the crucial work he says, is “understanding ourselves, others, our nature, our place in, and our effect on the world” (p. 82). What better way to gain access to that information then to invite the student to speak the truth in his or her own voice. Parker Palmer further stated (in Glazer, 1991) that the reforms needed in our schools are those reforms that encourage the teacher and the student to be in relationship together: empowering, liberating, transcending and renewing the vitality of life. Halifax (in Glazer, 1999) added that education in our time "needs to be primarily about redemption" (p. 180): redeeming the challenges that students face and creating an opportunity for each one to thrive and find his/her way as they persist toward a life that knows success.
Studies have shown that low-income, urban students are much less likely to persist toward graduation than their nonurban, middle-income counterparts (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman & Gallagher, 2003; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; MacIver & MacIver, 2009; Balfanz & Bridgeland, Bruce & Fox, 2013). In many inner city high schools, the number of students dropping out prior to graduation is at least as high as those who see their studies through to graduation (Campbell & College, 2003; Rankings and Estimates, 2010; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Swanson, 2009).

As students were invited to share their stories and their perceptions of their personal path to high school graduation, understanding increased around factors and processes which lead to persistence toward high school graduation in a low-income, urban neighborhood from the students’ perspective. These data have the potential to influence strategies and approaches toward education for administrators and teachers not only in charter schools but also in the greater educational community, particularly for those serving in low income, urban settings where graduation rates often fall behind state and national averages (Campbell & College, 2003; Rankings and Estimates, 2010; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Swanson, 2009). Including this information and understanding into the growing research on how to work toward increasing high school graduation rates, provided crucial information needed by policy-makers and educational professionals to improve school outcomes and overall rates of success in neighborhoods and their schools, where persistence toward high school graduation is often desired but elusive for a large percentage of their students.
Definitions

*Persistence* – a student’s high school education continuation behavior that leads to graduation.

*Protective Factors* – “individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effect of stressful life events; increase an individual’s ability to avoid risks or hazards; and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life now and in the future (School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors, 2009, p. 3). In this study—characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that supported the process leading toward persistence to high school graduation.

*Risk Factors* - “individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that increase the likelihood that a negative outcome will occur” (School Connectedness - Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors, 2009, p. 3).

Summary

This chapter included an overview to this study whose purpose was to explore the processes, programs, practices, and other factors that students from one urban public charter high school self-identified as having encouraged their persistence toward high school graduation. The students in this study graduated despite low-income status, life in urban neighborhoods characterized by high dropout rates, significant gang activity and affiliation, elevated levels of truancy and mobility, and other factors identified as deterrents to both academic and personal success. Students’ reflections on their own persistence toward high-school graduation increased understanding and influenced the development of strategies and approaches toward education and educational reform in the greater educational community.
A review of the literature related to urban public schools, risk factors and protective factors, persistence, and study voice comprise Chapter 2. Methods employed in this study are described in Chapter 3. Presentation of the data, findings, and implications will conclude this study in Chapters 4 and 5.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Plight of Urban Public Schools & Urban High School Graduation Rates

The last three decades have been accompanied by what has been framed “the high school dropout epidemic” in the United States (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). The National Center for Education within the U.S. Department of Education (2014) reported that the estimated 4-year graduation rate for public high school students for school year 2011-2012 was 80% (p. 4). In Illinois, that rate was 84% (p. 7). Further breakdown of statistics into specific demographic data showed that the rate for students who were economically disadvantaged was 75%, for Black students 74%, and for White students 89% (p.7). These statistics were calculated using the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR). States reporting the ACGR must follow the progress of each student who enters the ninth grade and through the student’s four years of high school, documenting their transfers in and out of districts, dropping out altogether, emigrating to other countries, or death (p. B-1; United States Congress, 2001). Compared to the national and state average, the graduation rate of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) at almost 65.4% and Hirsch Metropolitan High School (Hirsch) at 38% falls below and largely below the national averages, whereas Gary Comer College Prep’s (GCCP) graduation rate at 100% is well-above the national average (Illinois Report Card, 2014).

Studies have shown that urban students across the country are less likely to graduate than nonurban youth (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; Fine, 1991; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; MacIver & MacIver, 2009). Students from low-income families have lower rates of high school graduation than their middle-income counterparts (Balfanz,
Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013). In many inner city high schools, the number of students who drop out prior to graduation is at least as high as those who see their studies through to graduation (Campbell, 2003; Rankings and Estimates, 2010; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009, Swanson, 2009; Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

Basic facts emerged as Balfanz et al. (2013) discussed why it is important to consider graduation rates for high school students throughout the country:

- High school graduates are more likely to be employed, make higher taxable incomes, and generate jobs than individuals without the high school diploma;
- High school graduates are less likely to engage in criminal behavior or receive social services;
- High school graduates have better health outcomes and higher life expectancies;
- High school graduates are more likely to be civically engaged and able to serve in the armed forces; and finally,
- High school graduation has the potential to benefit not only the individual, but also the community and greater society of which the individual is part.

At Risk Students

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s Report, *A Nation at Risk*, brought to the public’s attention the crisis in United States schools and the term at risk came to define students who had a high probability of failing to graduate from high school along with a greater potential to abuse drugs, commit suicide, or become teenaged parents (Winfield, 1991; Dianda, 2008; National Council for Excellence in Education (NCEE), 1983). This report, along with studies that followed, and the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2001) illustrated a need to develop a more accurate definition of high
school graduation and more accurate estimators of high school graduation rates (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). More than 30 years later, a more precise definition of high school graduation emerged out of NCLB (2001) legislation and Code of Federal Regulations (34 CFR 200.19). The improved definition recognizes an alignment with each state’s academic standards and does not include alternative credentials, including the General Educational Development certificate (GED). The percentage of graduates has slightly improved; however, almost one-fourth of all students in the U. S. who enter ninth grade do not earn a high school diploma (Rumberger & Lim, 2007).

**Drop Out Risk Factors & Protective Factors for Persistence**

Researchers have worked for more than three decades to identify the factors that lead toward students’ disengagement and dropping out of high school before graduation and for ways to develop strategies that might prevent dropping out from occurring (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Kenny et al., 2003; de la Torre, Allensworth, Jagesic, Sebastian, Salmonowicz, Meyers, & Gerdeman, 2012).

Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) identified individual factors that lead to disengagement and institutional factors that can lead toward success. High absenteeism, behavior problems in and outside of school, and course failure—the ABCs of disengagement—were found to be the strongest predictors of dropping out. These three factors are often interrelated and have been repeatedly linked to an increased probability that students will drop out and not complete their high school education (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Alternatively, supportive relationships, high academic expectations, and meaningful
instruction were identified as factors that can lead to student success through persistence (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009).

Dropout rates tend to be higher in larger public schools in urban centers where poverty is wide-spread (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Kenny et al., 2003; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Dropout rates tend to be lower in schools where staff retention is high and teachers work as a team with students, encouraging students to look toward the future, helping create aspirations, and guiding students in planning for success (Fine, 1991; Fine, 2003; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Gerhardt, 2010). Schools with a history of high dropout rates that have become successful in retaining and promoting students are those that have the capacity to create and tailor programs to the particular needs of their student body (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Herlihy and Quint, 2009).

**Persistence**

**Persistence—cognitive & noncognitive facts.** Why do some students persist toward high school graduation while others do not? There are no simple explanations (Nieto, 2005; Aud et al, 2010; Benard, 2004). In school districts where failure is routine, some students do persist toward graduation. In other school districts where graduation is the norm, some students drop out or fail. Researchers have found that school performance is a complex phenomenon, and there are many potential answers to the question of why some students persist toward high school graduation while others do not. Those answers extend far beyond the seemingly simplistic responses that include intellectual capacity, content knowledge, and academic skills, which are called cognitive factors (Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson & Beechum, 2012; Seldacek, 2005).
In addition to cognitive factors, noncognitive factors such as behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies affect a student’s life and ability to persist. (Farrington et al., 2012). Researchers at the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research used current research and theory to create a conceptual framework of five essential noncognitive factors leading to a student’s persistence toward graduation, showing the relationship of factors to each other and the socio-cultural context of which students are a part (See Figure 1).

![Diagram of Five Noncognitive Factors Affecting Academic Performance](image)

*Figure 1. Five Noncognitive Factors Affect Academic Performance in a Classroom/School and Social-Cultural Context. (Farrington et al. (2012)*

Academic Mindsets are the psychosocial attitudes and beliefs that one brings to their academic work (Farrington et al., 2012). The sense of belonging to the academic community and belief that the work has the potential to lead toward academic success and is both interesting and of value contribute to the academic mindset that encourages perseverance,
and positive behaviors and results in stronger academic performance (Farrington et al., 2012; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Henderson & Milstein, 1996; Sedlacek, 2005).

Social Skills are the interpersonal skills such as empathy, cooperation, assertion, and responsibility that students employ with peers, teachers, and administration (Farrington et al., 2012). These skills have the potential to significantly influence academic behaviors, academic performance, and academic mindsets (Farrington et al., 2012).

Academic perseverance is the capacity of a student to keep working toward the completion of work regardless of roadblocks and distractions. Grit, tenacity, delayed gratification, self-discipline, and self-control fall under this umbrella. Academic perseverance affects both academic behaviors and academic performance (Farrington et al., 2012).

Learning strategies are the study skills, metacognitive processes, self-regulated learning, and goal-setting that students utilize in the cognitive work of thinking, remembering, or learning (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 12).

Finally, academic behaviors include attending school, doing homework, organizing materials, participating in class discussion, and studying. These behaviors have a direct correlation to success in the classroom (Farrington et al., 2012). Students who regularly attend school and are engaged in classroom activity are much less likely to drop out (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Wehlage, 1989). The five noncognitive factors in concert with a student’s background, the current school context, and the larger socio-cultural context, which includes the larger community beyond the school, influence the ability of a student to persist toward high school graduation (Farrington et al., 2012).
Persistence–environmental factors. In addition to the cognitive and noncognitive factors that students bring to their classrooms and courses of study, research has also focused on how teachers and school environments are critical parts of the protective factors (School Connectedness…, 2009) for fostering persistence toward graduation (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, in their 20-year study of urban public schools, named five environmental components that lead schools and their students toward success (5 Essentials, 2014).

1. Effective Leaders—The principal works with teachers to implement a clear and strategic vision for school success.

2. Collaborative Teachers—The staff is committed to the school, receives strong professional development, and works together to improve the school.

3. Involved Families—The entire school staff builds strong relationships with families and communities to support learning.

4. Supportive Environment—The school is safe and orderly. Teachers have high expectations for students. Students are supported by their teachers and peers.

5. Ambitious Instruction—Classes are academically demanding and engage students by emphasizing the application of knowledge (5Essentials, 2014).

The findings of the Chicago School Research Consortium were echoed by Cooper, Ponder, Merritt, and Matthews (2005), whose analysis of successful high schools also identified five patterns of success. A key component is collaborative leadership, which focuses on teamwork as opposed to micromanaging. Also important are the relationships and connections between faculty members and students, particularly those relationships that are marked by compassion with discipline. Third are safety nets, families feeling included in the
educational process and strong community connections that offer support, mentoring, and advocacy for both students and teachers. The fourth pattern includes departments that allow teachers the necessary freedom to develop and implement their own strategies for teaching. Finally, data-directed dialogue and collaborative instruction, which acknowledges parents and guardians as important stakeholders, as teachers work with colleagues and together they utilize data to inform and guide instruction (Cooper et al., 2005; Elliot, 2009).

Research by others supported these conclusions: Schools that have a clear vision or mission (Louis & Miles, 1990; Shields & Miles, 2008); schools that have strong organization and collaborative faculty and are willing to adapt a rigorous curriculum (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Dianda, 2008; Shields & Miles, 2008); and schools that promote a culture of success (Rodriguez, 2007) are more likely be successful in encouraging persistence toward graduation.

Beyond the institution, schools that connect to families and communities building social capital or partnerships, creating trust and developing relationships of mutual support experience improved academic achievement across economic, racial and ethnic, and educational backgrounds (Conchas, 2006; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Winfield, 1994).

**Persistence & student voice.** Two decades ago, in his thought provoking work on the state of urban schools in the United States, Kozol (1991) wrote, “It is part of our faith, as Americans, that there is potential in all children” (p. 67). Conchas and Rodriguez (2007) asked, “Do we have the political will to truly leave no child behind” (p. xv)? Paulo Freire (1968, 1993) wrote of the importance of seeing the student as an individual who also has knowledge to be shared with the learning environment—with both other students and teachers.
Connelly and Clandinin (1990) wrote of the importance of student voice in educational research in saying, “Humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). Student voice work has its roots in the early 1990s, when educators and social critics began to note that voices of students were systematically excluded from conversations about teaching, learning and schooling (Cook-Sather, 2006).

Reform efforts in education have been marked historically by “doing things to other people (students), for their own good” (Levin, 2000, p. 155). Fullan (1991) asked the question, “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered” (p. 170)? Others joined in the conversation encouraging the development of strategies to hear the students’ voice (Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996; Stenhouse, 1975, 1983; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

In the research, voice has come to mean an understanding that students have legitimate perspectives and opinions (Cook-Sather, 2006; Stefl-Mabry, Radlick & Doane, 2010); that they take an active role in shaping educational policies and practices (Fine, 2003; Holdsworth, 2000). Student voice research is about allowing students to have input, and with that, presence, power, and agency. In utilizing student voice, the system is afforded the opportunity to become open to the presence and power of students (Cook-Sather, 2006). Student voice research requires a cultural shift that affects the balance of power in research and in educational reform. Students move out of the role of passive recipients of decision-making processes into the active role as a “partner in learning” (Fielding, 2004b, p. 201).

Rappaport (2000) referred to the right of telling of one’s own story as an “index of power and of psychological empowerment” (p. 7). Freire (1993) spoke to the power of
listening to students as having the potential to be transformative, as the students’ experience has power to shape the future for those who learn.

Student voice theory gives authority to student perspectives. Cook-Sather (2002) identified how in many ways it runs counter to reform efforts in the United States, which have their basis in adults’ ideas about what education is and how it is meant to be practiced. The challenges Cook-Sather articulated are the dual challenges of a change in mindset and a change in the structures of relationships in education and the institutions that uphold them.

For students in urban public schools, the opportunity to speak their own story—to tell their own truth—opens a door to see both into and beyond the dominant cultural narratives where stereotypes abound about who these students are and where they are heading as children of poverty embedded in systems of chaos at home and at school (Rappaport, 2000). Through the case study method, student voice theory provides an avenue to hear those who are often voiceless and gives the power of self-representation to those who are often perceived to be powerless (Tellis, 1997). What are the factors and processes that lead students to persist toward graduation? In their own voice, with their own words, the students can speak.

Summary

The National Center for Education (2014) reported that the four-year high school graduation rate in the United States lingers around 80%, with urban youth less likely to graduate than their nonurban counterparts (Kenny et al., 2003; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; MacIver, 2009). With hopes of increasing the high school graduation rate in the United States, researchers and educators have worked at the complicated process to identify both the risk factors that lead to students dropping out of high school prior to graduation and the
protective factors that encourage students to persist toward that goal. Thirty years of research has shown that accomplishing those goals is not an easy task.

It is understood that cognitive factors (content knowledge and academic skills) are one small piece of the puzzle that can lead a student to persist toward graduation, but there are other important pieces as well. Farrington et al. (2012) discussed the significance of noncognitive factors: mindset, social skills, ability to persevere, behaviors, and learning strategies, all of which are important for academic success. Beyond the student, the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2014) identified five essential components for success that focus on the environment of the student at home and at school. Those five components include: effective leaders; collaborative teachers; involved families; supportive environments; and ambitious instruction. Other research highlighted the importance of strong organizations, cultures of success, collaborative leadership that moves across lines to engage administrators, teachers, students, and families (Cooper et al., 2005; Louis & Miles, 1990; Shields & Miles, 2008; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Diana, 2008; Rodriguez, 2007; Conchas, 2006; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Winfield, 1994). Student and environment are a dynamic reality in interplay with the potential to work together toward persistence or work in conflict toward disengagement.

Student voice theory takes seriously the understanding that students have legitimate perspectives and opinions on the concerns facing the educational experience (Cook-Sather, 2002; Stefl-Mabry, Radlick & Doane, 2010). The theory holds that they can and should take an active role in shaping educational policies and practices (Holdsworth, 2000). Student voice theory invites students into the question, the conversation, and the research, to offer
their perspectives and opinions as the question is asked, "What factors do students self-identify as the processes, programs and practices along with other factors, which lead to persistence toward high school graduation"?

The goal of this research and the methods identified in Chapter 3 were chosen to address the questions and then to listen to the voice of students who had experienced success in persisting to high school graduation. Data gathered and discussion of the findings and implications of this study are presented in Chapters 4 and 5.
Chapter Three: Research Design and Methods

Introduction

A qualitative, case study research method was used to explore processes, programs, and practices along with other factors that participants from one urban public charter school in Chicago self-identified as having encouraged their persistence toward high school graduation. Qualitative research seeks deep understanding of the questions being asked, as it elicits stories and experiences from the individuals in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research looks at the participant in his or her natural environment, inviting individuals to participate in the collection of data.

Beyond the inference of statistics, qualitative research is interested in the lived experience of the people represented in the numbers. Merriam (1988) referenced qualitative research as “hypothesis-generating” (p. 3) by design, as opposed to being hypothesis-testing. Rather than attempting to prove or disprove a hypothesis by analysis of limited variables, a qualitative study, through a process of both induction and deduction, attempts to achieve understanding of a particular situation and perspective of individuals or group of individuals (Bendassolli, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Kincheloe, 2005, Maxwell, 1996). Biases, values, and interests of the researcher are acknowledged and included in the reporting (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Methods

Individual case studies explored the lived experience of students who graduated from one urban public charter high school in Chicago. Interviews and documents related to the experiences of graduates of Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP) who are currently attending
either a large state university (LSU) or a small private liberal arts college (SPC) in western Michigan. According to Stake (2003) a case study is concerned with individual cases and the learning that can come from studying these cases. Participants in this study self-identified the processes, programs, and practices, along with other factors, that led to persistence toward their graduation.

Through the case study approach, investigation of a group that shared a common experience as students from and graduates of GCCP revealed themes regarding their perceptions of the processes, programs and practices along with other factors, which led to their persistence toward high school graduation and made their world visible (Creswell, 2013). The case study method allowed for the examination of both individual and collective experiences. Although case studies may not be generalizable to whole populations, they can provide useful anecdotal information that may illustrate more generalized statistical findings (Isaac & Michael, 1984).

Yin (1984) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used,” (p. 23). He stated that the case study is the “preferred strategy when how or why questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 13). Details come from the point of view of the participants (Tellis, 1997), which paves the way for theories to emerge from the stories that are collected and the data that is gathered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Graduates from GCCP, who are now students at the LSU or SPC, were invited to participate in semi-structured individual interviews. Collecting narratives from the individuals provided an opportunity to go deeper into the teller’s story and allowed for “a rich description of words and pictures” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16) of the participant’s perceptions and understandings of his/her own lived experience. This method of research allowed the stories to unfold, voices to be heard without the constrictions of having to fit into a particular pre-established theory (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 1999).

Utilizing student voice, the researcher acknowledged that students through their own experience gain knowledge and skills that can be shared and in time can influence the curriculum development process (Ngussa & Makewa, 2014). Not only is there wisdom to be gained from this process, but also it encourages students to become involved and take responsibility for their own curricular process (Mitra, 2004).

**Theoretical Framework**

The Student Engagement Model, as developed by Rumberger and Larson (1998) identifies interrelated dimensions of educational achievement. The model provided a theoretical framework, offered a place to begin when considering the factors that may lead to persistence toward high school graduation, and to begin framing questions for the study (See Figure 2).
Figure 2. Student Engagement Model (Rumberger & Larson, 1998)

The Student Engagement Model proposed by Rumberger and Larson (1998) looked at the student in a holistic frame, as a person who is part of a family and a community as well as a particular school. This model expanded on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) and his ecological systems theory. In his work, Bronfenbrenner looked at the behavior and development of children as well as their caregivers and the backgrounds and surroundings in which they live and grow. He identified five environments that influence individuals throughout their lifetime: microsystem or the immediate environment of where one lives and the people with whom one has contact; the mesosystem or the relationships between Microsystems in one’s life; the exosystem or the impact of contexts where the individual may or may not be a direct player, such as the neighborhood, the work environment of family members, or the governmental influences; the macrosystem or the broad cultural patterns that affect the individual including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender; and the chronosystem.
or the time in a person’s life and what is going on at that moment for them. Bronfenbrenner encouraged both researcher and public to see the ways in which the five environments work together or against the development of healthy individuals, particularly the development of healthy children.

Rumberger & Larson (1998) restated the interconnected reality of a student’s life and world. Their holistic frame, which comprises the Student Engagement Model, looks at each student as a unique person with a unique voice who is part of a particular family, a particular school, and a particular larger community. As a unique person with unique potential, this model gives space to consider the cognitive as well as noncognitive factors in a student's life, as identified by Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson & Beechum (2012): academic mindsets, social skills, academic perseverance, learning strategies, and academic behaviors. By seeing the student as part of a particular family in a particular school and as part of a particular larger community, the Student Engagement Model also takes into account the world into which a student lives his or her life, the components that are part of 5Essentials for public school (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014): effective leadership, collaborative teachers; involved families; supportive environment; and ambitious instruction.

Exploring the question of persistence toward high school graduation requires consideration of noncognitive factors as well as knowledge and academic skills or cognitive factors. In addition, the bigger picture includes what is happening in the home, the community and the school. According to Rumberger and Larson (1998), all are important aspects of the concept of persistence.
Research Questions

Understanding that the qualitative research process is emergent, it was understood from the outset that the research questions could change as the perspectives of the participants guided the exploration of their persistence toward graduation (Creswell, 2013). This was indeed the case. As the researcher began the interview process, the research questions included:

1. What factors encouraged students (and their families) to choose GCCP over other schools?
2. What adversity (in the form of risk factors) do students identify and describe in their lives?
3. What school-based experiences, processes, or programs had the greatest influence on students persisting toward graduation at GCCP?
   a. School Mission
   b. Teacher Relationships
   c. Community Engagement
4. Were there people in the student’s life outside of GCCP that encouraged them to persist toward graduation?
5. What external (community) factors influenced persistence toward graduation?
6. What changes do the students see in themselves as a result of their experiences at GCCP?
7. How do students define and describe their own resiliency or persistence? What are the attributes or competencies they have developed that they believe have encouraged their ability to persist toward high school graduation?
Participant Selection and Participation

This qualitative case study research employed a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2013). Ten students, who are graduates of Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP) and are now attending a large state university (LSU) or a small private college (SPC) in western Michigan were invited to participate. (See Appendix A). LSU and GCCP are developing an intentional relationship for both recruitment and retaining of students. GCCP provides a Comer-to-College advisor who continues to mentor and guide students as they enter into post-secondary education experiences. GCCP students currently at SPC were chosen because they share a common Comer-to-College advisor with those at LSU, an advisor whose task it is to support GCCP graduates through their college years by providing the tools and support they need to persist through college.

This study was designed understanding that, at minimum, five students would participate. None of the participants would be students in the classes taught by the researcher who holds a faculty position at LSU. All Eastern Michigan University and Grand Valley State University policies and procedures regarding informed consent and protection of human subjects were followed. Participants who agreed to be part of the study were informed that they could voluntarily withdraw from participation at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants was protected (See Appendix B).

Data Collection

Five of the ten graduates from GCCP currently at LSU and SPC who were invited to participate in this study agreed to be part of the study. A brief initial survey was distributed to them to establish foundational data from which the interviews would be conducted. Participants were interviewed in settings designed to be comfortable and inviting. Some of
the students met in my campus office. Others met in a local coffee shop. Food and beverages were available to all participants during the interview sessions. The questions asked in individual interviews were intentionally open-ended, inviting participants to move away from the tendency to answer with a simple yes or no and providing an opportunity for participants to share their stories and other descriptive data. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Multiple forms of data were utilized and analyzed. In addition to the brief survey and interviews, other sources included the use of documents and artifacts (Creswell, 2013). Identified as one of the top charter school systems in the nation and as recipient of the Broad Prize for Public Charter Schools (Pandey & Vega, 2015), the network has been scrutinized as well as researched by a variety of sources, creating a vast pool of resources from which to look at the data that emerges from GCCP (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014; Illinois Report Card, 2014; Knowles, 2014; Luppesco, Allensworth, Moore, de la Torre, Murphy & Jagesic, 2011; University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, 2012a; University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, 2012b; Warren, 2012; Whitaker, 2010). Observations were made at the school and during school events, which provided opportunities to talk to current students and staff both informally and in more formal settings. Field notes recorded personal hunches, emergent questions, experiences, and learnings (Creswell, 2012). All of this combined to allow the triangulation of findings and sources so that the data collected could be viewed and examined from multiple perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).
Analysis of Data

Miles & Huberman (1994) discussed three aspects of data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This study resulted in descriptive or narrative data. The focus of this study was the participants’ perceptions of their experiences as students at GCCP proceeding toward high school graduation. Data from this study is not quantifiable.

Data Reduction. According to Miles & Huberman (1994), data reduction is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that are part of written and transcribed field notes (p. 10). Data reduction or coding is the ongoing process in qualitative research wherein the researcher attempts to determine which data are relevant to the research questions (Bogdan & Biklan, 2007). Gathered data were summarized and paraphrased, and codes were affixed to both observations in the field which occurred during visits to the school site and the interviews that took place with the participants. The process of induction and deduction in analysis “sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that final conclusions can be made and verified” (Miles & Huberman, 2007, p. 11). It helps to ensure that the data collection is focused and not repetitious (Merriam, 2009).

Data Display. The second element of qualitative data analysis according to Miles & Huberman (1994), is data display, carefully developing a system to compare and contrast the data that are collected. It is the work of organizing the information in a meaningful and accessible way (p. 11). Materials collected were coded, organized, and analyzed to identify both commonalities and differences across cases. Theme and patterns that emerged were noted. Generalizations were eventually drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
**Drawing Conclusions and Verification.** The final step in qualitative data analysis according to Miles & Huberman (1994) is the drawing of conclusions and verification of data (p. 11). Cross-case analysis was conducted wherein themes and patterns were identified and reviewed and lessons learned from the case noted (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985).

As analysis proceeded the researcher was intentionally attentive to criteria for validation put forward by Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001): accurate interpretation of participant’s meaning; a critical appraisal of all research; integrity or self-critical posture of researcher; authentic representation of all participant voices. Thick description is the method used for communicating a holistic picture of the factors and processes the participants self-identified as having a significant impact on their ability to persist toward high school graduation at GCCP. The final presentation of data is an individual and collective construction of the participants’ experiences and the meanings they have attached to them.

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher is responsible for anticipating any ethical issues that may emerge during the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2013). Measures were taken to ensure the safety, confidentiality, and anonymity of both the human subjects and the school from which they graduated. Research did not proceed until approval was granted by the Institutional Review Boards on the campuses of Eastern Michigan University and Grand Valley State University. This research was determined by both EMU and GVSU to be exempt from IRB review (See Appendix C). Pseudonyms were used for the institutions of high learning, students who participated in this study, teachers, advisors and principals involved. All data collected have been kept in a secure location, where they are confined exclusively for the purposes of the study.
Limitations & Delimitations

This study followed a qualitative research design with the primary method of research being the semi-structured interview. The study involved a preliminary descriptive examination of the perceptions and experiences of five urban high school graduates, who chose to attend and then graduated from Gary Comer College Prep, an urban public charter school in Chicago, and are currently attending either a large public university or a small private liberal arts college in western Michigan. The large state university students were chosen because it is a university in western Michigan that is developing an intentional connection with GCCP, and where the researcher serves on the teaching faculty. The small private liberal arts was chosen because it is a local college in western Michigan whose students share a common Comer-to-College advisor who continues to mentor and guide students as they enter into post-secondary education experiences. All participants willingly chose to be part of this study. A limitation of this study is the assumption that participants in this research will answer questions truthfully and to the best of their abilities.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are held by the researcher:

1. GCCP attempts to provide a climate that is safe, rigorous, and engaging for students and their families.

2. GCCP has a structure that attempts to nurture significant and meaningful relationships between staff, faculty, and students.

3. Respect, trust, and high expectations are part of the core mission and values of GCCP.
4. Each student has a story of significance that informs why he or she attends and persists at GCCP.

5. Participants in this research will answer questions truthfully and to the best of their abilities.

Summary

A qualitative, case study method was employed to explore factors and processes that students from one urban public charter school in Chicago self-identified as having encouraged their persistence toward high school graduation. Qualitative research allowed for an exploration of the stories and experiences of students through a brief written survey and semi-structured individual interviews.

The Student Engagement Model developed by Rumberger and Larson (1998) and the work by Farrington et al. (2012) on noncognitive factors that affect academic and the 5Essentials identified by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (2014) regarding the school and community environment provided theoretical frameworks that guided the choice of questions for the study. The frameworks worked together to encourage a holistic frame from which to look at background, engagement, and educational performance, identifying them as interrelated dimensions connected to persistence and educational achievement.

This research also considered student voice theory, which focuses on the lived experience of students who have persisted to graduation in a school district and neighborhood where graduation rates hover around 50%. Findings of this study increased understanding and provided information for policy makers and school administrators about what students perceive to be the crucial factors that encourage persistence toward high school graduation, particularly in neighborhoods where high school graduation is often desired but
found to be elusive for a large percentage of students. The results of the study, discussion of
the significance of the study, and suggestions for future research will be shared in Chapters 4
and 5.
Chapter Four: The Stories

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the processes, programs, practices, and other factors that students from one urban public charter high school self-identified as having encouraged their persistence toward high school graduation. Utilizing a qualitative case study method, student voice provided a rich, in-depth understanding of the persistence factors at work that encouraged the students to overcome adversity and continue on toward high school graduation; a path which is in stark contrast to the alternative taken by their peers in the neighboring high school marked by notably higher dropout rates and lower college entry rates. Through the students' own words, the stories collected are not only meaningful for those invested in the education process today, but they also have the potential to serve as encouragement for those who follow, and can contribute meaningful information to the field of urban education reform.

Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP) is a public charter high school in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. Opened in 2008, it is part of the Noble Network of public charter schools, which is the highest performing network of open enrollment public high schools in Chicago. With 812 students, GCCP’s student population is nearly twice that of the neighboring high school, and class sizes at GCCP are almost 25% larger. The four-year graduation rate at GCCP is 100 percent, compared to the neighboring high school's rate of 38%.

GCCP is an urban public charter high school that has intentionally developed a culture that includes a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, with the goal of building
scholarship, discipline, and honor in students. The Student Code of Conduct and Discipline Policy are extensive and strictly enforced by both staff and administration. Disciplinary processes, including LaSalles, which like detentions, are part of an after school program designed to instill the importance of completing work. For students at GCCP, the assumption is held that the school day continues for each student until all of their work has been completed. Students are assigned to an advisory group, similar to a homeroom, with the same faculty advisor for the entire four years of high school. The advisor and advisory group play a central role in holding students accountable for their behavior and class work. High expectations for cooperation and success are central to the school program. Teachers and advisors have office hours, and students are encouraged to meet advisors there. Students are taught from their first day at GCCP that "with enough grit, zest, optimism, and gratitude, anything is possible" (Gary Comer College Prep, 2014).

**Research Questions**

This study explored the following seven research questions:

1. What factors encouraged students (and their families) to choose GCCP over other schools?
2. What adversity (in the form of risk factors) do students identify and describe in their lives?
3. What school-based experiences, processes, or programs had the greatest influence on students persisting toward graduation at GCCP?
   a. School Mission
   b. Teacher Relationships
   c. Community Engagement
4. Were there people in the student’s life outside of GCCP that encouraged them to persist toward graduation?

5. What external (community) factors influenced persistence toward graduation?

6. What changes do the students see in themselves as a result of their experiences at GCCP?

7. How do students define and describe their own resiliency or persistence? What are the attributes or competencies they have developed, which they believe have encouraged their ability to persist toward high school graduation?

Ten graduates of GCCP who are currently enrolled at either a large state university (LSU) or a small private liberal arts college (SPC) in western Michigan were invited to participate in this study; five agreed to participate. All participants attended GCCP for all four years of their high school careers. Four of the students interviewed were college freshmen who had graduated from GCCP in 2014. One was a junior, a member of the first graduating class at GCCP in 2012. The students ranged in age from 18-to-21 years-of-age. All of the interviews were face-to-face, except one interview that was conducted electronically through Skype to accommodate the student who was participating in a study abroad program as part of her junior year experience. The interviewees included:

- Ynes. Mexican-American female. Graduate of GCCP in 2012. Attending (SPC) at the time of the interview. Her father did not complete elementary school. Her mother was a high school graduate.

- Olivia. African-American female. Graduate of GCCP in 2014. Attending (SPC) at the time of the interview. Father obtained a GED.
• Bernadette. African-American female. Graduate of GCCP in 2014. Attending (SPC) at the time of the interview. Mother was a high school graduate.

• Georgia. African-American female. Graduate of GCCP in 2014. Attending (SPC) at the time of the interview. Mother obtained a GED. Father's level of educational attainment is unknown.

• Rhonda. African-American female. Graduate of GCCP in 2014. Attending (LSU) at the time of the interview. Mother graduated high school and had some college experience.

With the intent of truly hearing each student's voice and to understand their perspective, the results of the interviews are shared in story form.

**Perspectives**

**Ynes.** Ynes was the senior voice in this research project. A junior at SPC, the Skype interview took place during her semester studying abroad. Ynes was the only interviewee who lived with both parents in the home during her high school years. However, her father traveled to Mexico for at least one month each school year to take care of his mother, who was in ill health. When he was gone, it was Ynes’ responsibility to help her mother with household tasks and take on the role of "being the dad."

**Choosing Gary Comer College Prep.** Ynes was the first in her family to attend GCCP. Her oldest brother had attended a public school in CPS, "that was known for gang violence," according to Ynes. Her middle brother went to a private high school and had received scholarships that covered his tuition. In her own words:
I was supposed to go to a private school, but that was too expensive, and my parents told me they couldn't afford it. My mother did a lot of research. She thought Gary Comer College Prep would be the best place for me to go.

Ynes and her mother met with the principal of GCCP, who explained the policies and expectations of the school and gave them a tour of both the school and the Gary Comer Youth Center, which at that time housed the new high school and now is on the same campus. It was the personal interview with the principal that encouraged Ynes and her parents to make the choice for enrollment at GCCP. Reflecting on the choice to attend GCCP, Ynes said, "It was a blessing in disguise, because I wanted to go to another school (the private school), but this ended up being a better decision."

**Adversity or Risk Factors.** When asked to identify what adversity in the form of risk factors she would identify in her life, Ynes immediately began speaking of her grandmother in Mexico:

My grandmother was sick a lot of the time. My dad would have to go to Mexico to visit her and make sure she was ok, so I had to be there for my mom to help her out around the house—cook dinner and take care of my brothers, who were still living in the house.

When her father went to Mexico, he was gone for a month at a time. "I felt I had to be 'the dad' to help her out around the house." Even after her grandmother passed away, her father would continue the trips to Mexico to visit and care for his brothers and sisters.

Ynes identified the second risk factor as the prospect of being a first generation college student. Wanting to be successful in high school was critical for Ynes to be able to fulfill her dream of going to college. "Being a first generation college student is hard because
you're going into unfamiliar territory." She spoke of "everyday going through challenges that other people don't have to worry about." Her time at GCCP was not only about being successful in her studies but also learning how to handle the stress of paying bills and bringing money into the home.

**School Experiences, Processes, and Programs.** Thinking about her experience at GCCP and the school-based experiences that had the greatest influence on her ability and willingness to persist toward graduation, Ynes enthusiastically identified teacher relationships, "100 percent!"

The teachers at Gary Comer were the most impactful to me during my time there. They were what motivated me to keep going, to do my best, especially my English teachers. They were the ones that saw something in me—saw that I had curiosity for reading and writing, and they are the ones who pushed me. Not only did those relationships encourage Ynes, but they also influenced her direction for future studies.

That's why I decided to become an English major. I felt my teacher relationships grew stronger every year. They were the ones who really cared about the students, and that's what I really appreciated about them—they believed in us. They believed we were going to go to college—that we were going to persist and graduate, even though sometimes WE felt we weren't.

Ynes believed that teacher relationships at GCCP are one of the primary things that distinguish GCCP from other high schools:

A lot of people I meet in college went to big high schools. They describe their experience; they took the classes, but the teachers were just there to teach them the
content, and they didn't really care about the students. When I describe Gary Comer, they are really surprised, because they said at their high schools they didn't have that—that close relationship with teachers—and the college mission wasn't really present there. They just wanted to get it over with. Whereas, at Gary Comer they really bond with you.

She also believed that teacher relationships were not just important for her, but for the whole school's success.

If you don't have passionate teachers teaching the students, you're not going to have positive outcomes, like the 100 % graduation rate. If the teacher doesn't care what they're teaching, you're not going to learn. It's really important for the teachers to be passionate.

Ynes also saw the principal as having played a significant role in her success story:

The principal, Mr. Taylor, had an impact. The principal sets the standards and sets the tone for the environment. Mr. Taylor was that person. Even when he wasn't there, you felt his presence around the school. He was always willing to talk to you and criticize you. But you couldn't be mad because he wanted the best for you. He was always willing to work hard to get the word out about Gary Comer and the great things we were doing. That was another integral part of the curriculum.

Even though the founding principal has left and moved on to an administrative role in the network, Ynes said, "I keep picturing him in the school walking around, making sure we were doing what we were supposed to be doing. His presence is still there."

A third influence for Ynes was the role of the advisory. Students at GCCP remain with the same advisory students and advisor all four years they are enrolled. More than a
homeroom, the advisory assists with academic planning and monitoring preparedness for each day's work, as well as looking forward toward college exploration. "They become your family, your supporters. If you needed help with something, you could turn to your advisor and you could support each other. That way we got very close. I really liked that aspect of it."

Finally, Ynes saw "Report Card Pick Up" as being a strategic way of keeping family, students and school connected. Parents are required to pick up their student's report card at the end of every quarter if their student is to continue at GCCP.

By going to 'Report Card Pick Up' the parents would always show their interest, and that makes a difference. All the parents at Gary Comer were interested in what their children were learning and doing, and they would talk to the advisors, asking, 'How can I help my child do better?' I think it was really important to have those talks with the parents. If parents don't know what's going on with their children and understand why they're not succeeding, they're not going to know, and their children are going to continue to not do well.

**Outside Personal Encouragement.** For Ynes, her parents and grandmother in Mexico were the people outside of GCCP who most encouraged her to persist toward graduation.

Both of my parents really just wanted me to do the best that I could do and were very supportive. They loved Gary Comer and loved the teachers—especially my mom. She is very friendly and talkative, and every time 'Report Card Pick Up' came around they knew my mom would be there. She would bring them cookies.
Her grandmother in Mexico was also very proud of Ynes. Her father would call his mother every weekend (when he was not in Mexico), and her grandmother would ask for updates on the family. "She would always ask about me. She was very proud of me." She added, "There wasn't anyone else in my immediate family who went to college, so they were happy I was going to Gary Comer, but they weren't saying anything about going to college."

**Community Factors.** When asked what external or community factors influenced her persistence toward graduation, Ynes identified the Gary Comer Youth Center. The Youth Center is on the campus of the current high school, but it housed the high school for the first two years of the school's existence, the years when Ynes was a freshman and sophomore.

We would be interacting with the workers and the kids there, and that was another community we could turn to for support and encouragement. The people who worked at the Youth Center were always talking to us, supporting us, and coming to Town Halls.

Town Halls occur once a month on Fridays. They are an opportunity for the GCCP community to celebrate their achievements or deal with issues facing the school or community. This gathering can include performances from student groups or organizations, recognition ceremonies, presentations from students about trips they have taken or research they have done. These gatherings are open to the public, and families are encouraged to attend. "The people at the Youth Center were always telling other people in the community about Gary Comer. That, in itself, was another great community to turn to." Ynes reflected further on the work of the Youth Center.

There's after school activities, like tutoring. They provide lunch, snacks, dinner, and other events for adults in the community—talks and things like that, too. It was really
just a hub for the community for information. It's not just for people who have
students at Gary Comer. You can get a membership and you get the benefits of
events and activities, but there are a lot of events you don't have to be a member to
get. The people who are staff there would be the ones who are supporting and
motivating and encouraging you. When we were in that building, every morning
you'd have to sign in, and there was always someone there saying, 'Good morning!
Have a good day! You'll do great!' So, hearing that every day brightens up your day.
Ynes also identified her neighborhood as a factor that influenced her to persist.
However, the influence was from a different angle.
In my own neighborhood there weren't a lot of kids going to high school. They were
involved in gangs and participating in violence. Seeing that every day made me
think, 'This is not where I want to go with my life.' So, I wanted to persist on to
college to make a better life for my parents to get them out of this neighborhood, to
provide for them, so that was another factor.
She went on to say,
Just seeing it first-hand—my neighborhood was really bad with violence and gang
violence sometimes. Across the street there would be shootings. Seeing it first-hand,
seeing it happen, seeing the police take away men in handcuffs, and seeing my
parents scared and not knowing what to do—that opened up my eyes. I saw that's not
something I want to be involved in.
Staying in high school was what Ynes perceived to be the alternative to becoming
involved in these activities in her neighborhood and a way out of the neighborhood for
herself and her family.
**Personal Changes.** Ynes spoke of how the experiences at GCCP helped her develop and grow in a variety of ways.

It made me challenge myself, be more articulate, more mature. The academic rigor was intense, so in going to college I felt prepared. I wasn't worried about the academics. I was more worried about other things. But definitely knowing I could handle adversity and stress and challenges, because there were a lot at Gary Comer, and with the academics, and I did just fine.

Talking about how it helped form her as a person, she said,

It was strict. A lot of rules. I never got in trouble. I never got a detention, so the discipline part I didn't have any trouble with. Just the academics were different from elementary school. I went to a Catholic elementary school, so I remember focusing on religion, going to Mass. I don't remember so much math and science and don't remember those being challenging. So, at Gary Comer, the academics were a big wakeup call, intense and challenging but worth it in the end.

**Defining Persistence.** Ynes spoke of her own resilience or persistence as she recalled,

...the little voice in my head telling me, 'You can do it.' The voice telling the other voice to be quiet and do not listen to that other voice. It's really just that drive and motivation to want to do better. The voice in me that's telling me, 'You know you can do better, so you're not going to accept anything less that your best!'

She concluded by saying, "I would not be where I am without Gary Comer. That's the honest truth!"
Olivia. Olivia, along with the other four young women in the study, was a 2014 graduate of GCCP. A freshman at SPC, she is a first generation college student, raised by her father who obtained a GED.

Choosing Gary Comer College Prep. For Olivia, the decision to attend GCCP was predicated on the knowledge that she did not want to go to a traditional public school.

I went to a public school for grade school, and it wasn't the best experience. When the Gary Comer rep came to my (elementary) school and explained the rules and said that we would have smaller class sizes, which I liked, and that the teachers actually care about you and they want you to graduate on time...I liked that. So I said, 'I like that school' and brought it up to my dad, and he said, 'All right. Let's go to the open house.' We live on the south side and the high schools aren't really the best.

When she went to the open house with her dad, it was the principal whose interest and care for each student and family member impressed them both. One of the things the principal identified was the goal of having a 100% graduation rate. Her dad liked that. Olivia said, "What I didn't really like was the homework package I would get. It made me change my mind, but I knew I didn't want to go to a public school." In the end, even though the school was about 30 minutes from her home, her dad said that “GCCP was where I was going to be."

Adversity or Risk Factors. Olivia identified the most significant adversity in her life as,

...the neighborhood people (around the school). It was kind of distracting knowing that they were standing outside waiting. When the students would come out after school, they would bother you for no reason. It would throw me off a little bit, and I thought, 'Don't you have anything better to do?'
The street on which GCCP is located is the dividing line between two rival gangs in the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood. Olivia dealt with this distraction by staying inside the school until her dad came to get her. "There was really no reason for me to go outside. I don't like to be confrontational, so there was really no reason for me to go outside to fight somebody for no reason at all."

A second risk factor for Olivia was the stress that came with keeping up in her studies.

They gave out so much homework. It was so much. Going from an elementary school that didn't care and didn't give out so much homework—at Gary Comer, you had to do it every day, on time, 100% complete—it was just a lot to handle.

*School Experiences, Processes, and Programs.* Olivia identified her relationship with the advisors as the most influential school-based experience that encouraged her to persist toward graduation. In elementary school, she had struggled with gym. Her first year at GCCP, she failed her gym class and had to attend summer school.

I was going to fail (gym class) again my sophomore year. But my advisors weren't having any of that. So, we would go outside, and they would push me to finish running a half-mile. After they were done, they would come back and help me. So, that was really a big thing.

The advisory group also served to help Olivia make and sustain significant student relationships.

I was by myself at GCCP. I was the only one (from my elementary school) who went there. At freshman orientation I didn't want to talk to anybody, and I said, 'I don't know any of these people,' so I just wanted to get through the night. But after the first
week, you have to talk to people because you're going to spend four years with each other.

She added, "I met my best friend in my advisory."

Olivia also identified the principal as being important to the process of persistence. "Mr. Taylor was the best principal I ever had. He was so nice. He knew everybody's name, and when he saw you walking in the hall he'd say, 'Hi, Olivia. How's your day?' Olivia was sorry that he left for an administrative position in the network after her first two years.

Teachers were also important for Olivia; however, there were a few caveats. "They (the teachers) care. But sometimes they took it to another limit—they would try to interfere with your personal life. I understand that sometimes they had to do that, sometimes they were a little too nosy." When asked why she thought they were so inquisitive she replied, "They want to get to know you. My sister's advisor is just IN my sister's life—every little thing she has to know—and my sister doesn't like being open like that, so it's a little awkward."

**Outside Personal Encouragement.** When asked if there was anyone outside of GCCP that encouraged her to persist toward graduation, Olivia identified only her father. I don't talk to any of my elementary school teachers any more, mostly because the school is closed and I don't know where they are. My family relationship isn't the best outside of my dad and my sister. My dad's mom is around, but she was not close or encouraging.

She gives her father credit for keeping her on track and focused on graduation. "So many times I told him I wanted to transfer. I wanted to leave school. But, of course, he said, 'No!'"
**Community Factors.** Olivia identified the violence in her neighborhood as the most significant community factor that influenced her to stay in school. "It was mostly the negative stuff that was happening, especially in the summertime. There would be fights or sometimes people would get killed. It happened right next to my grandmother's house." She paused and then told the story.

I was 15 or 16. It was 3:00 in the morning, so I should have been in the house. But, I was sitting on the porch, not walking the streets. My side of the street was rivals with the other side of the street. A guy from the other side of the street was walking on our side of the street. They didn't know what he was doing there, so it just went down from there.

As she reflected on the event she added, "The police don't really care. They just let it slide. It was a wakeup call—time to get out of Chicago. I would tell my dad and my sister that this is not where we need to be." She identified GCCP as a path to get out of the neighborhood. "Just to make sure I have my education so I would be on the path to leaving."

**Personal Changes.** Olivia saw some of the greatest self-changes to emerge from her time at GCCP centered around who her friends were and the impact those friends had in her life.

The friends I had in elementary school, they would try to get me to go to parties. I didn't want to go to parties at all. They would have led me down the path where I didn't want to go. I'm glad I didn't go to public school. I already made up my mind. I didn't want to go to public school.

She also reflected on the impact of strict discipline and challenging homework.

"Whenever I would get a high grade, I thought, 'O.K., I can actually do this.' But when I got
a low grade I would be very, very discouraged. It would really bring me down a lot." When
asked how she dealt with those challenges she said,

My advisors would make me go to office hours. I would have to sit there for a certain
amount of time and get a paper signed saying I was there. I didn't want to do it at all,
but I had to do it if I wanted to pass.
During those office hours she would have to, "retake a test, or work on homework, or study
with a partner, or ask your teacher for whatever you need." This structure she said,
"sometimes gave me a sense of being able to succeed in difficult situations."

**Defining Persistence.** Olivia had difficulty defining her own resiliency or
persistence.

Being here (in college) is just a struggle. The first semester here, I'm not going to lie, I
just quit. I got straight F's. I would call my dad or my sister, talk to them for a few
minutes or go down the hall to talk to one of my friends. They would make me laugh
or something.

With honesty she continued, "If I'm having a difficult time. When I get overwhelmed, it gets
hard for me to breathe. I email (my advisor) if I need help, and she sends me emails and
says, 'You can come to my office.'" She connected her ability to talk to her college advisor
with the experiences of talking to her advisor at GCCP. "It's different here, because (the
advisor) doesn't know me. But at the same time, it's still helpful." Having said this, she
reflected that her senior year at GCCP was very stressful, and she felt like quitting. "Ms.
Martin was my college advisor. She knew I wanted to graduate. She would tell me, 'These
are your options and this is why you should do this. This is why you shouldn't quit.'"
**Bernadette.** Bernadette was also a freshman at the SPC. She was raised by her mother who had completed high school and received a diploma.

**Choosing Gary Comer College Prep.** Bernadette lived in a neighborhood about 15 minutes from GCCP. "I was surrounded by high schools." Some were within walking distance, others a distance similar to GCCP. "I don't really know HOW I ended up at Gary Comer." She was not aware of anyone coming to her public elementary school to recruit for the high school. She believes that someone may have suggested it to her mom, and together they decided to go to the open house. At the open house, "My mom thought it was such a good school. It was new." Hers was the first class to begin their high school years in the new state-of-the-art building.

It had a high percentage of people graduating and going to college. What I liked is that it was really structured, and the teachers really seemed to care about students' grades. They didn't want to see you fail. They wanted you to go on to college. It was really strict, too.

The Noble Network of schools was not completely new to Bernadette and her mom. She had a cousin attending another one of the other Network schools. GCCP and the Noble Network, however, were not her first choice. "I took enrollment tests for other schools (outside of the Network), but did not get in." In addition,

My mom didn't want me to go those other schools because they wouldn't have helped me get into college the way GCCP did. GCCP was pretty much the only school my mom liked because of the discipline and work I would have to do.

When asked if it was hard to get in, Bernadette responded,
No, you just have to write an essay on why you want to go there. They accepted a lot of people. We had to take a placement test, but that was pretty much it. They accept a lot of people. It's pretty easy to get in.

**Adversity or Risk Factors.** Thinking about the risk factors that might have kept her from persisting toward graduation, Bernadette spoke of the workload being difficult, but giving in and giving up were not possibilities:

Sometimes classes would get hard, and I'd get bad grades and want to give up. But I'd think about my mom. My mom is older and is really strict, so if I get a bad grade, I'm going to get in trouble. I have not had anything that would have stopped me from graduating from Gary Comer and going to college. I had to do it—there weren't any options.

When asked what would have happened if she had come home from school and told her mother she had had it with GCCP, Bernadette responded by saying, "She would have said, "I don't care. You are going here. It doesn't matter! Staying at Gary Comer was the only option. The subject was closed!"

**School Experiences, Processes, and Programs.** Bernadette quickly identified the teachers as the most influential school-based factor for encouraging her persistence toward graduation.

The teachers were not going to give up on you. They wouldn't take 'No' for an answer. Even in class, a lot of teachers gave you one-on-one time. But if you were doing something extra, like a solo project, they were there to answer questions. The teachers really cared and were determined to see us graduate even as freshmen. They
said, 'We're going to get your grades up and make sure you have community service.'
Without them, I wouldn't be in college right now.

But then she went on to speak of the advisory and her advisor.

Our advisor made it a priority for us to go to office hours. We called her our second mom. Some days we'd come in with a bad attitude, and some days she'd be mad, but she really helped us graduate because she forced us to go to office hours. She kept up-to-date with our grades. We had one-on-one meetings. I went to her house a couple of times, and I liked the times we saw her outside of class. I feel she really helped us out, and she wanted us to finish high school and go to college.

The relationship with the advisor went beyond school matters to personal relationships.
"You could talk about anything with her. I haven't talked to her recently, but I do keep in contact with her."

Bernadette also said that school involvements played an important role in keeping her from leaving GCCP. "I was in sports, cheerleading, and in the National Honor Society. But I didn't want to join a lot of clubs because our workload was so much."

**Outside Personal Factors.** Bernadette identified both friends and family as the people outside of GCCP who encouraged her to persist toward graduation. "Friends. (During her high school years) We were so ready to graduate from high school and go to college and be on our own and have freedom. We wanted to stick together, but we all went different ways." Her mother and cousins were also supportive.

My cousins were encouraging, but my mom was a big part of it. She's a single mother, a quick learner. It takes me time to learn things. I try to listen, but I don't raise my hand much in class. My mom has been telling me to raise my hand, to ask
questions, get answers, study, don't listen to music while studying, no Netflix while studying. She threatened to take my Netflix away. I told her I needed some down time. My aunts and uncles are also supportive.

**Community Factors.** Bernadette identified two community resources that influenced her persistence toward graduation: the Gary Comer Youth Center and neighbors. At the Youth Center, "I did after school activities, mentoring activities. I went there one summer. Sometimes I just went there to hang out before I went home. They were really helpful."

When asked how they were helpful she said,

They helped with applications, personal statements, basically everything. They're open all day, with activities from 3:00 on. Sometimes, people from other schools come. If a parent wants to sign up, they can come any time. I would go almost every day. On Thursday, I had an all-girl mission group, and we'd talk about issues. Or sometimes, on Friday, I'd stay and watch boys playing basketball or football.

For Bernadette there was also the support of neighbors. "My neighbors were proud of me for graduating, knowing that I graduated and went on to bigger things in life. Not many kids on my block graduate and go on to college."

**Personal Changes.** Bernadette was able to identify a number of changes in herself that occurred because of her experiences at GCCP.

I see myself as prioritizing my time more, because they teach you about time management and keeping to a schedule. Every year, every semester, you'd have to make out a schedule. There's a block for lunch. I also learned to go to get help. Sometimes it was forced, but I can more easily go get help without hesitating.
She referenced the system of demerits or detentions that are part of the Student Code of Conduct.

At Gary Comer you get demerits for the smallest things, like chewing gum. Even the small things can mess you up. After a while I got adjusted to it, but some people had problems with talking in class, or arguing with teachers. But I was good.

It wasn't always easy for Bernadette.

When I was a freshman it was too much, like military school. But after a few years I felt like I wanted to get done and get out and not cause any problems. It was like boot camp. They would have two random searches every year. They'd search our books bags, and pat us down and check our lockers. We don't have metal detectors, so they'd check for weapons. My freshman year, I thought, 'What's going on? Why are you checking my stuff?' It was weird. But by the end you know what you'll get in trouble for, like having chips or candy. You could only eat healthy snacks they gave you. So you learned what you could do and what you could bring without getting in trouble.

In summing up how GCCP affected her development, Bernadette said, "At Gary Comer, they really put it in your mind that education needs to come first; that's how you’re going to get a good job and be successful. Also discipline."

**Defining Persistence.** Bernadette saw her own resiliency or persistence best described by the word "determination."

I want to get a good job; I want to be a correctional officer. I feel like if I focus on education and get a degree, then maybe I can go higher than a correctional officer. It's just wanting to do well in life, to be stable and have what I want. To be on my
own and make sure I have money and a job so I don't have to ask my mom for anything and be tied to her purse strings.

**Georgia.** Georgia was also a freshman at SPC. She lived with her mother and father her first year of high school, but they separated (which she identified as "not a big deal") at the end of her freshman year. After that, she lived with her mom. Her mother obtained her GED. Georgia was uncertain about her father's level of educational attainment.

**Choosing Gary Comer College Prep.** Georgia’ first choice was not GCCP. I took selective enrollment tests to go to Gwendolyn Brooks and King (both selective enrollment high schools in Chicago), but I didn't get in to Brooks. My mom really wanted me to go to Brooks. An aunt worked there in Security and could have kept an eye on me. I didn't want to go to Brooks, but my mom didn't want me to go King. I'm not sure why she didn't like King. She thought it was not a good selective enrollment school, not as good as the other ones.

Her mother talked to Georgia's godmother about the situation. Her godmother's daughter was at GCCP. Georgia's godmother affirmed the choice of GCCP.

My godmother said that GCCP was a really good school. As close to selective enrollment as you can get. My godsister was very successful there. My godmother thought it would be good for us to be together. So, that's another reason my mom wanted me to go to Comer, so someone would watch over me. I had a cousin at Whitney Young, which is a really good school, and I had a cousin at Walter Peyton. Both were good schools.

(But after talking to my godmother, my mom) had her mind set on GCCP.
There was concern that the discipline at GCCP might be difficult for Georgia. Yet, the choice was made. Georgia enrolled and graduated from GCCP.

**Adversity or Risk Factors.** Georgia said there really weren't any risk factors in her life that would have kept her from persisting toward graduation at GCCP:

My mom was a parent who said, 'You don't have a choice. You are going to graduate. Period.' No matter what school I went into, she didn't play when it came to our education. You went to school every day. You are going to graduate. That was her motto.

Georgia went on to describe how her mother's health influenced her own sense of being able to get her schoolwork done. "My mom is handicapped. She has multiple sclerosis. When it started progressing, getting worse over the years, that's what made me sometimes feel overwhelmed with schoolwork and trying to help her, especially my senior year."

Georgia had a brother and aunts nearby, who were able to step in and help with some of the household responsibilities.

(My mom's) had the disease for 11 years, but it really started progressing when I was in seventh and eighth grades. Before that, I knew she was sick, but I didn't realize how bad it could be. With that disease, you never know what will happen. It got really bad in my high school years. Before that, she was still doing things—going to work, cooking, and cleaning. Then her MRIs started to look different with more lesions on her brain.

For Georgia, the prospect of graduating and going away to school, leaving her mother behind was difficult. However, with her mother's encouragement, she was able to continue on the path to graduation and into college.
School Experiences, Processes, and Programs. Georgia said, "It was mainly the teacher relationships," within school-based experiences that had the greatest influence on her persistence toward graduation at GCCP.

The teachers there are very caring. I've never met teachers who care as much as they do. I've been at good schools, where the teachers wanted to help you, but these teachers really wanted a relationship with you. They wanted to work with you, to help you understand the subjects and the concepts.

She acknowledged that she didn't like GCCP at first. But I can't say it was because of the academics. It was challenging but not extremely challenging because I went to a decent elementary school. But I can honestly say the discipline got to me. We had so much freedom in elementary school, and we didn't have to wear uniforms. So, it was an adjustment. You had to wear a uniform every day, and tuck your shirt in, or you're in trouble. Do your buttons, or you're in trouble. It was a lot of discipline that I wasn't accustomed to and had to get used to.

But the advisory and her advisor helped her make the adjustment and stay the course.

Everyone had personal issues they were going through at home, and if you didn't have anyone else you could talk to, you could talk to your advisor. A lot of people remain in contact with their advisors (even now when they are in college), because they were so helpful.

Unlike most advisories that stay together all four years, there was a change in personnel that forced Georgia’s advisory to be reconfigured after two years.
The first two years I had Ms. Small, and the second two years, Ms. Lincoln. I wish I
could have been a Lincoln all four years. She was excellent, like a second mom, and
tried to help us as much as she could.

This help was especially significant during Georgia's senior year.

During our senior year when we needed people to read our essays and edit our
personal statements (for college entry), she was always the person everyone went to.
She would always help us, always encourage us to stay positive and to be the best we
could possibly be. My junior year I struggled with difficult classes and working. I
pushed through because of her. She was a big inspiration. It felt like being home. I
really felt connected to her. We had more of a personal connection.

Her wish was for the students who now come after her. "Ms. Lincoln's not there any longer.
I wish she was so she could help more students."

*Outside Personal Encouragement.* Georgia identified her family as the people
outside of GCCP who encouraged her to persist toward graduation.

My mom and my aunts and uncles and cousins. Even my father; everybody was
really supportive. My mom would tell me to get as much education as I could, 'You
don't want to be doing what I'm doing, or what your father's doing. You want to
have a career and be proud of what you do.' She would always tell me that, every
day. My aunts and uncles always said they knew I was going to be successful
someday. I was pushed to be the best I could be.

For Georgia, their support encouraged her to pursue a degree in criminal justice.

I want to be a homicide detective. Where I'm from, the murder rate is really high.
I've known people who lost friends or family members, and I've lost friends and
family members. The murders are still unsolved; everybody just forgets about it. I just want to help families, and help myself, if possible. I have so many family members, mainly cousins, who have died, and their murders are unsolved. So, it's a personal thing, and I also want to help others. Some were from my neighborhood, or not too far from me.

She went on to say,

It seems like it never ends. Each year it gets a little harder. Every day someone dies. They're in the media for a minute, and then they stop talking about it. They don't care. My cousin's been dead six or seven years, and it's still unsolved. He was 22 when he died. I think he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he was probably in a gang. A week prior to his death, his car was shot up. The clues add up. They were aiming for his friend, but they killed him, too. They died together. They investigated it for about a week, but then they let it go. I feel like his mom didn't do a good job of furthering the investigation. So many people die every day; so they go on to investigate another case.

**Community Factors.** Georgia also identified the Gary Comer Youth Center as being a supportive community influence.

I think the Youth Center helped me, and it helped kids who didn't go to Comer. Our teachers were our support, but other kids didn't get that kind of support that helped them succeed a little more. I felt like we didn't need it, because we already had support. I still utilized it. I utilized as much information as I possible could.

Part of her involvement in the Youth Center included a connection to Upward Bound and a growing sense of professional identity.
I was part of the Upward Bound program. The Youth Center also helped us with work experience. Knowing how to dress. Knowing how to talk to people. It really stuck. The things that people pay attention to. Your handshake counts. My friend just got hired because she had a firm handshake. That stuff matters. They taught us how to present ourselves in a decent manner when it comes to looking for a job, getting a job, being on time. I had my first job at the Youth Center, and I worked up. Before going to GCCP she was not familiar with the Youth Center.

**Personal Changes.** Georgia saw a number of changes in herself during her years at GCCP, but there was one thing that stood out.

I became more of an adult. I was able to balance my time better. I had a job, I went to school and I was able to keep my grades up and remain positive. I went to school every day. A lot of kids can't do that, and when they get to college they can't balance school and work. I felt like I had more of a view of the real world.

When asked how GCCP helped her develop those skills she replied,

They tried to help us 'stay gritty.' It meant to stay positive, push through. There's many things I've seen at SPC, as far as the culture shock and the race difference, coming from a Black community to a White community. Comer helped me with that, helped me push through and taught me how to push through challenging times. They taught me a lot of things about college, like work ethic and do your homework.

She then went on to describe how the skills she learned in high school are transferring to her approach to studies in college.

At college I've never not turned in a homework assignment, because it counts. I rarely miss class, and if I do, my professors will reach out to me because they notice
when I'm not there. I feel like we're paying for the education, so don't waste your money. Comer did a good job of teaching us the values of college. 'Go to class. Do your homework. Study for tests.' Also, not to plagiarize. That was a very good idea, because classmates now ask to see my paper and I say, 'Not to be rude, but no.' You could get in too much trouble. A lot of people brush it off, but they really shouldn't.

**Defining Persistence.** Georgia defined her own resiliency or persistence, beginning with how it serves as a motivating force.

I hate failure. I want to be successful. Not everybody has the mindset. Some people say, 'I'm really going to be something.' I say, 'Yes, I want to be something, but I also know how hard I'm going to have to work and push myself to be all that I can be.'

My mom would probably like me to be more than she is today. But, she didn't push herself the way I push myself. And my brother didn't push himself.

At this she laughs and says, "So I'm the oddball in the family."

She attributed much of her own resiliency or persistence to her time at GCCP:

I was so successful at Comer because I learned how to remain positive no matter what. I was like that even before I went there, having a sick parent and going to school. Once I got there, I felt it was tough, but I had to push through, especially if you want to be successful. People don't understand the work you have to put in. I've always been a good student. I always did my homework; always studied.

Georgia also gives credit to her mother.

...AND I had a parent that was on top of me about my schoolwork. When you have a parent like that, you want to do well. Having a caring parent is what helped me get through school, a parent who cares, and cares about your grades and checks your
progress report and wants to see you succeed. When you have a parent like that, you
don't want to disappoint them. She worked, so she didn't check my homework, so I
had to do it myself so I didn't get a LaSalle. My mom and myself—those are the only
ways I got through high school—and my advisor, Ms. Lincoln.

**Rhonda.** Rhonda was a freshman at LSU. She lived with her mother during her high
school years. She was the only one of the interviewees whose parent had graduated high
school and gone on to attend college, although her mother did not complete a college degree.

**Choosing Gary Comer College Prep.** Although it is only one mile from her home,
Gary Comer College Prep was not on Rhonda's radar when she was thinking about where she
wanted to go to high school. No one she knew went to Comer, and no one from her
elementary school had ever gone there. "I only applied to four high schools. Gary Comer
wasn't one of them." The four high schools to which she applied required taking placement
exams, "and I didn't want to take them." The public high school I would have gone to was
Hirsch or South Shore, but my mom said, 'No!' The day before the deadline (at GCCP) she
told me to do the essay and she sent it off the next day." When asked how her mother knew
about GCCP, she replied, "I don't know what made my mother interested in Comer. She saw
some information on Noble, and she made the decision. She knew that if I wasn't forced to
do something, I didn't do it." Fortunately, she said, "Gary Comer did not require a placement
exam." Now she has both a sister and a nephew who have followed her to GCCP.

**Adversity or Risk Factors.** The biggest risk factor for Rhonda was the difficulty of
the coursework at GCCP.

I thought I was placed in courses that I didn't know, like math for instance. I was
placed in Advanced Algebra and other courses that were too difficult. But I did get
through it. In elementary school you start (the year) by touching on things you learned the year before. When I started at Comer, they didn't refresh or review previous education.

Even though she did not end up having to go to summer school, she said, "I had homework even through the summer. In elementary school I had to go to summer school after every benchmark and graduating on time was difficult." At GCCP she was able to graduate on time. She saw this as a great success.

School Experiences, Processes, and Programs. When Rhonda was asked what school-based experiences, processes, or programs had the greatest influence on her persisting toward graduation, she identified an outside and inside force in concert with one another.

My boyfriend was at Gwendolyn Brooks High School, and we were in competition. I wanted to do better than him (sic). He talked about how bad Gary Comer was, and I told him it was the top on the south side. All four years my advisors kept me on track. In the beginning of my freshman year, I acted like I wasn't interested in homework. I had some homework detentions at first, but less and less as the years passed. My freshman year I ended up with 10 to 20 LaSalles.

The school website, Core Programs (2014) says this of LaSalles:

If a scholar does not complete their assigned homework and turn it in the day it is due, the scholar will receive LaSalle from their teacher and be required to attend (an after school program) from 4:15pm to 5:15pm. LaSalle was created and implemented to reinforce that the scholar's day is not over until everything due has been completed.

"My advisor kept me focused. Told me it was on me, and I had to do it myself and get everything together."
Rhonda also identified the significance of relationships with teachers:

I wasn't involved in elementary school.... The teachers didn't care. We could walk out of class and they didn't say anything. Some students went to teachers they had in previous years instead of the ones they were assigned to. They didn't care so we didn't care. At Comer, if you didn't come to class you got detention, so I went to classes to avoid that. I struggled (with homework and tests). There were times when I felt Comer was so hard, (and asked) 'Why am I here? Do I really need to be here? Do I REALLY need to be here?' But teachers cared.

Two other factors also had a significant influence for Rhonda. In her later years at Gary Comer, her nephew and niece enrolled. “I thought they would want to go to college, so I wanted to set a good example. My other sister is at Comer now, too.” Secondly, there is a camaraderie among students that serves to encourage students to work hard and do their best. "When the Juniors are getting the instructions to take the (ACT) test, the rest of the school lines up to cheer them on. We did that every single year. I couldn't wait until it was my turn."

**Outside Personal Encouragement.** Rhonda identified family and friends as her "outside GCCP" support. "My family and friends (encouraged me)." She also spoke of her desire to prove the nay-sayers wrong.

I have a lot more people who say, 'Don't do it if you don't have a passion for it.' But I'm strong headed, so if you tell me not to do something, then I'm going to do it! It was distant cousins who were discouraging. They went straight into working (after high school). They said, 'You don't need college.' I said, 'You do.' The money you make is based on what degrees you have.
Although there were negative voices, there were also the positive voices encouraging Rhonda on the path. "The ones telling me to stick it out were my mom, my dad, my aunt, my boyfriend, and his family." She is glad that her boyfriend has gone to a different college, because it has shown her that she can do it on her own.

My sisters didn't say much, because they knew I'd graduate. My mom wasn't forceful. She gave me scenarios of what life would be like if I had (a high school diploma) or if I didn't have it.... She is more artsy. I am more of a thinker. What she wants for me is a career. A job is something you have to do, but a career is something you want to do. She made that clear to both (my sister and myself).

**Community Factors.** Rhonda identified the Black-Latino Achievers (BLA) as having had a significant influence on her ability to persist toward graduation:

I was in a program at the YMCA — Black Latino Achievers. I didn't know about it until my mom forced me into it. It was like a little mini-Comer. We only met two times a month, but they kept drilling us about college; telling us we had to have college to get any type of job; it's that competitive. The higher-paying people have some type of degree, even at McDonalds. That was eye opening.

In describing the program, she said,

BLA was separated by class. There were about 10 to 15 of us.... My mom heard about it and I volunteered there, so we knew people there. My mom heard about (the program) and registered me. It cost $20 for the whole school year. It was from 9:00-2:00 on Saturday. I did it for five years, from 8th grade through graduation. We had professionals come in and talk about their careers and what they had to go through from a minority standpoint. There weren't a lot of women who came in, but the ones
who did come were in the medical field. We did projects with the people who came in. One time we had to build a rocket. They had an engineer come in, and we did whatever the engineer said. When it was medical, we did what the medical professional said, so we got a bit of everything.

In addition to bringing in professionals, BLA also brought students to visit colleges:

During Spring Break they would take us to different colleges. One time we went to Washington, D.C., and went into the White House. We even went to a deaf and sign-language school, and our interpreter was signing at us. We went to Oregon, to Maryland, to the University of Georgia. My senior year we went to the west coast, to UCLA.

**Personal Changes.** When asked what changes she saw in herself as result of her experiences at GCCP, Rhonda remembered many things.

I was always an organized person. I saw that Gary Comer emphasized that in advisory, and we would have to lay out everything. I would have extra of everything. If you weren't focused or engaged at Gary Comer, you got demerits (which may result in detentions or LaSalles). You didn't really get rewards, but you got the negatives. I also became more friendly and came out of my shell. I got to know a lot more people outside of my advisory. I started doing more activities and participating in more clubs. I was in the chess club; I was the only girl in the chess club at Gary Comer. I played with the president of the chess club. He won't let anyone win. I haven't even come close. I was also in a LGBT club, but it was disbanded in my senior year. The teacher who sponsored it left, and no one took over. There were only six of us in the
club. I was in Drama for years and in the gardening club. I was also in the marketing club.

**Defining Persistence.** Rhonda defined her own resiliency or persistence by beginning with a failure.

I learn from mistakes, so thinking about 8th grade and how I didn't graduate, that made a big focus to me. I'm strong-headed, so, I knew that if I needed to do something to graduate, I would do it.

Adding to that, she said, "I'm flexible and well-rounded. I can take on three different projects at a time, and having that strength helped me get through it." She also identified what she needs in order to persist. "I need deadlines so I won't procrastinate. I'm really easy going. So, even with stress, I can have a laid-back moment to do what I needed to let go and keep going." Another asset, "I can stay in the present, looking at right here, right now. My mom helped me look towards the future. Even on break I'll bring books home, so I can bring up my grades."

**Summary**

Students in this study articulated a variety of reasons for choosing GCCP as their high school. GCCP recruitment efforts along with family member encouragement, and/or motivation to find something beyond the neighborhood high school played a part for each individual. For each, the experience of GCCP was one that provided an opportunity to grow and mature. Although there were both adversity and risk factors in each of their lives, they were able to find their way, often with the support and encouragement of family, friends, neighbors, and school staff. They all acknowledged that the curriculum was challenging and
the homework intense, but with the support of staff, peers, family, and community resources they were able to persist to high school graduation.

For all five students, relationships were identified as an influential factor that encouraged them to persist toward graduation amidst adversity and risks. At school it was relationships with teachers, advisors, the principal, and their peers. The advisory of which they were part for all four years in high school was identified as perhaps the most important source for encouragement and accountability at school.

Relationships between family and the school also played a considerable role. Worlds coming together to support and encourage a positive school experience was identified in a variety of ways. For some, it was parents who wouldn't let them give up, even when they were discouraged and disheartened. For others, it was extended family who offered encouragement and support. Finally, it was relationships with outside organizations, the Gary Comer Youth Center and the YMCA programs, that provided places and people who cared, who wanted to be of help and who believed in the student’s ability to succeed.

What did it mean for them to persist? It meant identifying resources to help and encourage throughout their high school years, and using those resources to the best of their ability. It meant having the determination needed to continue on the path. "You can do it!" "Determination." "Finding resources to help and utilizing them." "Remaining positive no matter what." "Learning from mistakes."

Five very different stories emerged from the interviews for this study. Yet, at the heart of each interviewee's responses was the importance of relationships. Whether that be with a family member or neighbor who encourages and supports at home; a principal who encourages them to consider GCCP and then continues to follow the student in their high
school years; an advisor who guides them during all four of their high school years; teachers who not only care during classroom hours, but open the doors of their classrooms before and after school to be in relationship with their students; or a community program that welcomes and mentors students—relationships were perceived to be key to persistence toward high school graduation. Programs are important, but relationships keep individuals engaged and persisting on the track toward graduation.
Chapter Five: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the processes, programs, practices, and other factors that encouraged persistence toward high school graduation of students from one urban public charter high school in Chicago. A qualitative case study method was chosen. Student voice was heard through personal interviews that provided a rich, in-depth understanding of the persistence factors at work that encouraged students to overcome adversity and continue on the path toward high school graduation. Participants described their experience at Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP), a path in stark contrast to the alternative taken by their peers in a neighboring high school, which is marked by significantly higher dropout rates and lower college entry rates. The stories collected are not only meaningful for those invested in the education process today, but they also have the potential to serve as encouragement for those who follow, and contribute meaningful information to the field of urban education reform.

The importance of relationships both inside the high school and in participants’ families and the greater community were at the heart of the low-income minority students’ ability to persist toward high school graduation in an urban zone that ranks tenth for violent crime among 77 Chicago neighborhoods. Relationships were crucial, beginning with the students’ choice of GCCP through the four years of rigorous academic curriculum and disciplinary expectations. The relationships within and outside of the school not only served to support and encourage each student, but they also aided the development of the necessary cognitive and noncognitive factors essential for academic success (Farrington et al., 2012).
Choosing Gary Comer College Prep

Students in this study articulated a variety of reasons for choosing GCCP as their high school. For Olivia, it was the recruitment efforts by GCCP while she was still in elementary school. For Ynes, Bernadette, and Rhonda, a parent or family member became aware of the school and encouraged exploration of the possibility. For Georgia, it was her godmother who brought up the possibility of GCCP and Georgia's mother followed through. Finding a school other than the neighborhood high school that could be the place of learning during the high school years was the primary motivation in each case. The high school principal was an important influence in the final decisions of Ynes and Olivia to enroll at GCCP; his interest, care, and encouragement were identified as being impressive and ultimately persuasive. All of the interviewees indicated that the parent or parents had a very strong, if not overriding influence in their students enrolling at GCCP.

From the initial inquiry through orientation after enrollment, students and parents were made aware of the high standards and expectations for students and their families at GCCP, where both supportive relationships and high academic expectations were part of the school structure. As Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) acknowledged, supportive relationships, high academic expectations, and meaningful instruction are three factors that contribute to academic success. Even before it is clear whether the instruction at GCCP will be meaningful for students, the other two of the three factors that have the potential to lead toward student persistence are in place. Bringing parents or guardians into the school for orientation and making clear the ongoing expectations for them and for their student throughout their child high school experience, GCCP intentionally works to create a solid connection between home and school for each student enrolled. Connecting to families,
creating trust, and developing relationships of mutual support have improved academic achievement (Conchas, 2006; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Winfield, 2007). As identified in the 5Essentials this is a critical aspect for student success (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014). Involved families, who connect and have relationships with teachers and administration, who see themselves as partners in their child's school experience, regardless of income or background, lead to success of the students who do better in school, stay in school longer, and have a more positive school experience (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Implication for policy & practice. High schools interested in increasing student persistence toward graduation must work to intentionally create open, honest, and ongoing relationships with parents and guardians of students. Expectations need to be communicated clearly. The relationships need to be defined by a mutual willingness to listen and support one another.

Adversity or Risk Factors

When asked to identify adversity in the form of risk factors in their lives during their high school years that might have kept them from persisting toward graduation, the responses varied. For Ynes, it was the responsibilities of duties at home with an absent father. For Georgia, it was the reality of her mother's diminishing health. Both of these scenarios added burden to the significant homework responsibilities of school. Olivia identified the “neighborhood people” as risk factors. With gang borders defining the street in front of the school, the potential for conflict and fights was present whenever she left the school grounds. Olivia, Bernadette, and Rhonda spoke of the difficulty of schoolwork and the expectations by the teachers and advisors at GCCP for completion of all assigned homework as a major
challenge. Ynes identified the pressure that came with potentially being a first generation college student and the difficulty of having to meet the expectations when so many other responsibilities were on her shoulders.

Rumberger and Larson (1998) articulated in their Student Engagement Model that students must be seen in a holistic frame, as a persons who are part of a family and a community as well as a particular school. For each student, some adversity or risk factors had the potential to draw them from their academic path toward the world beyond the school. As students in a high-demand educational environment, the interplay of home, school, and personal expectations weighed heavily. To persist toward graduation, each student was clear that significant factors offered encouragement and support along the way. For some, like Georgia, it came in the form of a parent who told her that she was “going to graduate. Period.” For others, it was the relationships as school or in the community.

Implication for policy & practice. High schools interested in increasing student persistence toward graduation must remain mindful of the adversity or risk factors that are part of each student's life. To see each student as a unique individual struggling with issues at home, in the neighborhood, or in the school environment is critical. For students from low-income families in urban centers, the adversity or risk factors that are part of their lives may be compounded by their life situation. These factors may pull them from their goal of graduation. High schools must develop relationships and broader systems of support that can encourage students in the midst of daily struggle and help them navigate the path toward persisting toward high school graduation.
School-Based Factors

Two categories emerged for all five students when asked about school experiences, processes, and programs that encouraged them to persist toward graduation: teachers and their advisory. For all, the care, concern, and commitment of their teachers and their advisors made graduation possible and probable. Each student perceived that their teachers and advisors were not only motivational but also inspirational. Bernadette said, ‘The teachers were not going to give up on you.” The students all had a conviction that the teachers and advisors believed in them and wanted to work with them toward the goal of graduation. Even for Georgia, whose advisor left the school after her sophomore year, the relationship with the new advisor was critical for Georgia's success. Teachers and advisors gave their cell phone numbers to each student and parent to make certain that there would be a way to contact them with questions and concerns after hours. They also kept office hours before the school day began and after the school day ended so that students had a place where they could come for both instruction and general conversation.

There was a clear sense by all of the interviewees that teachers and advisors truly cared about each student. For Olivia, there were times when the interest expressed by the advisor wanting to get to know students felt like, “sometimes they were a little too nosy.” For Georgia, that interest by teachers and advisors in both the student's school and home life provided a safe place to talk. “If you didn't have anyone else you could talk to, you could talk to your advisor.”

Along with the advisor relationship, the advisory, or homeroom-like experience, was identified by almost all of the students as having been an important factor in their academic persistence. Having an ongoing relationship with the same group of peers for all four years
made a difference for the interviewees. For Ynes and Georgia, the advisory along with the advisor was experienced as an extension of their family, “like home.”

The principal was also identified by Ynes and Olivia as being an important piece of the persistence puzzle. His commitment to the school and the students was noticed and appreciated. His daily personal greetings, willingness to talk to students and hold them accountable, and his commitment to the school when he was out in the community left a positive impression on the students at GCCP.

School processes that encouraged persistence were identified by Ynes and included “Report Card Pick Up” and “Town Halls.” Both of these events fostered a relationship between parents and school staff. Ynes saw it as crucial for parents or guardians to be involved in their student's life, if the desired outcome is success. She said, “If parents don't know what's going on with their child and understand why they're not succeeding, they're not going to know, and the child is going to continue to not do well.”

For Bernadette, it was the ability to be actively involved in clubs and sports that kept her involved and eager to complete her education at GCCP. Rhonda was able to say that even the LaSalle disciplinary code, which resulted in after school detentions, was part of her learning to complete her school work in a timely manner and resulted in classroom success.

Relationships matter. Engaged teachers, advisors, and principals were a constant reminder of each student's place and importance in the school environment. 5Essentials (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014) identified relationships as core to having a supportive environment that encourages academic success. Cooper, Ponder, Merritt, & Matthews (2005) saw this as connections that provide compassion alongside of discipline. Glazer (1991) spoke of relationships as part of the emotional and spiritual component of
learning. Palmer, cited in Glazer (1991) believed that significant relationships between teachers and students have the potential to empower, liberate, and renew the vitality of life.

Relationships matter with parents or guardians as well. Understanding that families and the community work as partners with the school toward the goal of success for each student is vital. With a continuous expectation for parent or guardian involvement, GCCP worked to keep the paths of communication open. 5Essentials (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014) identified involved families as one of the keys to support student learning. Cooper et al. (2005) found the family's perception that they were included in the educational process was one of the patterns leading toward a student's academic success.

**Implication for policy & practice.** High schools interested in increasing student persistence toward graduation must understand that relationships matter. Teacher, advisor, and administrator relationships with students matter. Relationships with parents and guardians matter. Caring, honest, and compassionate relationships that address both stories of success and those of struggle in a student's life are formational and critical. For the sake of the student and a healthy school environment, schools must work to develop and support the relationships between all individuals who together have the potential to partner and become the learning environment for the student. Schools must work to support teachers, staff, and administration to maintain a culture that encourages their commitment as well as their retention and, in so doing, make possible deeper connections with both students and their families to build relationships that have the potential to grow over time.

**Outside Personal Encouragement**

Outside personal encouragement for all of the interviewees came from parents, siblings, extended family, friends, and neighbors. Sometimes the voices were positive,
encouraging the student to continue on. At other times, the voices were negative. In the case of Rhonda, the negative voices in her family and neighborhood only inspired her to prove that she could do it; she could succeed on the path to graduation.

Georgia responded to the question by identifying the violence in her neighborhood as an outside encouragement. Ynes and Olivia talked about the violence in their neighborhoods when discussing Community Factors, but for Georgia, the family members who had been murdered were a motivating force for her to continue her education, so that she could become part of solving the crimes. To graduate from high school brought her one step closer to her dream of becoming a homicide detective, so that she can help people in the community by solving the murders of those they love.

Taking a holistic stance and understanding the importance of seeing the student as one who comes from and is part of a broader community of relationships is key to developing a path toward academic persistence (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). The community can be a place that encourages the student with a positive voice of support. It can also be as in the cases of Georgia, Ynes, and Olivia, the experience that motivates persistence to change that environment or leave it altogether. The desire to change or leave the community influences the academic mindset for success and academic perseverance as well as the goal-setting capacity of learning strategies as set forth in the model of noncognitive factors developed by Farrington et al. (2012).

**Implication for policy & practice.** High schools interested in increasing student persistence toward graduation must work with students to develop the noncognitive factors (Farrington et al., 2012) integral for success. Beyond content knowledge and academic skills, students must be challenged to develop academic perseverance that enables them to
overcome obstacles and work toward goals. Students must also be challenged to develop the social skills that encourage them to network within and beyond the community and discern the voices and relationships that can encourage them on the path to persistence.

**Community Factors**

The Gary Comer Youth Center on the campus of GCCP was identified by Ynes, Georgia, and Bernadette as having been a community factor of great influence that led to persistence toward graduation. The Youth Center was a place where they were able to find tutoring services and personal support as well as a safe place to go for after school activities. Staff at the Youth Center were identified by Ynes as, “another community we could turn to for support and encouragement.” The YMCA’s Black-Latino Achievers program was identified by Rhonda as providing some of the same programming as the Youth Center, with more of an emphasis on professional development.

Ynes and Olivia spoke of the neighborhood from which they had come as encouraging them to persist in their studies. Having been witness to gang violence and murder, these women saw graduating from high school and continuing on to college as the way for them and their families to move out of the neighborhood. Ynes said, “I wanted to persist on to college to make a better life for my parents to get them out of this neighborhood, to provide for them.” Olivia said that GCCP was a path to get out of the neighborhood, “Just to make sure I have my education so I would be on the path to leaving.”

The greater community was important for the students in this study because of the relationships that were established and nurtured—relationships that supported, encouraged, and invited students into a greater vision for their future. Halifax, cited in Glazer (1999), spoke of this in terms of redemption. Students need an opportunity to redeem the challenges
they face and create a path for each one to thrive and find their way to persist toward a life that knows success. The community in concert with both family and school can be part of that redemption.

Implication for policy & practice. High schools interested in increasing student persistence toward graduation need to develop collaborations with community partners who support their work as an educational institution and their students on the path toward persistence. High schools must understand that they are not alone in their desire for student success. As part of a broader community, desiring the well-being of the community as a whole, there is the potential to work together with community partners for the health of students and their families.

Personal Changes

When asked how their experiences at GCCP had changed them and shaped them, the answers were varied. For Ynes, it was about learning to challenge herself and become more mature. For Olivia, it provided the discipline she needed to believe that she can succeed in difficult times. It also taught her how to find good friends, whose impact on her life would be positive. For Bernadette, it was learning how to prioritize her time and put education first. It was also learning how to live well and avoid missteps and punishment. For Georgia, it was becoming more adult, taking on responsibility and seeing it through. She saw her time at GCCP as helping her develop a strong work ethic, staying positive, and pushing through the difficulties that may come her way. She also learned to understand the value of college. For Rhonda, it was learning how to remain positive “no matter what.” It was at GCCP that she says she began to come “out of her shell” and develop important relationships with peers and staff. All of the students credited GCCP with having been an important chapter in their
continuing story of educational achievement. Ynes summed up the sentiments expressed when asking this question by saying, “I would not be where I am without Gary Comer. That's the honest truth!” All of the students articulated the challenge of the curriculum and disciplinary code, but reflected on the experience by identifying the many ways in which they had grown while at GCCP.

Rumberger and Larson (1998) identified personal changes as part of social engagement and academic engagement. Students developed the skills and resources needed to persist toward graduation. Farrington et al. (2012) saw them as a coming together of the noncognitive factors that affect academic performance—academic mindset, social skills, academic perseverance, learning strategies, and academic behaviors. Beyond simply “doing the work,” each student developed the ability to meet and at times surpass the rigorous academic curriculum, live within the bounds of an unyielding disciplinary code, and set personal goals for a future beyond their high school years.

**Implication for policy & practice.** High schools interested in increasing student persistence toward graduation must work to encourage the development of the student as a whole and healthy person. Intellectual rigor that challenges the mind, an extensive disciplinary code that encourages a culture of high expectations, and significant relationships with teachers, advisors and administration serve to encourage students to reach their fullest potential.

**Defining Persistence**

As the final question, each interviewee was asked to define persistence. For some, this was the most challenging of the questions. It was a “you can do it” attitude for Ynes. For Olivia, it was figuring out available resources and utilizing them when times get tough.
For Bernadette, it was simply “determination.” Georgia defined it as “remaining positive no matter what.” Rhonda defined it as “learning from mistakes” and being flexible and well-rounded. All of these responses are in line with the five noncognitive factors that are essential for academic success according to the work of Farrington et al. (2012). These are all personal mindsets, skills, strategies, or behaviors that are part of the student's life and are necessary for students to persist toward high school graduation in the face of adversity or risk factors that might negatively influence movement toward high school completion. For all of the interviewees, these characteristics of persistence were attributes they were able to work on and achieve in varying degrees during their time at GCCP.

**Implication for policy & practice.** High schools interested in increasing student persistence toward graduation must promote a culture of success (Rodriguez, 2007), and support that culture with a rigorous curriculum that challenges students to push beyond their perceived bounds of capacity, while supporting that challenge with relationships that hold accountable and ultimately empower the students for success.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This research study focused on one urban public charter high school in the City of Chicago. Utilizing a qualitative case study method, this study explored through student voice the processes, programs, practices, and other factors they self-identified as having encouraged their persistence toward high school graduation. Ten graduates of Gary Comer College Prep, who are now students at either a large state university or a small private liberal arts college in western Michigan, were invited to participate. Five females agreed to participate and completed the interview process.
Further research would expand the understanding of the questions that are at the heart of educational reform, particularly as they intersect with urban high school graduation rates. As stated by Louis and Miles (1990), urban, public high schools are often complex organizations embedded in districts that are even more complex organizations. How to improve the current statistics on high school graduation rates, particularly in urban districts where poverty and mobility define the neighborhoods, will require the willingness to enter into deeper conversations and relationships with the students, teachers, and administrators, and the broader communities that surround and have the potential to support the educational process.

Recommendations for further research include:

1. Expand the research group. This research dealt with a small group of all female interviewees from one urban public charter high school in the City of Chicago, who are now engaged in post-secondary education in western Michigan. Expand the group to include students who are male as well as female and beyond the bounds of western Michigan colleges and universities.

2. Follow the graduates throughout their post-secondary years. Do the attributes of persistence that allowed them to complete their studies during their high school years serve to assist them in persisting toward graduation at the post-secondary level? Are students more likely to persist toward post-secondary graduation in a small private college, where they are potentially followed more closely and supported more fully by faculty and staff? Or is the potential for success at the post-secondary level not influenced by the size of the college or university?
3. All of the students in this study had at least one parent who was committed to the student’s success at Gary Comer College Prep. Include in future research students who did not have a parent or guardian who was able to offer encouragement and support. Include students who were homeless during their high school years.

4. All of the students in this study identified relationships with teachers and staff as being critical to their ability to persist toward high school graduation. Teachers and staff at GCCP are individuals who invest deeply in the lives of their students. Most of the teachers and staff at GCCP are young professionals who are under the age of 30. In conversations with teachers and staff it became clear that they not only put in long days, most often ten or eleven hours during the week, but are also at school on weekends preparing for the next week's work.

Much of the research on persistence has shown the importance of continuity in the school classrooms, the importance of teacher retention (Fine, 1991; Fine, 2003; Allensworth & Easton, 2007). In future research, explore the feasibility of this level of commitment in teachers and staff for longer periods of time. How can deep commitment to students and self-care of teachers and staff work in concert with one another?

**Conclusion**

For more than three decades, researchers have worked to identify the reasons that students disengage and drop out of high school before graduation and strategies that might encourage persistence toward that goal. Much of the work has focused on deficits. What is missing? What goes wrong? How is this affected by gender, social class, poverty, and
classroom structure (Conchas, 2006)? Theories have been developed and tested against the reality of the high school dropout epidemic (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006).

After 30 years of study, little is known about students who succeed in spite of or in the midst of challenging life circumstances (Conchas, 2006). Seldom have students who have been able to persist toward high school graduation been brought into the center of strengths-based research and invited to share their stories and offer their wisdom from their own unique perspectives. Inviting them in, and listening to their voices as they speak the truth that is their own has potential power to inform and shape understanding among those working toward educational reform and student success, particularly in low-income, urban settings where graduation rates often fall behind state and national averages.

This study, utilizing a qualitative case study method examined through student voice the factors and processes that led to persistence toward high school graduation in one urban public charter high school. In a structured interview format, students were asked to reflect on their own ability to persist toward high school graduation in the midst of a neighborhood where less than 50% of students complete 12th grade. Five very different stories emerged from the interviews for this study. Yet, at the heart of each interviewee's responses was the importance of relationships. The relationships included family members or neighbors, who encouraged and supported at home; a principal, who encouraged them to consider Gary Comer College Prep and then continued to follow the student through their high school experience; an advisor, who guided them during all four of their high school years; teachers, who not only challenged supported, and encouraged during classroom hours, but opened the doors of their classrooms before and after school to be in deeper relationship with their students; and a community program that welcomed and mentored students. Relationships
were perceived to be key to persistence. Rigorous academic programs are significant; they encourage the development of personal knowledge and skills and push students beyond their own perceptions of ability; however, it was relationships that kept individuals engaged and persisting on the path toward graduation.

It is essential for those who are concerned about high school graduation rates, particularly in low-income, urban areas to view students holistically, as proposed by Rumberger and Larson (1998). Each student is a person who is part of a family and community as well a particular school. In a data-driven educational environment, school administrators and teachers must remember that in working toward increasing test scores and improving graduation rates, a rigorous curriculum is important, but even more critical perhaps is the significance of intentionally working to develop meaningful relationships with not only students, but also with parents, guardians and other family members, and the community. If schools truly desire to improve the educational process and encourage persistence toward high school graduation for the students in their care, relationships cannot be a secondary concern. Schools standing by students and inviting parents, guardians, families, and the greater community into relationship, acknowledge that we are all in this together. Each story of persistence, in the midst of often overwhelming odds, is a story of success for the whole community.

It is critical for all who are involved in educating students and considering educational reform to remember the importance of listening to those whose lives are influenced by the educational process. Theirs are the stories of import. As Terrence Deal (1990) reminded us, students who have found a path of persistence to high school graduation
in the face of incredible odds have a story to tell and it is our job to listen. “The only thing worse than not hearing any stories is having stories to tell and no one to hear them.”
References


Consortium on Chicago School Research.


University of Chicago Urban Education Institute. (2012b). *5Essentials - Noble Street Charter*


Appendix A: Letter Of Invitation To Participate In The Study

Dear -

Study Title: Voices of Persistence – Stories of Success at One Urban public charter School

Greetings! My name is Diane Maodush-Pitzer. I am a professor at GVSU in the Liberal Studies Department. I also serve as the Program Coordinator for Religious Studies at Grand Valley State University.

As a graduate of Gary Comer College Prep, I would like to invite you to participate in a research study which is part of my doctoral studies in the Educational Leadership program at Eastern Michigan University. The purpose of my research is to better understand the experiences of students who have graduated from Gary Comer College Prep. I am interested in exploring what you, as a graduate of GCCP, would identify as the factors and processes which encouraged you to persist toward high school graduation. Those who do research in this area as well as school teachers and administrators have ideas about what is important to include in the school’s program and curriculum, but I would like to hear from you – as a student who successfully navigated the high school program at GCCP – I want to hear what you believe helped you complete your high school degree at GCCP and allowed you to enroll and begin your studies at (name of current higher ed institution).

I am inviting you to voluntarily participate in this study. There is no obligation to participate. Participation in the study will involve one conversation with me, taking up no more than one hour of your time. You will not be forced to answer questions that are not comfortable for you. If you choose to participate, you may still withdraw your participation at any time. You will not be identified by name in the study. Your identity will remain anonymous.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions, please contact me at either my office or cell phone number or my email. If you do not have any additional questions, and if you consent to participate in the study as described above, please respond to this email with an email message that states, “I agree to participate.” At that time we will set up a time to meet - most likely at Lemonjellos in Holland. Beverage of your choice on me!

I will be in Holland this Friday, February 22, and would be glad to meet one or more of you later in the afternoon - if that works for you. If not, I would hope we can complete the interviews before your Spring Break in early March.

Thank you again for your consideration. I look forward to the possibility of meeting each one of you.

With kind regards,

Diane Maodush-Pitzer
Program Coordinator, Religious Studies
Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Grand Valley State University
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form - Participants

Project Title - Voices of Persistence: Stories of Success from One Urban public charter High School

Principal Investigator: Diane Maodush-Pitzer, Grand Valley State University, Program Coordinator for Religious Studies, 236 Lake Ontario Hall, Allendale, MI 49401, 616-331-2848, maodushd@gvsu.edu

Purpose of the Study: This study will investigate your experiences as a student at Gary Comer College Prep and seek to explore the processes, programs, and practices along with other factors that you would self-identify as having encouraged your ability to successfully persist toward high school graduation.

Procedure: I will explain the study to you, answer any questions you may have, and witness your signature to this consent form. Your consent will allow you to participate in both a focus group with other graduates from Gary Comer at GVSU, and an individual interview with the research investigator at a location that is mutually convenient for you and the investigator. This study will take no more than two hours of your time.

Confidentiality: Your name will not be used in this study and will be kept confidential. At no time will your name be associated with the study. All related materials will be kept in locked file cabinets in the researcher’s office and electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer.

Expected Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit to you for participation in this study. However, it is hoped that this research will contribute to a greater understanding of factors and processes which lead to persistence toward high school graduation. There are no foreseeable risks to you as a participant in this study. All names or other potentially identifiable data will be kept confidential.

Compensation: There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you do decide to participate, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study without negative consequences.

Use of Research Results: The results of this study may be presented at research meetings and conferences, in scientific publications, and as part of a doctoral dissertation being
conducted by the principal investigator. No names or identifying information will be revealed.

**Contacts and Questions:**
If at any time you have questions about this study you may contact the principal investigator, Diane Maodush-Pitzer, (616)331-2848, maodushd@gvsu.edu.

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by both Grand Valley State and Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committees. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator, you may contact the Grand Valley State University Human Subjects Review Committee Chair at (616)331-2281 or Eastern Michigan University Director of the Graduate School at (734)487-0042.

**Statement of Consent:**
I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers received. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to follow the study requirements which will include being audio recorded as I take part in the study.

**Signatures**

________________________________________
Name of Subject

________________________________________
Signature of Subject

________________________________________
Diane Maodush-Pitzer, Principal Investigator
Appendix C: Approval for Human Subjects Research

RESEARCH @ EMU

UHSRC Determination: EXEMPT

DATE: February 9, 2015

TO: Diane Maodush-Pitzer, Ph.D. (c) M.Div/M.A.
Department of College of Education
Eastern Michigan University

Re: UHSRC: # 690734-1
Category: Exempt category 2
Approval Date: February 9, 2015

Title: Voices of Persistence - Stories of Success from One Urban Charter High School

Dear Diane Maodush-Pitzer

Your research project, entitled Voices of Persistence - Stories of Success from One Urban Charter High School, has been determined Exempt in accordance with federal regulation 45 CFR 46.102. UHSRC policy states that you, as the Principal Investigator, are responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of your research subjects and conducting your research as described in your protocol.

Renewals: Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (access through IRBNet on the UHSRC website).

Modifications: You may make minor changes (e.g., study staff changes, sample size changes, contact information changes, etc.) without submitting for review. However, if you plan to make changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a Human Subjects Approval Request Form and obtain approval prior to implementation. The form is available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Problems: All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects or change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an Event Report form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Follow-up: If your Exempt project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office will contact you regarding the status of the project.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Beth Kubitskey
Chair
DATE: January 27, 2015

TO: Diane Maodush-Pitzer, Ph.D. (c) M.Div/M.A.
FROM: Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee
STUDY TITLE: [690734-1] Voices of Persistence - Stories of Success from One Urban Charter High School
REFERENCE #: 15-093-H
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: EXEMPT
EFFECTIVE DATE: January 27, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of materials for your planned research study. It has been determined that this project: IS COVERED human subjects research* according to current federal regulations and MEETS eligibility for exempt determination under category 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Please consult the HRRC recommendations for constructing an informed consent form as posted on the HRRC web site under About/FAQs/TIPs/Informed Consent. Note, however, that under the federal regulations an informed consent form is not required for exempt studies. If you so elect, the signature line may be removed and the document can be used as an information sheet. The word “approved” in the document should be changed to “determined” to be exempt.

Exempt protocols do not require formal approval, renewal or closure by the HRRC. Any revision to exempt research that alters the risk/benefit ratio or affects eligibility for exempt review must be submitted to the HRRC using the Change in Approved Protocol form before changes are implemented.

Any research-related problem or event resulting in a fatality or hospitalization requires immediate notification to the Human Research Review Committee Chair, Dr. Paul J. Reitemeier, 616-331-3417 AND Human Research Protections Administrator, Mr. Jon Jellema, in the Office of the Provost, 616-331-2400. See HRRC policy 1020, Unanticipated problems and adverse events.

Exempt research studies are eligible for audits.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Protections Program, Monday through Thursday, at (616) 331-3197 or rpp@gvsu.edu. The office observes all university holidays, and does not process applications during exam week or between academic terms. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with our office.

*Research is a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge (45 CFR 46.102 (d)).