

**CHOOSING COMMUNITY COLLEGE: UNDERSTANDING THE ATTITUDES
AND SATISFACTION OF STUDENTS AND WHY IT MATTERS**

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AND SATISFACTION OF STUDENTS AND WHY IT MATTERS**

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ABSTRACT

Students at a rural community college with several campuses in Northeast Alabama were surveyed to determine their general attitudes toward community college and their levels of satisfaction with the institution that they are currently attending. One thousand one hundred eighty one students responded to a survey placed on the community college web site. Using a measure of attitudes toward community colleges created by the researcher and a modified version of the *Community College Satisfaction Inventory* by Noel-Levitz, the study explored numerous demographic and social indicators that the literature suggested might influence attitudes and satisfaction. Findings indicate that non-white, traditional and technical or certificate students have more favorable views of community college than white, non-traditional, and transfer students. The findings also indicate that, as a general rule, students who attended this rural community college held very favorable views of the institution. However, numbers differences emerged with regard to social indicators such as race, gender, and educational goals, parental influence on college choice, availability of flexible schedule, and costs.

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INTRODUCTION

Nationwide, an increasing number of students are choosing community colleges. Between 1965 and 1997, community college enrollment increased from 1.2 million to 5.5 million, which was a 78% increase (Coley, 2000). In the fall of 2009, some 3,346 community colleges enrolled an estimated 6.8 to 8 million students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). This huge influx of students is coming to community colleges for a variety of reasons. Many community college students tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and in addition to being cost conscious, these students choose community colleges looking for a practical education that will place them in the workforce quickly and lucratively (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Students are choosing community colleges because it is close to home, the tuition is less than a four-year institution, and overall, it tends to be more convenient (Absher & Crawford, 1996). Other students find themselves attending a community college due to “reverse-transferring” after an unsuccessful experience at a university, or simply to brush up on skills that they did not master in high school or have forgotten (VanWagoner, Bowman, & Spraggs, 2005). Due to work or family responsibilities, other students may be seeking a student friendly institution which offers flexible course schedules (Bryant, 2001).

As the community colleges continue to expand their role in the vast system of higher education, more interest is being generated about how the two-year college can establish a vision to successfully deal with rapid growth, low retention and graduation rates, a lack of student integration into the campus community, and a large student population that is academically unprepared (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2008). One method that can be particularly effective for shedding light on which problems are of

particular concern in an individual institution is through the use of student satisfaction inventories (Bryant, 2006; Noel-Levitz, 2000). The knowledge gained from such research can help colleges more effectively identify problems or more specifically deal with difficult issues such as improving retention, making important policy decisions that directly affect students, and ensuring the institution is effective in meeting institutional goals and students' needs (Alfred, Shults, & Seybert, 2007).

This exploratory study seeks to examine students' attitudes toward attending a community college. Important here is to examine student views and feelings about attending a community college, including available resources, perceptions of quality, and the overall value of a community college education. Another important function of this research is to investigate the degree of satisfaction community college students have along a number of service and/or quality oriented outcomes. A large number of demographic factors (age, race, gender, marital status, number of children, level of income, employment status length of enrollment, student classification) are introduced for the purpose of distinguishing any differences in students' satisfaction levels and attitudes toward community colleges. Differences are also explored between those with differing educational goals including traditional and non-traditional students

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception of Community Colleges

Although community colleges have been praised for their diversity, commitment to the community, and their ability to meet the needs of a number of constituencies, the two-year school is still fraught with negativity. For example, in 2009, NBC introduced a new sitcom entitled *Community*, which focused on a group of community college

students who become friends via a Spanish class study group. Several of the main characters in the sitcom represented negative stereotyping of community college students. The show presents a few non-traditional students (over the age of 24) who have returned to college for a variety of reasons, but with little direction or purpose. For example, an academically underprepared minority student is attending the college because he was unable to obtain an athletic scholarship elsewhere. A female student is portrayed as having a substance abuse problem stemming from her high school days and is relegated to attend a community college due to a lack of other legitimate choices. The campus is a collection of buildings constructed in what appears to be the late 60s or early 70s and is lacking few positive aesthetic elements. Overall, the show paints a picture of community college that could potentially be seen as offensive by the millions of students who attend community colleges nationwide (Abramson, 2009).

A number of recent research studies have also found similar examples where negative perceptions of community colleges still linger. Handel (2008) found that in discussion with teachers and counselors many stated “they almost never refer their students to a community college” (p. 5). One reason given included the notion that a community college would not present a challenging enough academic environment and, as a result, some parents were negatively disposed to sending their children to a two-year institution. In fact, Handel mentions that when he encouraged students that they should explore community colleges as an educational option, parents frequently expressed anger and indicated some insult. This view is supported by Knight (2009) who found that students attending a two-year institution perceived their learning to be significantly more deficient than for students attending a four-year institution. Plank and Jordon’s research

(2001) also provides a negative stereotype of community colleges when they refer to attending such an institution as a “talent loss” meaning that academically gifted students coming out of high school would find this “less than challenging” experience a waste of time.

Several additional criticisms of community colleges also emerged in a nationally drawn random survey (N = 1,455) conducted by Belden, Russonello, & Stewart (2004). One negative view stems from the open admission policy resulting in 48% of respondents thinking community colleges must have low standards, if this is the case. This view is reinforced by a large majority (73%) who felt that community college courses are, at least some of the time, easier than the same courses taught in a four-year institution. Only 19% totally disagreed with the notion that students attended a community college because they are academically inferior. Four-fifths of those responding felt that community college students frequently lacked the necessary commitment to attend a four-year institution.

On the other hand, Handel (2008) has suggested that the perception of community colleges primarily serving low-income constituents, second-chance students, first-generation or minority students is an unfair characterization. In support, others have praised the success of community colleges, having referred to them as the “intellectual hubs” of their communities and essential institutions for educating the public and providing the necessary training for jobs in the twenty-first century (Boggs, 2004). With over one-half of the general public reporting they have either received a degree or at least some service, it is easy to see why community colleges are an important link in the educational system in America.

In fact, Belden's et al. (2004) overall findings did demonstrate that the majority of the American public view community colleges as providing good affordable education and training in locations convenient for traditional and non-tradition students alike. Of those responding, 93% found community colleges to be conveniently located, 89% rated them as providing a high-quality education, 85% good job training, and 82% affordable. Respondents age 40 or older of those having attended a community college tended to have the most positive perceptions. About one-half of the public over the age of 40 felt community colleges were providing a high-quality education compared to 39% in the 18-24 age category. In support of this positive view, a local study conducted in California, found that 43% of 682 students reported they were encouraged by high school counselors to attend a community college, and the majority reported that both their family (69%) and friends (59%) held positive perceptions about community colleges (Coutts & Utter, 2008). The authors also reported that one-third of this high school group felt that community colleges were highly functional and better suited for many students unprepared for a four-year college or university.

The view is emerging that the public perception of community colleges is gradually improving and may no longer be regarded as the last resort for the millions of traditional and non-traditional students who are now attending. Two-year institutions have, in more recent years, developed partnerships with many four-year universities, even prestigious institutions, providing community college graduates opportunities for scholarships and easy entry (Lum, 2004). According to Lum, some community colleges have gone so far as to introduce honors programs enticing students who could attend almost any four-year university. After spending two years in a locally convenient

community college, they become immediate success stories as they are actively recruited into highly competitive universities such as “Amherst, Norte Dame, Yale, Cornell, Georgetown, Duke, and Howard” (p. 54).

Community College Satisfaction

When studying community colleges, it is important to take into consideration the diverse students who attend. Those characteristics include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, familial status, socioeconomic considerations, previous educational preparation, physical and learning disabilities, and business and industry demands. It is true that a student body with a great deal of diversity has common characteristics and needs, however it is also true that community colleges must address their unique needs as well (Brown, 2006; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Simmons, 1994; Weathersby, 1980).

Because students come to the community college with such a wide variety of backgrounds and needs, it is understandable that they will likely have different attitudes and expectations for the institution prior to entry. The diverse nature of their student population mandates a high level of individualized service including a responsive curriculum, efficient registration, flexible hours, and convenient class scheduling, which is ultimately what many students expect from a community college (Burrill, 1994). Overall, a student’s potential enrollment status and demographic characteristics have an effect on the expectations they have of an institution and their overall satisfaction once in attendance.

An institution having an awareness of the attitudes or perceptions of its students or potential students is important because it must focus a great deal of effort on the quality of service that it provides to the people it serves. A highly complex student

population mandates a high level of individualized service including a responsive curriculum, efficient registration, flexible hours, and convenient class scheduling, which is ultimately what many students expect from a community college (Burrill, 1994). The students that colleges market to are also changing in today's society. Because of this, colleges must be more aware of how to market to these students in addition to their traditional aged students. The attitudes of these non-traditional students matter since competition among institutions of higher learning is so fierce (Cohen & Braver, 2008; Weathersby, 1980).

Age. Increased work demands, societal values and trends have lead to an increase in non-traditional students. A common definition of a non-traditional student is a student who is 24 or older (Chaves, 2006). The average age of the community college student is 29 years of age with 43% being younger than 21 and another 42% reported to be between the ages of 22 and 39 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). A student's age and his or her being classified as traditional or nontraditional can have a significant impact on a students college experience. Many times, that experience can be difficult for non-traditional student because college academic programs are designed with the traditional student in mind (Kasworm, 2005). Also, many adult students who are attending community college for the first time are simply not prepared for the environment that they are about to enter. As a result, there is a high level of attrition for these students (Chaves, 2006). That being the case, surprisingly, student satisfaction scores tend to increase with age (Noel-Levitz, 2000).

Rendón (1995) points out that many non-traditional students come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and are less likely to be familiar with a college atmosphere.

Many of these students have a perception, prior to enrollment and after enrollment, that they are different as compared to the other students. Donaldson (1999) reported that there are a number of variables that have an impact on the college classroom experience of non-traditional students. An individual's personal experience, like experience gained from the work force, has an effect on how they learn and apply themselves in the classroom. Stressful roles that they fill outside the college environment such as worker, parent, and family member frequently interfere with their ability to fully enjoy their college experience. Philibert, Allen & Elleven (2008) supported this view by stating that traditional and non-traditional students approach the classroom and their day-to-day responsibilities differently.

In another example of how age affects students, Strange (2008) noted that traditional aged community college students seem to want an experience that is very similar to high school where older non-traditional students are more likely to be looking for an experience that will more adequately prepare them for the workforce. Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) reported that the older a student is when he or she enters the community college, especially over the age of 30, the less likely he or she is to complete a four-year degree. Traditional students who have recently graduated from high school are the most likely students to transfer. Of course, the researchers note that the non-traditional students' likelihood not to transfer appears to have more to do with external demands, like work, family, enrollment status, or college major, than it does with the differences in their academic preparation from the traditional aged students.

Race. Since the inception of community colleges as we know them today, the proportion of racial and ethnic minority students continue to increase each year. It is

believed that this trend will continue as community colleges are being seen as an attractive choice as the costs of higher education is increasing across the United States (Maxwell and Shamma, 2007). With regard to student satisfaction, *Noel-Levitz* has found that Caucasian students have higher levels of satisfaction than non-Caucasian students (Noel-Levitz, 2000). Overall, there is a lack of research dealing with the specific experiences of students based on their racial and ethnic backgrounds in community colleges. Much of the research that does exist comes from college institutional research offices, governmental agencies, and educational associations. However, even with a lack of scholarly research, it is fairly obvious that differences among students based on race and ethnicity certainly do exist. Unfortunately, even though the existence of difference is obvious, it is difficult to pinpoint with any certainty the causes and explanation of the specific differences (Maxwell and Shamma, 2007).

Many of the studies that exist focus on campus climate for students with racial and ethnic differences. The dimensions included in these studies include, but are not limited to, campus diversity, campus friendliness, student comfort, a sense of belonging, college support services, campus safety, and student treatment by faculty and staff. Overwhelmingly, college administrators, faculty, and students perceive their prospective campuses in a positive light. With regard to students, one explanation given for this is that white students typically rate the racial and ethnic climate more positively than non-white students. Another explanation for the overwhelmingly positive response about campuses could also be that, with regard to discrimination and prejudice on campus, many racial and ethnic minorities may simply be unaware of any potential threats (Maxwell and Shamma, 2007). Of course, when individuals are asked to rate a specific

institution or service, feedback from stakeholders tends to be overwhelmingly positive regardless of a variety of demographic factors, as many individuals respond positively even when they may actually have had a negative experience (Royse et al, 2006).

Gender. According to recent statistics released by the American Association of Community Colleges, women now make up 56% of community college students. Research on student satisfaction has shown that women tend to be more satisfied with their college experience than men across all institutional types (Noel-Levitz, 2000). One special area of concern for women in community college focuses on those women who are non-traditional students. In research conducted by Johnson, Schwartz and Bower (2000), a large number of adult women attending community colleges reported high levels of stress resulting from parenting, financial constraints, and health concerns. These issues could be common for any non-traditional college student. However, they are a particular concern for women because women are more likely to be single parents and have lower incomes than non-traditional male students. However, Beckerman and Fontana (1987) found that among traditional-aged community college business students, there were few significant differences between males and females in the same fields of business. The only significant difference between the two groups was that women focused more on achievement themes than did male students. In other words, women were more focused on their educational and career goals and were less focused on the monetary gains associated with their goals.

Family Status. Factors such as marital status, employment status, parental status, and family income all have an effect on students. As stated in an earlier section, non-traditional students are more likely to be employed and have a family than traditional

aged students who are beginning their higher education right after high school. In fact, community college students are less likely than students attending a four-year institution to be dependent on parents. This difference reflects the tendency for community college students to be more independent and likely older than those attending a four-year institution. With regard to income, community college students were more likely than students at four-year schools to have family incomes of less than \$25,000 per year (Coley, 2000).

Researchers know that these family status factors have an impact on students in a number of ways. One of the most significant impacts that these family characteristics has is on student retention (Rendón, 1995). With regard to social class, when comparing students with higher levels of social capital to those with lower levels, data suggests that students with the higher levels are more likely to persist at those levels. However, the same data suggests, while comparing the student's level of social capital and institutional choice as being two-year or four-year, students with lower levels of social capital are more likely to persist in a two-year college than at a four-year institution (Wells, 2008). This suggests that students' social class has an influence over the attitudes he or she may have toward the institution itself.

Parental Influence. Parents can have a powerful impact on their children's attitudes and satisfaction levels with the institution they attend (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2003; Kern, 2000). Parents are important with regard to a child's decision to attend a particular institution for a variety of reasons. Parental influence in college choice has been linked to parents' prior involvement in their child's high school education, their interest in visiting web sites or college campuses, economic assistance

being provided, and applied pressure toward choosing a specific college (Noel-Levitz, 2000). Bers (2005) reported that four out of five parents reported they were involved in their child's decision to attend a particular college. Parents relied on a variety of materials to help their children choose a school including college publications, recommendations from high school teachers and counselors, as well as friends or relatives who had children enrolled at the institution, community perceptions, and the mass media. Also, Bers (2005) noted that some parents may actually be students at the community college themselves which influence their decisions of whether or not to encourage their children to attend the same institution.

A family's "social capital" also greatly affects college choice. "Social capital" is comprised of a variety of resources such as, but not limited to, the parent's level of education, access to various information sources, or being well read. Parents with high levels of "social capital" are likely to create expectations for their children's higher education, even at young ages. Also, these parents typically have more financial resources to help children finance college. Finally, parents with higher levels of education will encourage their children in different ways than parents who have little or no higher education. Typically, parents with little or no higher education are more concerned with proximity and cost with regard to college choice. Parents with more higher education are concerned with issues such as institutional prestige and academic offerings (Coleman, 1988, Plank and Jordan, 2001, and Bers, 2005).

Full-Time/Part-Time. The majority (59%) of community college students are enrolled on a full-time basis (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010). Enrollment status as a full-time or part-time student has an impact on a student's level of

success. Students who are enrolled as full-time are more likely to transfer than students who are enrolled as part-time (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Karp and Hughes (2008) researched a community college that instituted what they called a student success course that was required for full-time students and not required for part-time students. Students that did not take the course were at a disadvantage due to the fact there were services offered by the college that those students did not know about. This is a disadvantage because the part-time students needed more access to those resources because they were likely to be nontraditional students who had been out of school for a while, employed, or have families. The researchers argue that students who participated in the student success course had the opportunity to build more social networks with other students and feel more integrated into the institution. This is important because students that report feeling a sense of integration in their prospective institutions are more likely to persist to a second semester. Ultimately, students who are more integrated into their institution are more likely to have higher levels of satisfaction with the college experience than students who only attend part-time.

Educational Goals. Students who choose to attend community colleges have a great deal of options with regard to their educational goals. Community colleges now provide a number of programs to suit a growing and diverse student population. Community colleges commonly provide associate degree programs, transfer programs, worker training and retraining programs, occupational/technical programs, developmental programs, community services, economic development activities, and support services (Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski, Kienzi, 2005). Students tend to have different perceptions depending on what their academic goals may be. One example of this is the difference

between students who primarily plan to transfer to a four-year institution and those students who are only seeking a two-year degree program, professional development/job training, or personal enrichment (Coley, 2000).

When looking at the programs that community colleges have to offer, technical and vocational training has always been a staple. Barabach (2006) pointed out that the students who participated in her study perceived that their technical education enhanced their employment opportunities. Unfortunately, many students have negative attitudes about technical education for a variety of reasons. A problem with this negative perception toward vocational or technical education has led to some neglect and underdevelopment of programs in this area. This is especially problematic because, in recent years, the United States' performance in sectors such as skilled manufacturing has suffered on an international front. Secondary schools place so much emphasis on academic learning and college preparation that they fail to encourage students to explore the possibilities of a technical education or trade (Levinson, 2005). This lack of emphasis can negatively affect an institution's ability to accomplish its mission of providing access and upward mobility through academic preparation. Colleges should be able to meet the needs of a diverse student population and community by offering an exchange between academic education and vocational or technical training (Carnevale and Desrochers, 2001).

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

The source of the data for the current project came from an online survey of community college students who were in attendance during the spring 2010 semester.

The students attend Gadsden State Community College, a rural Alabama community college with a student population of approximately 6,600 students on five campuses. As of spring 2010, the racial makeup included 72% white students, 22% African American, and 6% falling into various other racial and ethnic categories. The majority of the students were female (60%) and the average age for all students including traditional and non-traditional was 31 years. About 9% of students enrolled during the Spring 2010 semester were first-time college freshmen who had completed high school in the previous year. A majority (96%) of students paid in-state tuition and 60% of students were enrolled in at least 12 credit hours which classified them as full-time students. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of students at Gadsden State indicated a major that is a two-year associate's degree or certificate program.

The subjects for the study were drawn from the general student population described above. The sample was a convenience sample of students who voluntarily participated in the survey online. The students were able to access the survey on the official website of Gadsden State for a three week period in January of 2010. Instructors on all campuses were asked to encourage their students to participate in the survey. Students who indicated that they were not currently enrolled and did not attend during the fall 2009 semester were removed from the sample. The research project was supported by the Office of Institutional Research by providing critical technical support.

Demographic characteristics of the 1183 students who elected to participate in the study are shown in Appendix A. The mean age of the students in this study is 25 years, which is considerably less than for the total student body and predominately consisted of traditional students (63.4%). With regard to race and gender, the participants were

mostly white (71.5%) and female (72.4%). The students were also more likely to be single (69.8%) and have no children (61.2%). Almost half of the students reported that their family income level was \$19,999 per year or below (49.4%) with few students (15%) reporting a family income of \$60,000 per year or more. When asked about their parent's level of education, most of the students reported that their father (57%) and mother (48%) had a high school diploma/GED or below.

The majority of students that participated in the study indicated that they were either seeking a two-year degree or certificate (46.7%) or planning to transfer to another institution (41.1%). A majority of the students (57.6%) were employed at least part-time. However, even with a majority of the students being employed in some capacity, a large portion of the participants (77.2%) indicated that they attended mostly day classes (before 3:00 pm). Students from all six campuses participated in the survey and with the exception of the Cherokee County campus, the percentages of student participation are fairly proportionally consistent with actual campus populations (see Appendix A). Based on the sample description, there is every reason to believe that the individuals responding to this survey adequately represent the various sub-groups who attend Gadsden State.

Instrument

Attitudes toward community colleges. The survey was composed of three major sections and is shown in its entirety in Appendix B. The first section consisted of 22 Likert-type statements measuring student attitudes toward the community college. Measures used for this scale ranged from Agree = 5; Somewhat Agree = 4; Neutral = 3; Somewhat Disagree = 2; Disagree = 1. Scoring was reversed for negative statements. Sample positive items included statements such as "The community college is very

student oriented,” or “The community college environment provides an atmosphere for intellectual growth.” “Community colleges don’t have a very good reputation,” and “Most people probably attend community colleges as a last resort,” are examples of negative items used in the scale. Since this portion of the survey was self-created, a factor analysis was conducted on the 22 items by means of a principal-components analysis with varimax rotation. While there were three interpretable factors that emerged from this process, all the items but one had factor loadings of .40 or better on the first factor and this factor explained one-third of the variation in the 22 item index. Therefore, it was decided to treat the index as a single measure of this one factor. An obtained Chronbach’s alpha coefficient of .89 indicates a strong measure of internal consistency.

Community College Satisfaction. The next section of the survey included items from the Noel-Levitz *Student Satisfaction Inventory: Community, Junior, and Technical College Version* (Noel-Levitz, 2006). A common instrument widely used in community college research, this instrument designed primarily for community, junior, and technical colleges initially focused on 12 different aspects of the institution with regard to importance (expectation) and satisfaction. This research used a modified version and included 59 statements which measured satisfaction on 9 major areas including 8 items on academic advising/counseling, 6 items on academic and learning resources, 8 items on faculty qualifications and institutional effectiveness, 4 items on admissions and registration, 3 items on financial aid, 7 items on campus climate, 7 items on student centeredness, 12 items on campus and facilities, and 4 items on safety and security. Each of the nine parts included statements that students were asked to indicate how satisfied they were using a Likert scale ranging from: Satisfied = 5; Somewhat Satisfied = 4;

Neutral/No Opinion = 3; Somewhat Dissatisfied = 2; Dissatisfied = 1. All items were stated positively for each sub-scale. Students were also requested to respond to the following two questions: “Overall, how would you rate your level of satisfaction with the institution you are attending,” and “Are you more or less satisfied with the community college than you thought you would be prior to attending this institution?”

Demographic Information. The final section of the questionnaire included questions gathering information on a variety of social indicators. Age was used to group students into “traditional” (age 24 and below) and “non-traditional” (age 25 and above). Due to the overwhelming number of white students, all other races were coded into the variable “non-white.” A variable measuring “educational goal” was created by asking student “if they were seeking an associate degree or certificate, planning on transferring to a four-year institution, seeking self-improvement courses or enrolled for personal growth, enrolled for job related purposes or undecided.” Others questions focused on current enrollment status (full-time, 12 or more hours, or part-time, less than 12 hours), marital status, status of employment (unemployed, part-time, or full-time), and time of attendance (mostly day, mostly evening, mostly distance learning). Students were also asked whether Gadsden State was their primary choice or whether they had to transfer from a four-year institution. Extensive information was also gathered on the approximate household income, number of children, and parents’ highest level of education.

RESULTS

Perception of Community Colleges

When examining various demographic and other social indicators, there are interesting findings revealing numerous significant differences in how students view

community colleges as well as their degree of satisfaction with the quality of services they receive, the resources available as well as the campus climate and student centeredness. A series of *t* tests were performed for the purpose of examining a several socio-demographic variables and how each might serve to influence student perceptions of community colleges. The results indicate that non-white ($t = 2.39; p < .05$) and the more traditional students 24 years of age or under ($t = 3.20; p < .01$) held a more favorable view of community colleges when compared to white or non-traditional students respectively. It is interesting to note that students enrolled in campus technical or certificate programs reported a more positive attitude toward community colleges ($t = 2.21; p < .05$). However, male and female students reported identical mean scores on attitudes toward community colleges resulting in a non-significant *t* score ($t = 1.03; p > .05$).

To further explore perceptions of community colleges among these four demographic variables, a series of chi squares was conducted on individual attitude items. While the responses ranged along a 5-point scale (Agree, Somewhat Agree, Undecided, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree), the findings presented in Tables 1-3 show the Agree and Somewhat Agree categories merged together with the Disagree and Neutral categories not shown. While the mean differences were significant between traditional and non-traditional age students, Table 1 illustrates the individual item percentages when comparing attitudes toward the community college. For example, compared to non-traditional students, traditional students were significantly more likely to view the community college as providing an atmosphere for intellectual growth and adequate

Table 1. Comparisons between Traditional and Non-Traditional Students and Community College Perceptions

Student Perceptions	Traditional (n = 750) % Agreeing	Non-Traditional (n = 433) % Agreeing	χ^2
Noted for quality programs	78.4	79.0	3.71
Offers challenging environment	76.2	87.4	42.92**
Offers course variety	32.5	39.3	29.93**
Better suited for remedial work	52.7	48.7	10.78*
Very student oriented	87.3	87.5	4.46
Atmosphere for intellectual growth	86.9	80.1	18.83**
Classes are a waste of time	20.7	13.4	12.92**
Have bad academic reputation	31.2	20.6	20.99**
Seen as a great value	90.7	84.7	16.07**
As good an education as anywhere	80.2	84.5	8.72
Viewed as last resort	34.9	21.8	37.41**
Can make friends easily	65.3	70.8	8.27
An enjoyable experience	82.9	89.1	11.49**
Social life isn't stimulating	35.2	23.1	28.03**
Little difference from high school	43.5	23.7	53.07**
Great pride in attending	70.2	82.6	32.48**
Good community reputation	68.3	88.2	17.62**
Can't attain educational goals	15.7	22.4	20.92**
Doesn't feel like college here	27.1	15.5	39.52**
Adequate preparation for 4-year	86.5	81.4	11.12*
Good preparation for workforce	84.3	87.7	10.37*
Would recommend to others	82.1	80.9	6.62

$p < 0.05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $df = 4$

preparation for attending a 4-year institution. However, this group was more likely to view some of their classes as a waste of time, that community colleges have a bad reputation and is probably better suited for remedial work. Almost half (43%) of the traditional students felt that community colleges were not much different from their high school experience compared to only 23% of the older non-traditional students. About one-third of traditional students held the view that students attend a community college as a last resort compared to one-fifth of non-traditional students.

On the other hand, non-traditional students were more likely to view community colleges as offering a challenging environment with a variety of courses offered. An overwhelming number (82%) of non-traditional students exhibited greater pride in attending a community college compared to 70% of traditional students. This view is supported by the fact that 88% felt community colleges enjoyed a good community reputation. For non-traditional students (89%) the community college experience was slightly more enjoyable than for traditional students (83%). It should be noted that both groups equally felt that the community college has a reputation for being very student oriented and that you can get as good of an education there as anywhere else. Also, about 80% of both groups agreed they would likely recommend a community college to others.

When continuing to assess student perceptions of community college, differences between racial groups were not as pronounced as for those classified as traditional and non-traditional students. However, there were several marked differences worth noting when comparing white and non-white students. As reported above, overall non-whites held a more favorable view of community colleges and the items reported in Table 2 provides a more comprehensive view of where those differences occurred. For example, non-white student attitudes were more positive when responding to the issue of quality programs, the fact that community colleges offer a challenging environment, and that the community college provides adequate preparation for a 4-year college. The non-white group also reported slightly more pride in attending a community college than the white students. However, there were some negative views also held by those in the non-white racial category. A substantial number (59%) of non-whites felt the community college was best suited for remedial work and a greater number of white students (84%) indicated

Table 2. Comparisons Between White and Non-White Students and Community College Perceptions

Student Perceptions	Non-White (n = 282) % Agreeing	White (n = 995) % Agreeing	χ^2
Noted for quality programs	87.3	77.4	28.66**
Offers challenging environment	84.6	81.7	15.62**
Offers course variety	26.8	38.0	15.38**
Better suited for remedial work	58.8	50.3	15.39**
Very student oriented	87.3	87.6	6.12
Atmosphere for intellectual growth	90.0	87.6	3.64
Classes are a waste of time	19.9	17.2	6.12
Have bad academic reputation	28.2	26.7	11.04*
Seen as a great value	85.6	84.0	5.03
As good an education as anywhere	84.0	81.7	16.48**
Viewed as last resort	39.1	26.6	19.09**
Can make friends easily	63.7	69.3	6.42
An enjoyable experience	83.5	86.2	1.87
Social life isn't stimulating	34.4	29.7	7.16
Little difference from high school	37.4	35.0	15.02**
Great pride in attending	79.7	73.1	17.53**
Good community reputation	84.6	90.7	11.59*
Can't attain educational goals	20.9	18.9	7.53**
Doesn't feel like college here	21.6	23.1	17.53**
Adequate preparation for 4-year college	89.3	83.0	10.98*
Good preparation for workforce	86.1	85.8	2.37
Would recommend to others	76.0	84.6	21.49**

$p < 0.05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $df = 4$

that they were more likely to recommend a community college to others than non-whites (76%). Also, more non-whites viewed the community college as a last resort. Generally, both groups were favorable toward the community college and the role it plays in preparing students for the workforce.

Although the mean scores, as a whole, on attitudes toward community colleges were comparable, it is apparent that females as a general rule hold a more favorable perception of community colleges than males (see Table 3). Although both groups felt

the community college would be an enjoyable experience where one can make friends easily, females were more likely to see community colleges as being student oriented and

Table 3. Comparisons Between Females and Males and Community College Perceptions

Student Perceptions	Females (n = 282) % Agreeing	Males (n = 995) % Agreeing	χ^2
Noted for quality programs	81.3	74.5	20.31**
Offers challenging environment	83.0	81.8	20.85**
Offers course variety	37.5	29.1	15.93**
Better suited for remedial work	51.2	56.4	16.52**
Very student oriented	89.4	85.8	10.74*
Atmosphere for intellectual growth	89.8	84.3	13.44**
Classes are a waste of time	16.3	21.2	38.09**
Have bad academic reputation	24.2	34.2	35.57**
Seen as a great value	88.3	89.5	4.30
As good an education as anywhere	84.7	75.8	27.05**
Viewed as last resort	28.6	32.9	22.43**
Can make friends easily	68.7	65.4	9.71
An enjoyable experience	85.9	82.0	7.42
Social life isn't stimulating	28.8	34.0	13.62**
Little difference from high school	33.5	40.8	10.57*
Great pride in attending	77.5	67.5	22.02**
Good community reputation	90.5	85.0	30.61**
Can't attain educational goals	18.3	21.3	28.64**
Doesn't feel like college here	20.7	27.4	45.58**
Adequate preparation for 4-year college	87.9	84.5	19.07**
Good preparation for workforce	87.7	80.7	24.42**
Would recommend to others	82.9	78.6	11.29*

$p < 0.05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $df = 4$

offering more course variety. While both genders felt that the community college offers an atmosphere for intellectual growth, females (89%) were slightly more likely to feel that way than males (84%). Females were also more likely to view the community college as providing adequate preparation for the workforce and would be more likely to recommend a community college to other prospective students than males. In addition,

females were more likely to think that community colleges were noted for their quality programs and an opportunity to get as good an education as anywhere else. As a result, females (77%) reported a greater pride in attending a community college than males (67%). Males were more likely to agree with items measuring negative perceptions of community colleges such as being best suited for remedial work, classes being a waste of time, viewing it as a last resort and little difference from high school.

Other variables with a statistically significant effect on students' attitudes toward community college was marital status, parental status, current educational goal as being a student seeking an associate's degree or planning to transfer, choosing the community college in need of a flexible schedule, and the campus that a student attends. When comparing mean scores between married (76), divorced (77) and single (79) students using a one-way analysis of variance, the results indicated a significant results ($F = 3.81$; $df = 2$; $p < .02$). Although single students tended to have a more positive view of community colleges, they were more likely to view the community college as not having a very stimulating environment and similar to a high school than married students. Students who did not have children also reported a slightly more favorable attitude toward the community college ($t = 2.31$; $p < .05$).

Finally, students who are attending a community college to obtain an associate's degree, either academic or technical, or attending a certificate program but do not plan to transfer have a more positive attitude about community college in general than those students who do plan to transfer ($t = 2.21$; $p < .05$). An ANOVA confirmed the distinct difference between transfer and non-transfer students when comparing students across the six campuses ($F = 5.96$; $df = 6$; $p < .01$). The students at the East Broad campus reported

the highest favorable mean score of 83. This particular campus is an entirely technical campus. The students reporting the lowest mean score of 77 are from the Wallace Drive campus of the institution. This campus is the largest campus and is primarily an academic campus with a large proportion of transfer students.

Student Satisfaction with Gadsden State

The findings of this study indicate that, as a rule, students who attend the Gadsden State Community College have a very favorable view of the institution and are generally satisfied with their college experience. The majority (73%) rated Gadsden State as their first college choice with 19% rating this community college as second on their list. When asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the institution, 74% indicated they were satisfied, 17% somewhat satisfied, and 6% fairly satisfied. Moreover, when asked, “Are you more or less satisfied with your experience at Gadsden State than you thought you would be, 44% responded they were much more satisfied? Another 24% indicated they were somewhat satisfied and 27% felt it was about what they expected.

For the majority of the individual items in the Noel-Levitz inventory, in the neighborhood of two-thirds to four-fifths of the respondents tended to be satisfied or somewhat satisfied with all aspects of their community college experience. Students were more likely to express dissatisfaction or at least being neutral about whether the residence halls are adequate. About one-half of the students indicated they were dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with available parking space and well over half (57%) were dissatisfied or neutral with the food services in the cafeteria. As expected, students who held a more favorable view of community colleges in general were more likely to express satisfaction with the community college experience ($r = .31; p < .01$).

Demographic Variables. Overall, age, gender, race, and educational goals all have a significant impact on a students' level of satisfaction. The findings in Table 4 indicate that females were somewhat more satisfied with their experiences at Gadsden State compared to their male counterparts ($t = 3.54$; $p < .001$). When conducting a series of individual t -tests on the various sub-scales measuring community college satisfaction, females reported a significantly higher level of satisfaction for all sub-categories with the exception of academic advising where there were no gender differences in mean scores.

Table 4: Independent Samples t -test Results on Gender

	Female		Male		t value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total Satisfaction Scale	232.88	31.496	224.41	33.009	3.544***
Academic and Learning Resources	26.51	4.167	25.60	4.559	2.990**
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness	36.55	5.239	35.77	5.094	2.087*
Academic Advising and Counseling	34.68	7.106	33.95	6.989	1.461
Safety and Security	17.52	3.191	16.52	3.429	4.327***
Admission and Registration	17.99	3.084	17.13	3.319	3.884***
Financial Aid	13.06	2.870	12.45	2.945	2.992**
Student Centeredness	31.42	5.183	30.40	5.402	2.753**
Campus Climate	29.48	5.086	28.49	5.050	2.733**
Campus and Facilities	25.22	4.859	24.47	4.706	2.176*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Likewise, Table 5 also presents an overall significant difference in satisfaction between the two racial groups ($t = 2.37$; $p < .05$). In particular, non-whites were more likely to view the services associated with admission and registration and financial aid more favorably than white students. This is consistent with other research as non-white students are more likely to hail from lower socio-economic backgrounds and will most

likely receive more financial aid. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to qualify for financial aid resulting in less satisfaction with that institutional attribute, especially if the student's income is just above the financial aid cutoff making it difficult to finance his or her education out of pocket. However, for the majority of the sub-scales, there were no significant differences in satisfaction for the two groups.

Table 5. Independent Samples *t*-test Results Between Racial Categories

	Non-White		White		<i>t</i> value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total Satisfaction Scale	234.76	29.095	228.95	33.224	2.377*
Academic and Learning Resources	26.54	3.935	26.16	4.439	1.225
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness	36.59	4.961	36.20	5.371	1.036
Academic Advising and Counseling	34.95	7.034	34.25	7.155	1.392
Safety and Security	17.41	3.174	17.23	3.326	0.777
Admission and Registration	18.15	3.016	17.58	3.246	2.528*
Financial Aid	13.41	2.672	12.70	2.977	3.517***
Student Centeredness	31.12	5.487	31.10	5.272	0.042
Campus Climate	29.91	4.967	29.00	5.067	2.549*
Campus and Facilities	25.36	4.974	24.88	4.776	1.415

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In viewing the mean scores for the satisfaction scale shown in Table 6, it is apparent that those students participating in technical or certificate terminal tracks were considerably more satisfied with all aspects of their community college experience ($t = 5.17$; $p < .001$) when compared to students who planned to transfer to a four-year college or university. In viewing the findings it appears that students in the terminal tracks were much more content with the campus climate than transfer students. With the lone exception of non-traditional students appearing a bit more satisfied with services related

to financial aid, age was not a factor influencing perceived satisfaction with Gadsden State. When asked, “Are you more or less satisfied with your experience at Gadsden State than you thought you would be?” one-half of the non-transfer students indicated they were much more satisfied than expected with their community college experience compared to only one-third of transfer students, which was a significant finding ($\chi^2 = 38.45$, $df = 16$; $< .001$).

Table 6: Independent Samples *t*-test Results on Educational Goal

	A.S., Tech., or Certificate		Transfer		<i>t</i> value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total Satisfaction Scale	235.69	31.458	223.90	32.959	5.177***
Academic and Learning Resources	27.00	3.994	25.37	4.446	5.746***
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness	36.62	5.523	35.89	5.172	2.026*
Academic Advising and Counseling	35.44	6.734	33.30	7.532	4.471***
Safety and Security	17.73	3.056	16.63	3.475	5.075***
Admission and Registration	18.09	3.031	17.28	3.297	3.825***
Financial Aid	13.27	2.792	12.34	3.087	4.736***
Student Centeredness	31.77	5.085	30.40	5.567	3.845***
Campus Climate	29.87	4.990	25.19	5.306	4.854***
Campus and Facilities	25.65	4.615	24.06	5.014	4.921***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Although age tended to be an influencing factor regarding student perceptions of community colleges, with the exception of non-traditional students being more favorable toward financial aid, surprisingly there were no real differences between the two age groups. The lack of significant results does reveal, however, that other variables are more likely to play a key role in determining student satisfaction other than age. Table 7 provides a summary of the mean differences.

Table 7. Independent Samples *t*-test Results on Age

	Non-Traditional		Traditional		<i>t</i> value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total Satisfaction Scale	229.20	32.480	230.00	32.992	-0.352
Academic and Learning Resources	25.96	4.253	26.30	4.440	-1.176
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness	36.21	5.678	36.26	5.022	-0.131
Academic Advising and Counseling	34.07	6.971	34.47	7.318	-0.854
Safety and Security	17.17	3.317	17.26	3.290	-0.428
Admission and Registration	17.63	3.334	17.71	3.166	-0.353
Financial Aid	13.16	2.609	12.69	3.095	2.478*
Student Centeredness	30.86	5.564	31.10	5.265	-0.696
Campus Climate	29.13	4.665	29.09	5.448	0.111
Campus and Facilities	25.31	4.809	24.70	4.925	1.913

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Parental Influence. As the findings reveal in Table 8, parental influence appears to have an important influence on satisfaction in several different ways. Most directly, parents that influenced the decision for their children choosing Gadsden State appear to have a significant impact on their children's level of satisfaction with the institution. For example, students responding "yes" to the item, "My parents made me go here," were found to be significantly less satisfied ($t = 3.63$; $p < .001$) with their overall community college experience. In comparing the sub-scales, areas of particular significance with regard to dissatisfaction are financial aid, campus climate, campus and facilities, student centeredness, and safety and security. In all of these, the means comparisons show that students whose parents forced them to attend this institution were significantly less satisfied.

Table 8. Independent Samples *t*-test Results on Parents Requiring Attendance

	No		Yes		<i>t</i> value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total Satisfaction Scale	78.43	31.90	79.80	38.98	3.631***
Academic and Learning Resources	26.31	4.30	25.16	5.03	2.124*
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness	36.30	5.22	35.22	6.28	1.638
Academic Advising and Counseling	34.58	7.03	32.34	8.27	2.547*
Safety and Security	17.36	3.25	16.14	3.42	3.022**
Admission and Registration	17.76	3.16	17.24	3.49	1.307
Financial Aid	13.05	2.81	11.31	3.54	4.924***
Student Centeredness	31.16	5.24	29.32	6.35	2.795**
Campus Climate	29.31	5.02	26.65	6.57	4.067***
Campus and Facilities	25.14	4.80	23.20	5.02	3.228**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

More indirectly, parental influence with regard to his or her level of education has a significant impact on a student's level of satisfaction. It appears that the parents' level of education has more significant impact on the student's satisfaction levels. The results of an ANOVA revealed that the higher the level of the father's education ($F = 3.41$; $df = 7$; $p < .001$) and mother's education ($F = 2.58$; $df = 7$; $p < .01$) the more likely students were to be dissatisfied with their choice of attending a community college. This is an indication that students who have parents who have earned degrees beyond the two-year level are less satisfied with the community college experience than students whose parents have a two-year degree or lower. Likewise, family income was also linked to level of satisfaction with Gadsden State as higher incomes were associated with less satisfaction ($F = 2.62$; $df = 5$; $p < .02$).

Institutional Choice. Students completing the survey indicated they chose community college for a variety of reasons. Although the convenience (61%) of being

close to home was the most frequently checked item, two common reasons given were that community colleges are less expensive (50%) and they are also more likely to provide flexible class scheduling (22%). Ultimately, choosing a community college for these reasons has a significant impact on a student's level satisfaction (see Table 9).

Table 9. Independent Samples *t*-test Results for Students Choosing Community College for Flexible Scheduling

	No		Yes		<i>t</i> value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total Satisfaction Scale	228.97	33.87	234.41	27.56	-2.245*
Academic and Learning Resources	26.27	4.40	26.13	4.24	.452
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness	36.11	5.42	36.66	4.84	-1.484
Academic Advising and Counseling	34.29	7.32	34.92	6.46	-1.263
Safety and Security	17.23	3.30	17.44	3.17	-0.895
Admission and Registration	17.65	3.26	17.97	2.92	-1.470
Financial Aid	12.86	2.96	13.22	2.62	-1.797
Student Centeredness	30.92	5.49	31.47	4.75	-1.483
Campus Climate	29.00	5.35	29.64	4.49	-1.753
Campus and Facilities	24.85	4.90	25.53	4.60	-1.972*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Mean comparisons for students who indicated they are attending community college because they needed a more flexible schedule also resulted in significant findings ($t = 2.24$; $p < .05$) with students who chose Gadsden State for the flexibility it provided in scheduling courses reporting higher satisfaction levels. Surprisingly, the means for students who indicated they chose the college for cost reasons were significantly lower (227) than students who did not (233) when statistically analyzed ($t = 2.93$; $p < .01$). For all sub-scales, means were lower for students who chose community college because it

was less expensive as one of their reasons for attendance with a majority being significant. These results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Independent Samples t-test Results for Students Choosing Community College for Less Cost.

	No		Yes		t value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total Satisfaction Scale	233.18	32.50	227.14	32.37	2.932**
Academic and Learning Resources	26.43	4.21	26.03	4.50	1.553
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness	36.32	5.39	36.15	5.19	.529
Academic Advising and Counseling	34.87	7.05	33.97	7.19	2.090*
Safety and Security	17.56	3.16	16.98	3.37	2.948**
Admission and Registration	17.97	3.06	17.46	3.30	2.664**
Financial Aid	13.38	2.65	12.47	3.06	5.374***
Student Centeredness	31.24	5.37	30.85	5.29	1.203
Campus Climate	29.69	4.96	28.57	5.32	3.621***
Campus and Facilities	25.47	4.82	24.52	4.81	3.256**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Time/Method of Attendance. On the survey, students were asked, “What time of day do you usually schedule your classes?” The response choices included 1 = mostly day (morning until 3:00pm), 2 = mostly evening (after 3:00 pm), and 3 = mostly distance learning. A one way ANOVA revealed significantly less satisfaction levels among students who indicated that they were “mostly distance learning” on the total satisfaction scale ($F = 8.63$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$). The mean scores of the three groups on the total satisfaction scale were as follows: day students (229.91), evening students (236.55), and distance learning (217.79). Some of the subscales that contributed to the significantly lower satisfaction among distance learning students were faculty qualifications and instructional effectiveness ($F = 9.062$; $df = 2$; $p < .001$) academic advising and

counseling ($F(2, 1011) = 6.791, p < .001$) and student centeredness ($F(2, 1019) = 9.414, p = .000$.) The difference in mean scores between day and evening students was not as dramatic. Overall, evening students reported the highest level of satisfaction for the three groups of students.

DISCUSSION

The positive views of community colleges presented in this exploratory study supports recent research that there appears to be less stigma associated with community colleges in today's world (Belden et al., 2008; Coutts & Utter, 2008; Handel, 2008). Every community college across the United States may have similar characteristics, but each one is unique in certain areas. It has been pointed out that the quality of instruction, available resources, and services provided may vary greatly from school to school (Handel, 2008). The demographics of the student body, geographic location, types of programs offered, and size, among other things, will all have an effect on how students in the community perceive the institution and will also have an impact on student satisfaction.

The findings presented here indicate that students at this institution were overwhelmingly satisfied with their experience. This finding is consistent with other research measuring student satisfaction (Noel-Levitz, 2008). Unlike previous research which has focused on identifying any gaps between student expectation and perceived reality (Noel-Levitz, 2006; Juillerant & Scheriner, 2004) or linking student satisfaction to retention (Crowson, 2004; French-Graybeal, 2007; Tinto, 2006), this research examined more comprehensively the significant differences in satisfaction along a number of social indicators and student classifications. It is understood that "student satisfaction" is a

subjective and complex concept; however, significant differences were found among students based on race, gender, employment status, income, parental influence, reasons for choosing the institution, time/format they attend class, and the campus that they attend. While acknowledging that many of these significant findings hinged on slim differences between “neutral,” “somewhat agree,” or “agree,” the results nonetheless make a valuable contribution to student satisfaction literature.

While there is still the view that community colleges are close, easy, and cheap (Handel, 2008), the majority of the public appears to view the returns on a community college education as substantial (Marcotte et al., 2005). The availability of higher education is critical for our country to remain competitive in the global economy. With a stagnate economy, many individuals are being encouraged to find new avenues for becoming more competitive in today’s job market (Sheldon, 2003). As a result, those students whose educational goal is gaining a terminal associates degree or technical skill were found to hold the community college in greater esteem than those students who viewed themselves as simply transitioning to a four-year institution. Non-white students also held a slightly more positive attitude toward community colleges than white students as well as being more satisfied with their community college experience

Noel-Levitz reports that African-American students have the highest level of expectations of an institution compared to all other ethnic groups (Noel-Levitz, 2000). Ultimately, this finding could be an indication that minority students at Gadsden State Community College feel that their institutional expectations are being met, thus improving their attitudes toward community college. Other possible explanations could be that because minority students are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds, they have a positive attitude about the community college's commitment to lower costs for students. Also, because minority students place a higher importance on diversity, these students may perceive the community colleges as having a strong commitment to diverse populations. Finally, one of the campuses of this institution has a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) status. This fact being well known in the community, and marketed by the institution itself to reach out to minorities, could have potentially had an impact on the minority students' general attitudes toward Gadsden State.

In an examination of the students attitudes by age, one explanation of the significantly more negative attitudes may lie in the fact that non-traditional students are less likely to be familiar with a college atmosphere (Rendón, 1995). Non-traditional students are less likely to be academically prepared for college (Chaves, 2006), which can be somewhat discouraging. Also, most colleges have more programs and campus activities that are geared toward traditional college students (Kasworm, 2005). Finally, research shows that a non-traditional student's real-life experience can have an adverse effect on their college experience. In other words, families who are less supportive of a student's decision to go back to school could potentially harm that student's attitude toward the institution (Donaldson, 1999). Of course, it was expected that non-traditional students would have a more positive attitude than traditional aged students. This is because non-traditional aged students are usually goal oriented in looking for an experience that will more adequately prepare them for the workforce (Strange, 2008). Also, because non-traditional students are less likely to transfer (Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006), they could potentially be seeking a technical degree or certificate that will give

them immediate job force training. Finally, because many non-traditional students have family expectations, they need the flexible scheduling and cost effectiveness that community colleges offer.

In comparing students by gender, women were significantly more satisfied than men. This was not only true for the total satisfaction scale, but it was also true for each of the institutional attributes except for academic advising and counseling. While there are a countless number of replications using the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory, the literature is virtually void in comparing gender differences. Thus, few explanations exist as to why women appear to be more satisfied. One suggestion might lie in the emotional state of women students as they experience an empowered feeling generated by being in an institution of higher learning. For example, Bean and Bradley (1986) defined student satisfaction as “a pleasurable emotional state resulting from a person’s enactment of the role of being a student” (p. 398). In this sense, perhaps women tend to embrace the “student role” more comprehensively than their male counterparts. With increasing numbers of both traditional and non-traditional women attending college, more research is needed to determine whether this finding can be generalized.

The educational goal of students had a particularly significant effect on students’ level of satisfaction in all of the subscales. Students who indicated that were only pursuing an associate’s degree or certificate program were more satisfied than students who indicated that they were going to continue their education at a four-year institution. An explanation may lie in the fact that, according to research, students who are seeking a technical education perceived themselves as having more marketability in the workforce, and hence, highly satisfied with this positive outcome (Barabasch, 2006). Perhaps these

students see the community college as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. On the other hand, transfer students may see the community college as nothing more than an educational “waiting room” of sorts in which they are just taking general education courses with their eyes set on a four-year institution.

Another explanation may lie in the fact that there is largely a separation between technical (which includes many seeking only an associates/certificate program) and academic transfer students (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001). This separation means that the students are exposed to different faculty members, different facilities, different technologies, and often times different campuses. These additional differences could have an effect on students’ satisfaction with the institution. Additional research should be conducted for the purpose of exploring why transfer students are less satisfied than students who are only seeking a two-year degree or certificate. Of course, as Noel-Levitz (2006) defined student satisfaction, it appears that non-transfer student expectations are more likely met or exceeded than transfer students and perhaps these differences should just be expected.

Research shows that parents have a profound influence over their children’s choices of college and stay very involved throughout the pursuit of higher education (Bers, 2005; Handel, 2008). This influence could certainly have an impact on the student’s attitudes and satisfaction toward the institution in which they are attending. In this particular study, parents who forced their children to attend the community college, likely because it is less expensive, created students who were significantly less satisfied than students who indicated they were attending the college for another reason. This is understandable especially if students did not actually make this choice themselves.

However, another possibility is that a number of students attending community college are considered “reverse transfer” students. These are students who began their higher education at a university and for whatever reason have returned home and are now attending a community college. Oftentimes, parents are the ones who encourage the students to return from the university because of either financial or academic difficulties. However, it is possible that the students themselves simply may feel trapped and are dissatisfied with their personal life, possibly hindering any objectivity in assessing their community college experience.

CONCLUSION

One obvious limitation to satisfaction research in colleges is that it tends to be more positive than anticipated (Noel-Levitz, 2008). One reason for this is that if students are pleased with a particular service they are receiving, they may give the overall institution or academic program positive ratings in all areas. For example, if a student is pleased with the instruction or the grades received, he or she is potentially less likely to give the facilities a drastically lower rating of satisfaction if they are actually dissatisfied with this institutional attribute (Royse et al. 2006). Even with the limitations of satisfaction research, it is still a useful tool that colleges can implement in evaluating the needs of their students. Colleges and universities need to know if their students are satisfied with the institution. Colleges with higher satisfaction levels have better retention and graduation rates. This will improve the image of the institution in the eyes of prospective students.

However, even though the use of satisfaction research is a useful source of information, colleges should use it in combination with other forms of institutional

research for the most effectiveness (Royse et al., 2006). Alfred et al. (2007) calls student satisfaction a core indicator of institutional effectiveness. Bryant (2006) reports that satisfaction research can be used in multiple ways to benefit the institution. Colleges can use the research to identify problems within the institution and for future planning to address and prioritize needs. The research can also be used to identify strengths and weaknesses with public relation efforts and recruitment tactics. Satisfaction research is useful for addressing accreditation requirements as well. In order for satisfaction research to be most effective, it must be done on a systematic basis. This will allow the institution to observe changes in students' satisfaction and successes over a longitudinal period.

It appears that based on the positive nature of student perceptions of the community college and the fact that nearly one-half of all postsecondary students are enrolled in two-year institutions, this particular educational environment will play an even greater role in the coming decades. Commonly noted as an American invention, the community college, with the help of a stagnant economy and rising gas prices, is playing an ever increasing role in local communities across America (Marcotte et al., 2005). Program offerings have continued to expand at the community college level as institutional missions and community needs have changed. The community college, in recent years, has played an ever increasing role in expanding nursing and other health provider programs, criminal justice programs, and computer technology programs to mention a few. Today, contemporary community colleges focus not only on teaching excellence but also provide both transfer education, career programs, remedial education, economic development within the community, and lifelong learning opportunities and continuing education. By educating 46% of all African-American undergraduate

students, 55% of Native-American students, and 55% of Hispanic students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2010), the community college's role in higher education will only become greater as the nation becomes more diverse in the coming decades.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	%
Age	
Traditional	63.4
Non-Traditional	36.6
Gender	
Female	72.4
Male	27.6
Race	
White	71.5
Non-White/Minority	28.5
Student Type	
Academic/Allied Health	71.0
Technical/Vocational	8.0
Unsure	21.0
Educational Goal	
Associates/Technical/Certificate	46.7
Transfer	41.1
Undecided	8.9
Other Reasons	2.2
Marital Status	
Single	69.8
Married	21.3
Divorced	8.9
Children	
No	61.2
Yes	38.8
Employment Status	
Unemployed	42.4
Part-Time	34.6
Full-Time	23.0
Income	
\$19,999 or Below	49.4
\$20,000 - \$39,999	24.1
\$40,000 - \$59,999	11.7
\$60,000 - \$79,999	6.9
\$80,000 - \$99,999	3.6
\$100,000 or above	4.4

Father's Highest Level of Education

12 th Grade or Below	19.7
High School Diploma/GED	37.2
Some College	20.5
Associate's Degree	9.0
Bachelor's Degree	9.6
Master's Degree	2.6
Doctoral Degree or Equivalent	1.4

Mother's Highest Level of Education

12 th Grade or Below	12.5
High School Diploma/GED	35.4
Some College	22.3
Associate's Degree	12.3
Bachelor's Degree	10.5
Master's Degree	6.1
Doctoral Degree or Equivalent	0.8

Most Frequent Schedule

Mostly Day	77.2
Mostly Evening	14.1
Mostly Distance Learning	8.7

Campus

Wallace Drive	37.5
East Broad	3.5
Ayres	13.3
Valley Street	19.7
Cherokee County	0.8
Attends Multiple Campuses	13.5

APPENDIX B

ATTITUDES/ SATISFACTION AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Attitudes Toward the Community College Experience

With regard to your attitude about community colleges in general, indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral/No Opinion	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
1. Community colleges are generally noted for their quality programs.	5	4	3	2	1
2. Community colleges provide a challenging academic environment.	5	4	3	2	1
3. Due to limited resources, community colleges don't offer a wide variety of classes.	5	4	3	2	1
4. Community colleges are better suited for students who need remedial work.	5	4	3	2	1
5. The community college is very student oriented.	5	4	3	2	1
6. The community college environment provides an atmosphere for intellectual growth.	5	4	3	2	1
7. Many of the classes offered at community colleges are a waste of time.	5	4	3	2	1
8. Community colleges don't have a very good academic reputation.	5	4	3	2	1
9. The community college is a great value for what you get in return.	5	4	3	2	1
10. You can get as good of an education at a community college as anywhere.	5	4	3	2	1
11. Most people probably attend a community college as a last resort.	5	4	3	2	1
12. It is not easy to make friends at a community college.	5	4	3	2	1
13. I would recommend that high school students consider going to a community college after graduation.	5	4	3	2	1
14. It is an enjoyable experience to be a student at a community college.	5	4	3	2	1
15. Social life at a community college isn't very stimulating.	5	4	3	2	1
16. A community college isn't all that different from high school.	5	4	3	2	1
17. I take a lot of pride in the fact that I am attending a	5	4	3	2	1

community college.					
18. This institution has a good reputation within the community.	5	4	3	2	1
19. A community college is not the ideal place to attain your educational goals.	5	4	3	2	1
20. A community college does not feel like a college at all	5	4	3	2	1
21. Community college is adequately preparing me for a four-year institution.	5	4	3	2	1
22. After completing my coursework at a community college, I will be better prepared for the workforce.	5	4	3	2	1

Satisfaction With the Community College Experience

Rate your level of satisfaction with regard to the following statements:

	Satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Neutral/No Opinion	Somewhat dissatisfied	Dissatisfied
Academic/Learning Resources					
1. Library resources and services are adequate.	5	4	3	2	1
2. There are a sufficient number of study areas on campus.	5	4	3	2	1
3. Library staff are helpful and approachable.	5	4	3	2	1
4. The equipment in the lab facilities is kept up to date.	5	4	3	2	1
5. Tutoring services are readily available.	5	4	3	2	1
6. The technology/equipment that I use for my program is adequate.	5	4	3	2	1
Faculty Qualifications and Instructional Effectiveness					
7. The quality of instruction is excellent.	5	4	3	2	1
8. Faculty are understanding of students' unique life circumstances.	5	4	3	2	1
9. Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	5	4	3	2	1
10. Nearly all classes deal with practical experiences and applications.	5	4	3	2	1
11. My instructor uses some technology in the delivery of content.	5	4	3	2	1
12. My instructor is prepared for class each day.	5	4	3	2	1
13. The faculty appears to be knowledgeable in their subject fields.	5	4	3	2	1
14. My instructors challenge my academic abilities.	5	4	3	2	1
Academic Advising/Counseling					

15. My academic advisor is approachable.	5	4	3	2	1
16. I feel like my academic advisor cares about my future.	5	4	3	2	1
17. My academic advisor helps me set goals to work toward.	5	4	3	2	1
18. There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	5	4	3	2	1
19. The counseling staff care about students as individuals.	5	4	3	2	1
20. My academic advisor is knowledgeable about the transfer requirements of other schools.	5	4	3	2	1
21. New student orientation services help students adjust to college.	5	4	3	2	1
22. Program requirements are clear and reasonable.	5	4	3	2	1
Safety & Security					
23. The security staff is helpful.	5	4	3	2	1
24. The security staff is friendly.	5	4	3	2	1
25. Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	5	4	3	2	1
26. The security staff are professional in demeanor and appearance.	5	4	3	2	1
Admissions and Registration					
27. Classes are scheduled at times that are convenient for me.	5	4	3	2	1
28. I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	5	4	3	2	1
29. The admissions staff are knowledgeable.	5	4	3	2	1
30. There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	5	4	3	2	1
Financial Aid					
31. Adequate financial is available for most students.	5	4	3	2	1
32. Financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	5	4	3	2	1
33. Financial aid counselors are helpful.	5	4	3	2	1
Student Centeredness					
34. I feel like I belong here.	5	4	3	2	1
35. Faculty care about me as an individual.	5	4	3	2	1
36. The college shows concern for students as individuals.	5	4	3	2	1
37. Faculty are interested in my academic problems.	5	4	3	2	1
38. Administrators are approachable to students.	5	4	3	2	1
39. Faculty are approachable to students.	5	4	3	2	1
40. Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	5	4	3	2	1
Campus Climate					
41. People on this campus respect and are supportive of each other.	5	4	3	2	1
42. Bookstore staff are helpful.	5	4	3	2	1
43. There are opportunities for students to get involved on campus.	5	4	3	2	1
44. There are activities for students to participate on this campus.	5	4	3	2	1

45. Overall, the people I encounter on this campus are friendly.	5	4	3	2	1
46. The cafeteria is adequate.	5	4	3	2	1
47. The residence hall is adequate.	5	4	3	2	1
Campus and Facilities					
48. Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.	5	4	3	2	1
49. The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.	5	4	3	2	1
50. On the whole, the campus and facilities are well-maintained.	5	4	3	2	1
51. The academic facilities are adequate for the program that I am pursuing.	5	4	3	2	1
52. This campus's facilities are clean.	5	4	3	2	1
53. The campus grounds are well kept.	5	4	3	2	1
54. Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.	5	4	3	2	1
55. The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.	5	4	3	2	1
56. On the whole, the campus and facilities are well-maintained.	5	4	3	2	1
57. The academic facilities are adequate for the program that I am pursuing.	5	4	3	2	1
58. This campus's facilities are clean.	5	4	3	2	1
59. The campus grounds are well kept.	5	4	3	2	1
Institutional Commitment – rate your institution's commitment to the following groups of students:					
60. Part-time students?	5	4	3	2	1
61. Full-time students?	5	4	3	2	1
62. Evening students?	5	4	3	2	1
63. Day students	5	4	3	2	1
64. Older, returning learners?	5	4	3	2	1
65. Young, traditional aged learners?	5	4	3	2	1
66. Under-represented populations?	5	4	3	2	1
67. Students with disabilities?	5	4	3	2	1
Overall Satisfaction					
68. Overall, how would you rate your level of satisfaction with the institution you are attending?	5	4	3	2	1
General Questions					
	Much more	Somewhat more	About what I expected	Somewhat less	Much less
Are you more or less satisfied with the community college than you thought you would be prior to attending this institution?	5	4	3	2	1
Why did you choose this institution? (Open-ended): Please write your answer below. If you need more space, you may use the back of this form.					

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to each of the items below. If you have a question, please ask the administrator of this survey.

1. How old were you on your last birthday? _____ Years.
2. Gender? _____ 1. Male _____ 2. Female _____ 3. No Answer
3. This institution was my _____ 1. 1st Choice _____ 2. 2nd Choice _____ 2. 3rd Choice or lower
 - If this institution was NOT your first choice, please indicate what it was?

4. I actually began my college education at a four-year school but have had to transfer to a community college because;
 - _____ 1. Does Not Apply to Me
 - _____ 2. University was too expensive.
 - _____ 3. I wanted to be closer to home.
 - _____ 4. I did not perform well academically at the university.
 - _____ 5. I received an academic, technical, or athletic scholarship to transfer.
 - _____ 6. My major is undecided and I did not see a need in attending a university until I knew for sure.
 - _____ 7. Other; please indicate: _____
 - _____ 8. Prefer not to respond.
5. Current Enrollment Status?
 - _____ 1. Full-Time (12 or more hours)
 - _____ 2. Part-Time (Less than 12 hours)
6. Current Time of Attendance?
 - _____ 1. Mostly Day (Most of your classes take place before 3:00pm)
 - _____ 2. Mostly Evening (Most of your classes take place after 3:00pm)
 - _____ 3. Mostly Distance Learning (Most of your hours are taken in an Internet format)
7. Class Level: How many semesters (not including summer) have you attended this college? _____
(Write "1" if this is your first)
8. What is your current educational goal? (*Mark all that apply*)
 - _____ 1. Associate Degree
 - _____ 2. Vocational/Technical Program
 - _____ 3. Transfer to another institution
 - _____ 4. Certification (initial/renewal)
 - _____ 5. Self-Improvement/Pleasure
 - _____ 6. Job Related Training
 - _____ 7. Other Educational Goal
 - _____ 8. Undecided
9. What is your current major? (If you're undecided, please write undecided)

10. ONLY ANSWER IF YOU ANSWERED UNDECIDED FOR NUMBER 10. If you're undecided, do you take more classes in the academic division or technical division?

- _____ 1. Academic/Allied Health
- _____ 2. Technical/Vocational
- _____ 3. Unsure

11. Marital Status? _____ 1. Single _____ 2. Married _____ 3. Divorced _____ 4. No Answer

12. Employed? _____ 1. Unemployed _____ 2. Part-Time _____ 3. Full-Time
 ➤ Are you employed _____ 1. On-Campus _____ 2. Off- Campus

13. Number of Children? _____ (Write "0" if you do not have children)

14. Approximate Household Income?

- _____ 1. \$19,999 or below per year
- _____ 2. \$20,000 – \$39,999 per year
- _____ 3. \$40,000 – \$59,999 per year
- _____ 4. \$60,000 – \$79,999 per year
- _____ 5. \$80,000 – \$99,999 per year
- _____ 6. \$100,000 or above per year
- _____ 7. No Answer

15. Please indicate your parents' highest level of education? (Father)

- _____ 1. Below 8th Grade
- _____ 2. 9th – 11th Grade
- _____ 3. High School Diploma/GED
- _____ 4. Some College
- _____ 5. Associates Degree
- _____ 6. Bachelor's Degree
- _____ 7. Master's Degree
- _____ 8. Ph.D., Ed.D., J.D., Pharm.D, or other doctoral equivalent or higher
- _____ 9. No Answer

16. Please indicate your parents' highest level of education? (Mother)

- _____ 1. Below 8th Grade
- _____ 2. 9th – 11th Grade
- _____ 3. High School Diploma/GED
- _____ 4. Some College
- _____ 5. Associates Degree
- _____ 6. Bachelor's Degree
- _____ 7. Master's Degree
- _____ 8. Ph.D., Ed.D., J.D., Pharm.D, or other doctoral equivalent or higher
- _____ 9. No Answer

17. Race/Ethnicity?

- _____ 2. African-American/Black
- _____ 3. Asian or Pacific Islander
- _____ 1. Caucasian/White
- _____ 4. Hispanic
- _____ 5. Native American or Alaskan Native
- _____ 6. Other Race
- _____ 7. Race – Prefer not to respond.

APPENDIX C

January 7, 2010

Dr. W. Darryl Harrison, President
Gadsden State Community College
P.O. Box 227, Gadsden, AL 35902-0227

Dear Dr. Harrison,

This letter confirms our recent meetings about my research. I am completing my masters' thesis at Middle Tennessee State University entitled "Expectations and Satisfaction of Community College Students." I would like to request your permission to solicit the participation of students at Gadsden State Community College in a survey that will be housed in an electronic format. The survey will be anonymous and is intended to measure the expectations they have of the community college and their overall satisfaction now that they are in attendance. Also, I would like to request your permission to provide a link so that students may be able to access the survey via Gadsden State's website or to send out an e-mail to our students providing the link.

Participation in this study only requires the students' participation in the electronic survey. If, in the event that participation in the online survey is poor, there is a traditional survey on paper (that I have attached with this letter) that could be administered in selected classes on our campuses with the individual instructors' permissions. Again, the students will not provide any personal information when participating in the survey keeping their identity confidential.

Finally, it is my intention to give my research findings and the final thesis document to Gadsden State so that it may be utilized by our office of Institutional Effectiveness or any other campus office that may find the research useful.

If these arrangements meet your approval, please sign this letter as indicated below and return it to me though hand-mail.

Sincerely,

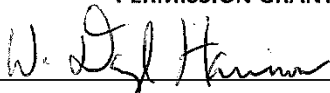
Derrick Griffey

Sociology and History Instructor, Gadsden State Community College

Graduate Student, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Middle Tennessee State University

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE

Signature: _____



Dr. W. Darryl Harrison

President

Gadsden State Community College, Gadsden, AL

