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## What Does The Staff Say?: Front-Line Staff Perceptions of Their Role in Student Success

Lee A. Helbert  
lee.helbert1019@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

### WHAT DOES THE STAFF SAY? FRONT-LINE STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN STUDENT SUCCESS

Lee A. Helbert, Ed.D.  
Department of Counseling and Higher Education  
Northern Illinois University, 2021  
Kathryn Jaekel, Director

This study focused on exploring the perceptions of front-line staff in supporting student success at a midwestern community college. These staff are generally the employees who are not usually involved with teaching or administration, but work in offices like the business, financial aid, and enrollment services or are administrative assistants to the different departments. Nine persons participated in individual interviews and/or a focus group discussion. These front-line staff shared their stories that related to how they saw themselves contributing to student success, what they saw as the challenges and benefits of supporting students, and what professional opportunities were provided by the institution to help them with supporting student success. Findings from this study show that these front-line staff believe that they play an important role in student success, from listening to student problems to helping them achieve their goals. Interdepartmental communication and communication between administration and staff were seen as issues that impeded student success. The findings and conclusions drawn from this study will expand the literature about this under-researched group of college employees and will help colleges train, hire, and support their front-line staff members.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

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“WHAT DOES THE STAFF SAY? FRONT-LINE SUPPORT STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF  
THEIR ROLE IN STUDENT SUCCESS

BY

LEE A. HELBERT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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Doctoral Director:  
Kathryn Jaekel, Ph.D.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Barry L. Helbert. He wanted me to finish my first doctoral program so badly, and I regret that he is not here to see me finish this one. This is for you, Dad. I finally did it.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Community colleges, which were designed to be open-access institutions, allow for a diverse student population of varying age, race/ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status to attend an institution of higher learning (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Although the overall enrollment numbers have been declining over the past ten years, the enrollment continues to become more diverse (Wyner, 2014). For example, in 2001-02, 41% of the student population identified as non-White. In 2016-17, that number had increased to 52% (IES/NCES data, 2019).

In order to serve these increasing numbers of diverse groups of students, community colleges need to provide a variety of services for students to help them with their goal of obtaining a higher education. These students are as diverse in their demographics as they are in their readiness for college (Silverman & Casazza, 2000), and as a result, additional support centers have been added to the services already existing at community colleges. Advising centers, tutoring support, writing centers, computer labs, library services, TRiO and SSS support services, financial aid offices, and First-Year Experience departments are all additional services that have been added as a reaction to the realization that these diverse students bring with them a range of experiences and unique expectations (Silverman & Casazza, 2000). As a result, there has been an increase in community college employees who are considered support staff.

Support staff members are the employees of a college or university who are not involved directly in either teaching or administration. Most definitions of support staff in education come

from K-12 sources where they are sometimes defined as “non-teaching” personnel or Educational Support Professionals (NEA, 2019). Schmitt, Duggan, Williams and McMillian (2014) suggest that these employees might “be more appropriately referred to as front-line educators” (p. 104). For the purposes of this study, I will use the term “front-line staff” members to refer to those employees who might work in the administration offices, such as Business, Admissions/Enrollment, Financial Aid, Advising, Tutoring Centers, Information Technology and Computing, Human Resources, Mailroom, Copy Center, or Library. These individuals work on the frontline, serving and supporting students as well as academic administration and faculty, such as administration assistants to vice presidents, deans, or chairs of the academic departments. They are also often responsible for providing quality customer service to the students and other staff who require help from their respective offices and are highly overlooked in their contributions to student success and retention (Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014).

Along with being the customer service specialists, front-line staff members are also the conveyers of information about how the college does business, what the college is, and how other offices can further help the student. They, in fact, are the main information conduit to students (Bauer, 2000). Importantly, front-line staff members are critical to the success of students as “many have frequent contact with students and are in positions that require them to provide instrumental support and guidance” (Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008, p. 73). The front-line staff members as a whole usually reflect the racial diversity of the institution and also experience some of the same issues that complicate our students’ lives, such as lack of childcare or transportation (Bauer, 2000).

Yet, while front-line staff play a key role in college and university day-to-day operations, individuals within these roles have continued to go under-researched (Murray, Flannery, &

Wren, 2008). Given the importance of these employees to the students, it is critical to further examine their experiences, training, and roles within the landscape of community colleges because of their contact with students, the immediacy of that contact, and their impact on student success.

### **Statement of Problem**

At Portulaca Community College (PCC), there are individuals who work in support staff roles who interact with hundreds of students on a daily basis as they come to PCC to submit their application, fill out their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), take placement tests, get registered for coursework, and set up payment plans or pay fees. Yet these staff members are not given any kind of professional development or training about student success, what it means at PCC, or how to interact positively with students. There are few, if any, training sessions about other support services and what those offices provide for students. In fact, support staff are hardly ever asked how they engage, support, and/or advise students. It is crucial that these support staff interact with students in a helpful, educational way. In the research that has been done about these important positions, one of the first points of contention is the lack of research (Farrell, 2009; Graham, 2012; 2013; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt, Duggan, Williams, & McMillan, 2014).

As the research states, there is little emphasis on training and development, and there has been no assessment of the roles and responsibilities of support staff members as pertaining to student success (Farrell, 2009; Graham, 2012; 2013; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). Farrell (2009) stated that research is sparse on how student support staff affects student retention. Graham (2013) wrote that “gaps in this research persist, and a full understanding of the work and identities of professional staff is yet to be elicited” (p. 7). It is

surprising that so little is known about how support staff impact student success, given that they have such a large part to play in student interactions (Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014).

Given these challenges, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore support staff's perceptions of their roles in supporting student success at Portulaca Community College (PCC). The term "support staff" is understood here as employees of the college who are not directly involved with teaching or administration, but support students in a variety of ways. The four guiding questions for this study are:

- (1) How do support staff members see themselves as contributing to student success?
- (2) What do support staff members perceive as the challenges to supporting students?
- (3) What do support staff members perceive as the benefits of supporting students?
- (4) What professional opportunities does the institution provide to support staff to promote student success?

Findings from this study provide evidence that front-line staff do believe themselves to be a critical part of students' success, from listening to them and helping them with their problems to caring about them and showing them tough love. The benefits of supporting students are mainly intrinsic: helping a student in need and having that student return to thank them. Communication issues between departments and between front-line staff and administration were seen as challenges to student success. The conclusions drawn from these findings are that front-line staff need more training in student support to help them continue to do their jobs better, that they need a "resource book" so that they know how and where a student should go to get help, and finally that they should be a part of committees and task forces that are working toward the overarching goal of student success.

## Literature Review

Student learning, success, and retention should be a campus-wide effort (Harrill, Lawton, & Fabianke, 2015; Hunter, 2006; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). In higher education, much like that old adage, it takes a village; it takes everyone on campus to ensure that students are receiving the support they need to be successful. This analogy is accurate for student success at a community college also. Students will encounter many people along their educational journey – faculty, tutors, advisors, and support staff. Each person a student encounters should be working to help support student success, development, and engage in value-added practices to ensure a student’s success.

Much has been written about student perceptions of colleges and universities (Astin, 1999; Bean, 1982; Kuh, 2016; Tinto, 1993, 1999); however, it is the perceptions of employees, specifically support staff members, that have gone under researched (Ferrell, 2009; Graham, 2012, 2013; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). The studies that do focus on staff members input consistently and constantly mention a gap in the literature and a call for more research on their impact on student outcomes (Graham, 2012, 2013; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). This literature review will explore the research that is currently available on the interactions of support staff with students, their roles, what support they can provide to students, and what they need to be able to support student success.

### **Support Staff and Community Colleges**

Much of the research about student success and student services fails to include information about support staff members’ contributions to the success of students (Ferrell, 2009; Graham, 2012, 2013; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). Community colleges need to continue to “bridge the gaps” to promote student success, whether those gaps are created

by the institution or in the perception of the student (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Powell, 2018). For instance, Powell (2018) compared the customer service of community colleges to that of trying to get through an automated phone service at a bank, being bounced from line to line, put on hold, bounced again, and never really getting the answer needed. Unfortunately, “students see the college as one single entity, but institutions are more commonly structured as discrete, disconnected units, or silos” (Powell, 2018, par. 2). These disconnections are generally known as silos.

The siloing of higher education is a criticism used to describe how post-secondary institutions are structured, including the student body, faculty, and departmental units (Frost, Strom, Dailey, et al., 2010; Tinto, 1999). The “silo effect” is a term that describes the lack of communication and cross-departmental support between and among groups. This effect keeps the departments who are in contact with students, like Enrollment, Financial Aid, and Advising, from communicating information across departments. For example, at one community college, a policy was updated in regard to the change in Pell Grant monies for summer semester. Because this was not communicated clearly to other departments, it caused a disconnection between what advisors were telling students and what Financial Aid was telling students.

Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) described this effect as the “cafeteria-style” college, where students must rely on themselves for assistance, everyone (staff, advisors, faculty) work in insulated isolation, and there is little interaction between instructors, advisors, and support staff. The fragmentation of the college into independent “silos” makes it difficult for collaboration and coordination, particularly for students. However, Tierney (1988) saw the college culture more like an interconnected web that should not only be studied for structure but for the students’ and

employees' interpretations. He saw institutional culture, not as Bailey and colleagues' (2015) "cafeteria" college, but more as a comprehensive whole connected by thin, fragile threads.

Historically, community colleges have been places where students are sent from department to department, collecting bits of information at each place they are sent but never receiving the whole picture. Some community colleges have tried to address "pin-balling" by creating "one-stop shops" where the student support areas are all in close proximity in a single building (Powell, 2018). While this eliminates some of the bouncing of students from place to place, it doesn't necessarily keep the informational silos from forming. Students seek information from many different areas of the college, and that information needs to be consistent and unified. Many campuses struggle to meet the needs of students because of this inconsistency, and "structures, policies, practices and people operate in a manner that is not reflective of student needs" (Powell, 2018). For example, at a Midwest community college, students must make changes in their schedules before the refund date, but this practice is not communicated well to other departments, faculty, or students. The refund dates are posted in a remote area of the website. Each semester, students who fail to meet the posted date are monetarily penalized by either having to return financial aid funds or having to pay double because they have to pay for the course they drop along with the course they add to their schedule.

### **Support Staff and Student Interactions**

For a student attending a community college, their experience involves interactions with a variety of employees and these interactions "could well make a difference in whether or not a student has a successful college experience" (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011, p. 188), which could improve student success. These are the people who are usually in contact with students from students' first experiences, like applying to the college, arranging financial aid, and determining



payment arrangements, to their last experiences, like withdrawing from all their courses before walking away.

Staff members play a vital part in students' experiences in college because they are in constant contact with the students (Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008). For instance, often the first person a student encounters when on a community college campus is a support staff member (Bauer, 2000). If a student comes to campus to apply to the college, their application will be turned in to a support staff member who will enter their information, give the student their ID number, and advise them as to their next steps. If the student does not know where to go on campus, the student will need to engage with the staff of the Information Center. A student who needs to pay tuition or fees will be directed to the support staff in the Business or Financial Aid Office. To register for classes, a student will need to see an advisor in either the Advising Center or the First-Year Experience Office. Community college students interact with numerous support staff members before they even set foot in a classroom or have a problem in which administration needs to become involved.

Schmitt and Dugan (2011) found that staff/student interactions can involve a broad range of questions across a broad range of areas. Unique questions were asked of these staff members as well as repeat questions. Staff members helped students with issues that blocked them from continuing. Staff members "empowered students by providing them with information to move closer to their overall goal" (Schmitt and Dugan, 2011, p. 185). They imparted information about important college policies and procedures that the students needed to know. Staff members were the ones who dealt with the inconsistencies that plagued students, like having an administrator override a policy or sign a form. In many instances, support staff members were not only the first person a student saw but the last, as the student walked out the door after they had given up.

Student-focused staff should be given the roles at the front to ensure that students see those staff members who can provide the most assistance (Schmitt et al., 2015).

### **Roles of Support Staff**

The culture of a college, the college's values and goals, are shaped from within the college and by the college employees: "[College] culture is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it" (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). Culture is what is reflected in the support staff's attitudes and behaviors toward students (Kopelman, Brief, & Guzzo, 1990). Support staff members play a huge role in relaying that culture, those values and goals, to the student population and provide a human connection between the technology, policies and practices of the college and the student (Schmitt et al., 2015). The support staff is the face and the voice of the community college culture for all its varying constituents.

Support staff personnel can and do impact student success and retention (Sydow & Sandel, 1998; Wild & Ebbers, 2002; Wilcox, Winn, Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). However, most of these studies looked at "academic" staff such as tutors and advisors, and not "non-teaching" support staff. However, Sydow and Sandel (1998) and Wild and Ebbers (2002) found that staff, both academic and support, need to be on committees that are tasked with retention and student success. Sydow and Sandel (1998) found that a systemic, standing retention committee that involved the entire campus community (faculty, staff, administration and students) was "critical for college-wide interest and enthusiasm" (p 642). Wild and Ebbers's (2002) institution detailed the support staff's role in retention by requiring "two learning support staff (learning center, library, tutoring) and two support staff who work with students, (i.e. admissions, business office, etc.)" (p. 514). Both studies show that they believe including support staff in retention programming is important for success.

Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) studied the “social support” of first-year students at the University of Brighton. They found that “influences on retention are complex and multifaceted” (p. 710). While they determined that peers and other students are the primary support group, they also found that academic staff members, such as tutors, were crucial for finding one’s place at the institution. These members of the staff were found to create social bonds with their students that enhanced emotional support. Students need to feel like they belong, and part of that belonging is finding friendly faces to help them figure out who they are in their new environment (Wilcox, Wynn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This sense of belonging has been studied by many as crucial to whether or not a student stays at a university (O’Keefe, 2013).

Staff can positively connect with students by showing students that they care about them as individuals, that they are valuable to class discussions, and that they are important to the college (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009); by showing students these things, “[students] will become part of the *we*” of college culture” (p. 175). Creating a connection with students, and especially creating an environment in which a student feels cared for, is crucial (O’Keefe, 2013). O’Keefe (2013) revealed that “a sense of connection can emerge if the student has a relationship with just one key person...and this relationship can significantly impact upon a student’s decision to remain in college” (p. 607). A support staff member could be that one key person who might ultimately sway a student to remain in school (Farrell, 2009; Schmitt, & Duggan, 2011; Schmitt et al., 2015).

### **Support Staff Needs**

Support staff serve an important function for student success and day-to-day operations; it is necessary also to examine their satisfaction with their jobs and the institutions in which they

work. Satisfaction with one's job is important for all employees of the college (Bauer, 2000). For support staff members to achieve satisfaction, according to Bauer (2000), they must have rewards and recognition, work-life balance, training and development, and positive perceptions of the work environment. Satisfied employees are more likely to provide strong customer service leading to overall customer satisfaction with the institution and the employee (Chen, Yang, Shian, & Wang, 2006). Farrell (2009) wrote that support staff professional training that focuses on job-related skills, a knowledge base, and interpersonal skills is vital. It can help staff to develop creative responses to student issues, and it is well worth the considerable time, effort and money spent. Teaching support staff how to be less reactive to problems can be helpful for both student and staff because the problem then is resolved.

Yet, one of the many problems with professional training for support staff is the conflict between their job duties and the training sessions provided. However, the benefits of training far outweigh the inconvenience of not having staff to cover their duties not only will they be learning skills that will affect their day-to-day job performance, they will also be increasing their own self-worth (Bauer, 2000). Providing training for support staff is an easy way to show them that the college understands their needs and their importance to student success.

Rewards and recognition do not have to be financial and can be intrinsic in nature, such as knowing which of their college coworkers could be helpful and receiving strong support from supervisors and administration to the list of needs for support staff members (Graham, 2013). Administration could reinforce these intrinsic rewards by allowing support staff to have more involvement in college policy development (Schmitt et al., 2015) and providing more training to provide better support for students (Graham, 2012).

Supervisors should be able to recognize that their staff maintains a good life-work balance. Changes in work duties or life at home can create stressful situations that can affect an employee's job satisfaction (Bauer, 2000). Staff members can and do experience the same challenges that cause students to not complete college, i.e., childcare, taking care of a parent, or difficulty with colleagues and coworkers. Understanding and supportive colleagues and supervisors can strengthen the overall perceptions of the work environment.

### **Conclusion**

Kuh (2016) stated that colleges are still struggling with the concepts of student success, but evidence shows that the quality of student experience varies most within the organization itself. Importantly, support staff members are a key component within colleges and universities. Because of the high amounts of interactions between support staff and students, it is key that their understanding of their role in student support is explored and that training and support are given to them in order to fulfill that student support role. This study is an attempt to contribute toward the shortage of literature which explores these roles (Ferrell, 2009; Graham, 2012, 2013; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015).

### **Research Design**

This study took a qualitative case study approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by exploring the primary question of how support staff members perceive their roles in student success. This basic qualitative approach attempted to “understand the meaning that a phenomenon has for those involved” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). The qualitative study strove to discover what staff members perceive as their roles in student success, the barriers, and the benefits of supporting students.

### **Methodological Approach**

The approach used for this study was an exploratory case study, which Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). A qualitative case study is the best choice for this project because this research project seeks to uncover meaning among one population at a single research site, or a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, PCC served as the bounded system for the research project.

### **Background on Research Site**

Founded in 1958, as Petal Township Community College attached to Petal Township High School, Portulaca Community College (PCC; pseudonyms) began as a teachers college. It has served the suburban communities that surround a large city in the Midwest for over 60 years. A PBI (Primarily Black Institution) and rapidly approaching HSI (Hispanic-Serving Institution) status, PCC has served students of color from some of the most financially depressed areas in the state. One of the cities in its district is Edsel Heights (formerly East Stamen Heights; pseudonyms), which was declared the poorest city in America in 1987; in 2020, the label still sticks. Six of the eight high schools in PCC’s district are on the Academic Watch List, which has impacted their funding for students. Of the 3,946 students who attended PCC in 2018, 61% were women, 33% full-time, 55% African American, 19% Latinx, and 59% were younger than 24 years of age. The latest data on their website shows that the graduation rate for 2015 was 20%.<sup>1</sup>

PCC also suffers the same backlash in state funding that many colleges across the country are facing. In the past 20 years, state funding has decreased from almost 30% of the total operating budget to less than 10%. Over the same time frame, tuition and fees have increased

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<sup>1</sup>Cohort start date was 2012; the state allows for 150% or three years before graduation.

from \$112 a credit hour to \$174, which is an increase of over 50%. At the institution, over 75% percent of students receive financial aid. According to the State Board of Community College's data, PCC's enrollment continues to decrease. Over a seven-year period from fall 2010 to fall 2017, enrollment dropped 32%, from 5,791 to 4,403 students. Fall-to-fall retention was reported at approximately 44% in 2016 (50% full time; 38% part time).

According to the 2018 state data book, PCC had 142 staff categorized as "Classified Staff," which is defined by the state as clerical and custodial staff. Clerical staff are those "employees who are engaged in the process of keeping records and processing information" (MIS Manual, 2019). This staff includes secretarial, clerks, and general office personnel. Of the 142, sixty-three are full time and the majority of those (45) are women. PCC defines support staff as a "bargaining unit member" in terms of the support staff union contract. The "bargaining unit member" is further defined as regular full-time and part-time employees who have been hired to work over 20 hours a week. The exceptions for "bargaining unit members" are those employees listed as managerial, supervisory, confidential, temporary professional, hourly and student workers.

Portulaca Community College has tried various retention methods over the past ten years, including best practices from the literature. Alamuddin and Bender (2018) stated that the average school had an average of six supports offered to help with student success. PCC has had six over the past ten years: new student orientation, a first-year seminar, student career services, social events designed for first-year students, learning communities, and first-year advising. Yet none of these practices seem to have made a huge difference in the success of students, and none of the staff were included in the planning of these support initiatives.

## Research Participants

Eligible participants for this study were comprised of staff members from Business, Financial Aid, TRiO, Advising Center, Enrollment Services and various academic offices at PCC. To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to be over eighteen years old and had worked for at least a year in their respective office. The participants could not be classified as faculty (such as librarians), academic support staff (such as advisors), or administrators or managers. The method for recruiting participants was purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Using purposeful sampling “best help[ed] the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 185). These participants were all PCC support staff who worked in the specific areas I was researching, and these participants had the experience that provided answers to my research questions. Purposeful sampling does not use random means or a large population from which to draw a sample population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I recruited participants by first sending emails to both the staff members and their respective supervisors. I then asked individuals who work in the offices listed above to participate in the study as well. I also made sure the supervisors knew when the focus groups happened and who was attending which session for the purposes of allowing those staff to attend.

Of the nine total participants, all (100%) were women, two were Latinx (22%), three were White (33%), and four were Black (45%). See Table 1.1. While the participants overrepresented the women and the White voice, the Latinx and Black resembled the student population more closely. In 2018, the student population was 61% women, 19% Latinx, 18% white and 55% Black.



### **Data Collection Methods**

In order to provide a rich description of the study, I used semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Patton, 2002) to collect the data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight individuals, one of whom had to be removed because the participant did not meet the one year in the position qualification. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility within the questions asked and I used an interview guide to make sure that all the research questions were explored in depth (Patton, 2002). The individuals who were interviewed were renamed with pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

The interviews lasted approximately one half an hour to an hour and were recorded. The interviews were held in several neutral conference rooms on campus, rather than my office. While my preference for interviews is in face-to-face format, participants also were given the option to schedule phone or Skype interviews, but all of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. At the beginning of each interview, the interview protocol was reviewed and participants were asked to sign the consent form, which also asked for their approval for me to record the session. The interviews were transcribed through Otter Voice Notes. Immediately after each interview, I wrote a memorandum to describe any nonverbal cues or other phenomena that occurred during the course of the interview. After the initial transcription, I listened to the recording to make sure the transcript was accurate and complete.

Table 1.1  
Research Participants

Name	Years at College	Position at PCC	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Participated in Interviews	Participated in Focus Group
Dorothy	3	Administrative Assistant	Woman	Latinx	Yes	Yes
Barbara	10	Financial Aid Coordinator	Woman	Black	Yes	Yes
Nancy	10	Administrative Assistant	Woman	Black	Yes	No
Rhys	18	Administrative Assistant	Woman	Black	Yes	No
Emily	10	Cashier	Woman	White	Yes	No
Carole	3	Administrative Assistant	Woman	White	Yes	Yes
Janet	1.5	Enrollment Service Assistant	Woman	Black	Yes	No
Octavia	15.5	Testing Coordinator	Woman	Latinx	No	Yes
Laurie	5.5	Scholarship and Alumni Coordinator	Woman	White	No	Yes

After the semi-structured interviews and transcriptions, data was initially compiled to create questions for the follow-up focus groups, which helped to triangulate and confirm the initial data collected. Focus groups allowed me to collect socially constructed information “with a group of people who ha[d] knowledge of the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 113). My follow-up focus group consisted of five staff members. (See Table 1.1) Two of the participants were asked to sign an informed consent document because they had not had a semi-structured interview. I hired a colleague with experience taking field notes to make notes during the session. I asked him to collect data about “people, objects, places, events, activities, and conversations. In addition, as part of such notes, [he] record[ed] ideas, strategies, reflections, and hunches, as well as note[d] patterns that emerge[d]” (Bogden & Biklen, 1982). Immediately after the session, I reviewed the field notes and added my reflective views about the sessions. I used Otter Voice Notes to transcribe the recordings and listened to the recording to make sure the transcription was accurate. The attendees’ names were kept out of the transcription and the two participants who had not been given pseudonyms in the interview transcriptions were given pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I began with open coding techniques in order to pull major broad themes and then used axial coding techniques to structure the data more formally. With each transcription, the field notes and memorandums, I started with open coding. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define open coding as “what one does at the beginning of data analysis. . . ; it is tagging any unit of data that might be relevant to the study” and searching for themes by breaking down the text with the basic questions of “who, what, when, where, why, and how” (p. 229). After I determined the larger, broader themes that emerged from the documents, I created focus group

questions. In order to narrow the original themes, interviews and focus group responses, I used axial coding techniques. Flick (2009) defines axial coding as, “from the multitude of categories that were originated, those are selected that seem to be most promising for further elaboration. The axial categories are enriched by their fit with as many [textual] passages as possible” (p. 312). I returned to the original documents and searched for subcategories that attempted to answer my guiding questions in order to start drawing inferences to the data collected in the interviews and focus groups. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and initially transcribed using Otter Voice Notes. I then used open and axial coding techniques to extract the data from the transcriptions, field notes and any memorandum. I did not use a software program to analyze the data; I did all the analysis manually using Post-it notes and a very large whiteboard. The data was originally categorized under the research question I thought it answered best, and the data was then transformed into a chart.

### **Criteria of Quality**

Determining issues of quality in qualitative research is different than quantitative research, although the necessity of determining whether or not a qualitative study has validity is important. Validity is determining whether or not a “common goodness criteria” exists in the study (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). For this study, authenticity was used to determine whether the data reflected the participants’ perceived meanings (Sandelowski, 1986).

Authenticity is “an attempt to remain true to the [persons] under study” (Whittemore et al., 2001, p. 530.) In order to ensure authenticity, I used peer review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and respondent validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Peer review is a process which Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described as “discussions with colleagues regarding the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the

raw data, and tentative interpretations” (p. 258). I spoke with others, such as colleagues at PCC and my dissertation chair, to determine whether or not the preliminary findings rang true and reflected the nature of the support staff experience. The data was also validated by respondent validation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define respondent validation:

The process . . . involved is to take your preliminary analysis back to some of the participants and ask whether your interpretation “rings true.” Although you may have used different words (it is your interpretation, after all, but derived directly from their experience), participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives. (p. 246)

I took the preliminary findings (in the form of focus group questions) back to three of the support staff that participated in an individual interview, and two who had not done an initial interview, in order to determine their believability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Positionality Statement**

I have worked in higher education for over 25 years – the past ten in student support efforts, mainly first-year student advising using intentional/intrusive advising techniques. As the manager of the First Year Experience, I use these advising techniques on a daily basis. I am a student-centered advisor and my personal motto is the same as medical professionals: “First, do no harm.” It is this experience that has helped me to frame my research study. I have worked with the front-line staff at Portulaca Community College in order to provide students with answers to questions, to get a student’s problem solved, and to ensure that the student has the support they need to be successful. I want to know what the support staff members know, say, and do for our students. I see the support staff as integral in providing critical information for student success, being as they are usually the first people to encounter new students to the college.

## Limitations

There were three limitations to the study. First, because of the political climate around support staff unions, some support staff declined to be part of the study. This cut the number of support staff I was able to interview. I had hoped that my reputation as a fair-minded individual would negate this attitude; however, it seemed it did not. I did make understood through the interview process that this study was a way to help the support staff. Interview and focus group participation gave support staff a venue to get their voices heard and make known their needs outside of the union environment.

There is a clash between administration and support staff at Portulaca Community College. At PCC, in open forums for new administrations, questions have been raised by support staff members about how that administrator might include the voices of support staff in their decision making. Both of these limitations are linked to the culture at PCC, which could be described as contrived collegiality. Although, Hargreaves (1994) uses this term to describe faculty and teacher interactions, it also is a good fit for the description of the culture at PCC: administratively regulated, compulsory, fixed in time and space and predictable. It is fairly clear that the support staff believe it is a top-down administration, with administration creating programs, policies, and practices and imposing them on the staff who need to enforce them. Support staff are not necessarily wrong. PCC administration tends to make decisions in private, i.e., President's Cabinet, and then calls for open forums to discuss, if they think they should get "buy-in" from other constituents. This is also a common complaint from faculty.

It is because of this culture that these limitations exist between support staff members and administration. PCC has a top-down administration: while it claims to have "shared governance," the Council of the College is mere window dressing. For example, the Council worked hard to

create a policy for a smoke-free campus a few years before the state requirement. Much time was spent researching and writing, yet when the recommendation went to the Cabinet, it was decided it was too much work and would just wait for the state. Relationships between support staff and administration are strained, to say the least.

A third limitation occurred during the focus group process for the study in early March of 2020. The college was closed and employees worked from home because of the spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. The second focus group I had been planning was not able to happen, and as of this writing, Portulaca Community College (PCC) is still functioning as a remote campus, with the majority of courses for the fall semester online and the college making plans for campus reopening. Although the second focus group did not happen, I believe that the data I collected is sufficient to answer my research questions without having to convene a focus group remotely.

### **Significance**

Although the literature states that student learning and success should be a campus-wide effort (Harrill, Lawton, & Fabianke, 2015; Hunter, 2006; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010), and at PCC, while administration call all staff “Student Success Specialists,” the support staff’s voices have been generally untapped as a resource for student success efforts. This study is significant because it will fill a gap in the literature regarding support staff’s roles in student success efforts. This study will help administration and board members understand these roles and how to give staff the resources needed to further help students. The findings from this study will provide an opportunity to better understand the support staff’s perceptions of their role in student success. It has implications to help how support staff members are hired, how support staff will be trained

and developed to provide student support, and ultimately provide community colleges with the information on how to better serve students and get them the support they need to succeed.

### **Findings**

The findings of this research study indicate that the support staff perceived their roles in student success as important to the college community. Staff believed they played a part of student success through their interactions with individual students, through listening, following up with the student to see if the problem was resolved, and receiving thanks for their efforts. Communication between and among the college community was seen as a hinderance in helping students. Communication (or lack thereof) from administration and between departments was seen as a way that Portulaca Community College (PCC) fails to help with student success. Finally, the college needs to support this population with extensive, required training about student success.

### **Dissertation Organization**

There are two other chapters in this dissertation. Chapter 2 is a publishable paper. The final chapter includes reflections on the study.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **PERCEPTIONS OF FRONT-LINE STAFF AND STUDENT SUCCESS**

#### **Introduction**

A significant amount of attention and scholarship has been paid to the importance of faculty interactions with students within higher education (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1976). Indeed, even within the community college landscape specifically, scholars note the critical importance faculty interaction and relationships have for both men and women students (Hagedorn, Maxwell, Rodriguez, Hocevar & Fillpot, 2000). Research has further indicated that faculty interactions positively impact students' persistence and retention (Wirt & Jaeger, 2014) and specifically supports underserved and underrepresented students (Chang, 2005; Wood & Turner, 2010).

While much research focuses on the importance of faculty and student interactions, scant research has examined interactions between support staff and students (Farrell, 2009; Graham, 2012; 2013; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; Regan, Dollard, & Hanks, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). Importantly, "support staff in higher education institutions plays a key role in creating a high-quality customer service and representing the institution's competence" (Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008, p. 69), yet few studies serve to explore these student and staff interactions and how they impact student success. While their roles in the college providing service to both students and other staff, as the prime information contact (Bauer, 2000) and quality customer service providers, they are

overlooked in their contributions to either student success and or retention (Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014). Moreover, scant attention is paid to how (or if) staff members within academia are trained and/or provided professional development to help them assist students in their learning, growth, and development. As such, this qualitative case study explored front-line staff and their perceptions of their interactions with students in a community college setting. For the purposes of this paper, I define the support staff members of the community college research site as those who interact with students and work in administrative offices such as Business, Enrollment, or Financial Aid or work as administrative assistants in other offices like advising, academic divisions or the College Foundation. Schmitt, Duggan, Williams and McMillian (2015) suggest that these employees “might be more appropriately referred to as front-line educators” (p. 104). Thus, throughout this paper, I will be using the term “front-line staff member” to refer to these individuals. This project was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do front-line staff members see themselves as contributing to student success?
2. What do front-line staff members perceive as the challenges to supporting students?
3. What do front-line staff members perceive as the benefits to supporting students?
4. What professional opportunities does the institution provide to front-line staff members to promote student success?

Findings from this study suggest that front-line staff members believe that they contribute to student success and that they developed meaningful connections with students in their daily interactions. Yet, while front-line staff members felt that they positively contributed to student success, they noted that there were several barriers that made them less effective. Finally,

participants noted that the institution did not provide professional development or opportunities for them to learn more about how to better support students with whom they worked.

Recommendations from this study include providing structured, incentivized professional development for front-line staff members, creating an informational packet about the departments at the college and how they serve students, requiring that all committees and task forces include at least one staff member on them, and asking that colleges reconsider the terminology of staff, and calling these important members educators instead.

### **Support Staff and Community Colleges**

Powell (2018) described the students at a community college seeking customer service like pinballs being bounced from service area to service area, but never really finding the answers for which they are looking. Students see the community college as a single unit and do not understand that many colleges are structured in departments and divisions, creating distinct and disconnected “silos” of information. This is a main criticism of the structure of colleges and universities. The “silo effect” can be described as a lack of communication and cross-departmental support. These silos create difficulties for students as policies differ from unit to unit and in different departments. Because units often do not communicate with each other, students can be left searching for assistance and not getting needed answers.

Some colleges have countered this criticism by creating “one-stop shops” where common student support areas are all put into a building or space in close proximity to one another (Powell, 2018). However, while this eliminates the endless “pinballing,” it does not ensure that information silos are not forming. Information across campuses should be consistent and unified, making sure that the same message is being delivered in each office the student visits.

This misinformation can cause students to get mixed messages and wrong answers to the questions they need answered and hinder their chance to be successful.

### **Support Staff and Student Interactions**

Students attending community college come in contact with many employees during their first visit to the college. The student may encounter staff in various offices as they ask questions of the help desk, submit their application, take placement exams, finalize their financial aid, set up payment possibilities, and get registered for college coursework. Staff members play a vital role because they are in constant contact with students (Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008). These interactions could “well make a difference in whether or not a student has a successful college experience” (Schmitt & Duggan, 2011, p. 188). For example, a new student could engage in activity with as many as four or five staff members on their first visit to the college, long before they meet their faculty in the classroom or encounter a problem for which they may need to contact administration.

Schmitt and Dugan (2011) found that interactions between support staff and students can involve a sweeping range of areas, from helping a student resolve an issue to answering basic student questions. Staff members were seen as empowering students to move closer to their goals by removing issues that blocked their success. In many instances, support staff are not only the first people a student might see, but in many cases, the last, as they file their graduation petitions or submit a form which withdraws them from all their classes. We must ensure that the most student-friendly and focused staff are there to provide the most assistance (Schmitt et al., 2015).

### **Roles of Support Staff**

College support staff are the crafters of college culture by reflecting “what is done, how it is done, and who is doing it” (Tierney, 1988, p.3). The values and goals of the college are reflected by the staff to the students they encounter on a daily basis by their attitudes and behaviors toward the students (Kopelman, Brief, & Guzzo, 1990) and, in this way, are the face and the voice of the college culture.

Support staff can and do impact student success and retention. Sydow and Sandel (1998) and Wild and Ebbers (2002) found that everyone at the college, including support staff, need to be on committees responding to student support and retention. Both studies show that including support staff in retention efforts is inherent to success of those programs.

Support staff are also important in creating a sense of belonging in students. Members of staff can create social bonds with students that can enhance their emotional support. While peers are the primary support group, staff can help students feel like they belong (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Part of that belonging is finding a friendly face that can help them figure out their new environment. A sense of belonging can be crucial to whether or not a student stays or leaves a college (O’Keefe, 2013). Creating a connection with students, and especially creating an environment where a student feels cared for, is crucial for students to continue at the college.

### **Support Staff Needs**

Because of the importance of these roles, it is important that the institution examine their satisfaction with their jobs and the work that they do, as well as their satisfaction with the institution. In order to achieve satisfaction with their jobs, they must have rewards and recognition, work-life balance, training and development, and positive perceptions of the work environment (Bauer, 2000). Employees who feel satisfied at their jobs are more likely to be able

to provide students with the customer service that they need (Chen, Yang, Shiau, & Wang, 2006). Supervisors of support staff need to ensure that they are providing rewards and recognition as well as training and development and allow support staff to maintain a work-life balance, which then leads to a better overall perception of the work environment. Hiring the right people for staff positions to serve students is crucial and most needed in order to ensure the overall satisfaction of the employees (McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005).

### **Research Design**

This qualitative case study used both semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore front-line staff members' perceptions about their interactions with students at a midwestern community college. A case study approach was utilized here because the study was designed to understand one population in a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, Portulaca Community College (PCC; pseudonym) was the single research site, or bounded system.

### **Research Site**

The site for this study was Portulaca Community College. PCC is a suburban, midwestern community college that has served the community for over 60 years, evolving from a teachers college in the 1950's to a community college today. In 2018, there were approximately 4,000 credit students taking courses at the school. There were 253 full-time employees, of which 61 were considered to be "support staff positions" (State Data Book, 2019). The college's main draw for students are the Dental Hygiene and RN Nursing Associate of Applied Science degree programs. These programs draw students from the surrounding suburbs and across the nearby state line. There are nine feeder high schools in the district that serve some of the wealthiest suburbs as well as the poorest suburb in the state.

For many years, PCC's administration called all staff "Student Success Specialists," yet little had been done to provide professional development or training for the front-line staff who came into contact with hundreds of students on a daily basis. These staff interacted with students who were coming to the college to file applications, take placement tests, fill out financial aid paperwork, register for class, and make arrangements to pay tuition. Some staff interacted with students as they wandered the halls looking for professor's offices, classrooms, and tutoring.

### **Participants**

To be eligible to participate, the staff member needed to have worked in the office for at least a year and needed to be over eighteen years of age. Participants were front-line staff who were not classified as faculty (such as librarians), academic support staff (such as advisors or tutors), or administrators or managers. The research used purposeful sampling techniques in order to draw from the population that would best help understand the problem and research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The participants were chosen and then sent an email for self-selection. A total of nine front-line staff members participated in this project. Table 2.1 indicates each participant's names, position, gender, how long they served at the college, and what forms of data collection they participated in.

### **Data Collection**

This project used two primary forms of data collection, semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) and focus groups (Sandelowski, 1986; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Nine total staff chose to participate in the interviews and focus groups. Five of the nine participated in both interview and focus group. Of the nine participants, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, one of which had to be eliminated because they did not meet the

Table 2.1  
Research Participants

Name	Years at College	Position at PCC	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Participated in Interviews	Participated in Focus Group
Dorothy	3	Administrative Assistant	Woman	Latinx	Yes	Yes
Barbara	10	Financial Aid Coordinator	Woman	Black	Yes	Yes
Nancy	10	Administrative Assistant	Woman	Black	Yes	No
Rhys	18	Administrative Assistant	Woman	Black	Yes	No
Emily	10	Cashier	Woman	White	Yes	No
Carole	3	Administrative Assistant	Woman	White	Yes	Yes
Janet	1.5	Enrollment Service Assistant	Woman	Black	Yes	No
Octavia	15.5	Testing Coordinator	Woman	Latinx	No	Yes
Laurie	5.5	Scholarship and Alumni Coordinator	Woman	White	No	Yes



required parameter of having worked in the office for a year. The interview questions were crafted to discover and understand how support staff view themselves and their roles in the overarching college goal of student success. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes, and they were recorded through Otter Notes, with the permission of the interviewee. I used an interview guide to make sure all the questions were explored thoroughly (Patton, 2002). The data from these interviews were initially compiled to create questions for the follow-up focus group. The interviews were conducted over a two-week time span in mid-December 2019 and one was done when the college resumed after Winter Break in early January 2020.

The follow-up focus group consisted of five staff members, two of whom had not previously participated in the semi-structured interviews. The focus group was used as a way to triangulate the data and was conducted with the understanding that the data collected should reflect the participants' meaning and remain true to the people in the study (Sandelowski, 1986; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). The focus group helped to ensure that the data collected and analyzed in the interviews "rang true" and was believable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The follow-up focus group was conducted in early March 2020.

I ensured trustworthiness by not only having prior relationships with these staff members, but also by assuring them that their names would be changed to pseudonyms in the final research document. I informed the participants that raw data would not be shared with anyone, especially administration at the institution, and that before I shared my research with administration, all indicators of identity would be redacted from the document. These conditions were all made clear in the consent document that participants signed.

## **Data Analysis**

The transcription of each interview was created initially by Otter Notes, but I then listened to the interviews and corrected the transcriptions as necessary, adding nonverbal cues and notes as needed. The transcription of the interviews resulted in approximately 90 pages of text, double spaced and line numbered. The focus group yielded an additional 25 pages of text, also double spaced and line numbered. I was familiar with all the participants, as I had worked with most during my 20 years at the institution, so each interviewee was given a pseudonym in order to preserve their anonymity.

Each interview was then combed through and manually coded; I made notes of ideas and phrases in the transcript margins to capture the rich details and descriptions. I then compiled these ideas and phrases using Post-it notes and a large whiteboard into thematic groups. These themes were then used to create focus group questions. I then “assigned” the thematic groups to a guiding question and combed through each interview, capturing line numbers that tied back to a particular theme and guiding question. Each response was coded by the initial of the pseudonym and the line numbers. As the data was organized, three broad categories emerged across the guiding questions that revealed that the support staff at PCC believed: (a) they were contributing to the overarching goal of student success, (b) communication among the college constituents and departments was a hindrance to student success, and (c) the college needed to provide better training, resources, and tools to allow them to serve students better.

## **Limitations**

One of the limitations was recruiting staff members to participate in the study. When I asked the front-line staff who agreed to participate in the study why they thought this might be, several answered that the staff who didn’t want to participate might be afraid of backlash from

their departments and administrators. Others believed that these staff thought nothing would be done, so why bother going through the motions. The support staff is unionized, and because of the top-down nature of the administration, there is a highly political climate. Even though PCC just made major changes to its administration and has reorganized parts of the campus, there is still a clash between the unions and administration. For example, right now on campus there is a struggle between the administration and staff over job duties, after a Memorandum of Understanding was drawn up to allow for staff who had not been able to work from home to undertake tasks that were not listed in their job descriptions. Some staff members saw this as a breach of contract.

An additional limitation was the global pandemic and the closing of the college due to COVID-19. The focus group process was interrupted in early March, and the second focus group I had planned was not able to happen. As of this writing, Portulaca Community College is still functioning mainly as a virtual campus, with students attending and faculty teaching mostly online courses. The support staff have been asked to start “reopening” the campus by coming to campus on varying days to support students who may be coming to the physical building for help.

### **Findings**

This qualitative case study explored support staff’s perceptions of their roles in supporting student success at Portulaca Community College. There were four guiding questions that helped inform this study. The first question looked at the ways in which PCC support staff see themselves as contributing to student success. I found that all of the participants considered themselves to be part of the overarching goal of student success. The second question attempted to determine what challenges keep support staff from being able to contribute to student success.

I determined several challenges that staff encountered, from their own attitudes to the attitudes and actions of students. The third guiding question looked at the benefits that support staff gain from helping students succeed. The overarching benefit was an intrinsic one: knowing that they had helped a student in need. The final guiding question asked about current training and professional opportunities that the college provided, and the unanimous response was there was none and they had to resort to using previous knowledge or find their own sources for training opportunities. Overall, however, the research revealed that there were three overarching impacts on student success.

### **Contributing to Student Success**

The participants in the study worked in different areas across the college, but all believed that they contributed to the overall goal of student success. Repeated phrases were “going above and beyond,” “giving 110%,” and “going out of the way” for students. Participants actively described activities that they felt illustrated how they contributed to student success such as listening to a student, telling them what they did not want to hear, helping them solve problems and complete goals, following up with the student, and seeing them graduate. Nancy, an administrative assistant, shared:

When [students] walk through that door, the main thing I do is listen, because some of them are coming in angry...they are at that point where they have extended whatever is going on in their personal life, or in their school life. So I listen and I find data, [which] has helped even when they are angry or upset. And then they see that I am just focused on what they are saying...Let's get to the point of why you are this anger[y] or upset or overwhelmed. So I think my key to their success is just to listen.

Rhys, an administrative assistant at the institution, described a similar situation with a story about a student who was not being listened to and had been turned away from other offices. Rhys offered:

These two young men [came in to my office], and I was like, just go there and do that. And then they had to sit and throw a fit. They had to start yelling. And the VP got up and was ready to call the police...and I said, 'Stop. I apologize...How can I help you?'

Rhys was able to calm the young men down, come to the root of the problem, and went on to share, "The student said, 'I got cash money, and they won't accept it.'...I walked down with him [to the business office] and they would not accept his money because he didn't have all of it, only part of it." She was able to then talk to the Vice President of Finance to not only serve the one student but to fix an overarching problem. From this, Rhys showed that by listening to this one student, she was able to address a pervasive institutional issue.

For Janet, a front-line enrollment services assistant, she felt that student success should also include students feeling satisfied and receiving help and students getting to the right place for their needs. She summed it up by saying:

Student success means that the student really feels satisfied, as much as possible...for them to at least feel satisfied that someone helped them, someone directed them to the correct place, or they got this problem figured out because someone helped them here.

For these front-line staff members, they viewed themselves as contributing to student success because they listened, helped get students to where they needed to be, and got students through their day-to-day needs.

Front-line support staff also discussed that they knew they were helping students because those students came back to thank them, bringing stories of their success back to the people who helped them succeed. One student even brought flowers to Emily, a cashier in the Business Office. Emily told a story about meeting a student in Subway whom she convinced to go back to school. The student and the interviewee then wound up in the same leadership class at the four-year university near PCC. Emily shared that story and added:

And at the end of the class, the teacher asked, 'Who was the best leader in this class?' and he said it was me and that I had changed his life forever,...and that he wanted his parents

to meet me because they had kept prodding him to go back to college, but it was an outsider that actually pushed him to go back and graduate.

It was through Emily's encouragement that the student went back to college.

Participants also felt that they helped with student success because of the growth that they see when a student graduates. Barbara, who works in the financial aid office, was brought to tears when she talked about her impact on student success, when she shared:

Just being a service, and making a difference in somebody's life is so rewarding. It's not just a paycheck... So to make a difference in somebody's young life, and be able to see them from day one to [them] walking across the stage in a cap and gown. It just is undescrivable (sic).

Barbara noted that this was not just a job for her; rather, she worked to make a difference in students' lives.

Other ways participants identified providing students support was described as "tough love," "mama love," and "being a mother." Participants shared that they often would have to tell students what they might not want to hear, but need to hear, in order to be successful. Carole said, "Maybe it's because we're mature and we're moms and you know, and we kind of know there is more to the story. If you hear things and you're like, wait, there's more to this, so let's figure that out." Similarly, Rhys said, "I'm gonna treat [students] like I treat my child, [they] just need to hear the truth. And I say sometimes, the truth hurts." For these women, they helped students succeed by engaging in enough care and dedication that they told these students hard truths.

### **Lack of Communication**

In every interview, the communication issues among and between both administration and staff as well as between departments was cited. According to participants, the lack of communication and/or miscommunication issues hindered student success. In several interviews,

staff talked about how administration made decisions but never asked the front-line staff members, who actually work with the students, what they thought. Rhys stated early on in her interview, “One thing since I’ve been here, that I find frustrating with this new administration; you have people who tell us what to do with our job, but they don’t do our job. And that’s frustrating.” Emily discussed how she thought administration could help staff support students better when she offered:

I think one would be just to talk to us, the support staff. Because I think the problems are on the bottom, but the decisions are made on the top. So if you don’t know what the problem is and then you make a decision on the top, you might not be making the right decision.

For participants, the lack of communication or awareness of the front-line staff’s position and job duties meant that administration may not actually be helping students.

Support staff also were concerned that they did not know what other offices and departments were doing to support student success. Carole was concerned about other staff members:

Maybe not being confident that when you send [students] somewhere, they’re going to get answers or they are going to get helped, because we see that a lot in our office. [The student] was sent to us when [the staff member] actually could have taken care of the problem.

Yet, front-line staff often were not encouraged to ask those questions about other support service areas. For example, Janet was reprimanded for asking for more information to help a student:

Because I usually get, ‘Well, you don’t need to know that,’ or ‘that’s not our job,’ but I mean there are decisions that [the staff] have to make, which I’m not able to make. So whenever a problem arises, I have to go ask about it, but if I had more information, I wouldn’t have to.

Being told “that’s not our job” was a problem for Janet. In her interview, I asked her why more people did not respond to participate in this study. Janet shared:

I don't want to be in a position to cause discord in the office, because of things I've said...but the only reason I did not care it is because I've already done that apparently. How much worse can it really get? ... I also feel like in the position I'm in, if I do go to authorities, that nothing will be done about it, nothing will be changed.

Unfortunately, since this interview, this employee has left PCC and has obtained employment elsewhere.

### **Need for Professional Development**

When the interviewees were asked about training and/or professional opportunities to learn about student success, all of them said there had been none. Some mentioned a program called "Professional Development Day," but it was more about how to do the job, and not about student success. Barbara shared in the focus group:

I've been here for years and I can't tell you off the top of my head [of] any meetings or committees or professional developments that have specifically taught me how to better assist students. Those types of skills and that initiative has solely been personal.

However, Nancy believed that there were no other tools or resources she needed: "I've never thought about that...I guess when I'm speaking with students, I never think to say, 'Oh, I need this to complete [this transaction]...Because mainly all I am doing is listening.'" Listening is a skill that Nancy felt she possessed already and did not need training for it.

One concern that Carole raised was the "wild goose chases" that staff send students on because they do not always have the answer. Barbara suggested cross-training as a possible way this could be solved:

I would need to be crossed trained in other areas of the college in order to be able to provide more accurate information, cut down on some of the foot traffic that comes in and out of the office...If we were able to provide more information to the students to help them in one area, instead of sending them to three different areas...And we have to say, go back to counseling and advising a lot.



Similarly, Janet described a situation with a student and said if she had more information she would not have to send students back to offices to figure out what had just been said: “It [would] be best if more people in the college were more well-versed in other areas, because [it could] slow down traffic, and make [students] feel less run around.” For both Barbara and Janet, it would be helpful if some training occurred so that they would know what other spaces on campus did so they could help students more efficiently.

However, staff who tried to give more information also had been written up for “not staying in their lane.” Barbara said, “I’ve always been accused of helping too much.” She was written up trying to help a student stay safe during a domestic violence situation. “Without thinking, I immediately reacted and made necessary calls in order to get her back to a safe home and her family. I ended up being reprimanded for it and called into HR. I stepped outside of policy.” Emily also recalled a similar situation: “I’ve been written up twice, I think, since I’ve been here. And that was because I went outside of my lane, I guess. [I] extended myself and was reprimanded...But I think I was raised that when you know better, you do better.” Interestingly, several participants noted that they were punished for what they perceived was “helping too much,” which violated policy.

In several interviews, the interviewees mentioned a “flow chart,” “a directory,” “a packet of information,” or “a resource book” to help staff direct students to the correct offices for assistance. In the focus group, Laurie mentioned:

I think it would be very beneficial to have a simple, and I’m not sure what it looks like, but a simple chart/grid/graph that when there’s a question that a student has, it’s pointing you in the direction of who to contact.

Barbara, after this comment, mentioned that perhaps the professional development days, “like our breakout sessions, should be learning about the other areas of the college...[to] teach about,

you know, general topics. Let's learn about each other." For these participants, they saw benefit in learning more about what other parts of the institution did so that they could better support students.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore support staff's perceptions of their roles in supporting student success at Portulaca Community College. The case study allowed for discussions about various areas that impact that perception. The study found evidence that support staff perceive their roles in student success to be important and they provided that support to students in varying ways. Yet, this study also found that participants felt like the lack of communication from administration was a hinderance to student success. Finally, participants noted that there was no professional development available and several of them had been formally reprimanded for "not staying in their lane" when going out of their way to support students.

The first finding illustrates that participants were passionate about their jobs and really felt that they aided in student success. Participants noted that they engaged in listening to students, helping them solve problems, and noted the importance of students feeling heard and satisfied. This was illustrated by Rhys, who shared the story of the young man who was turned away from the finances office simply because he did not have all of the money for his bill. Here, Rhys was able to talk to the Vice President of Finance at the institution and not only fix the issue as it pertained to that one student, but she was able to identify a problem that many students faced. As such, these participants were important to identifying problems students had and helping them correct such issues.

Student success is generally defined in the literature as persistence and degree completion (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). While literature discusses student success as a result of retention efforts (Hagedorn et al, 2000; O’Keefe, 2013; Sydow & Sandel, 1998; Tinto,1999) and engagement activities (Hunter, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), there is not much literature about how front-line staff participate in both retention and engagement of the student population (Farrell, 2009; Graham, 2012; 2013; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt et al., 2015). Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) described the interactions of the staff and students as social support, citing it as one of the three themes in whether or not a student decided to stay or leave the institution.

Front-line staff at PCC were crucial to many students finding their way around the college. Stopping to ask students who looked confused in the hallway what they needed was just one of the things Carole mentioned in her interview. She also mentioned that she made sure students knew where they were going or where they needed to be: “[Student success] means answering [student] questions or helping them ask the right questions, does that make sense? Guiding them to where they need to be or what they need to be doing.” Some researchers have called this kind of knowledge “college adjustment” and many studies have been made about how different racial groups adapt to the college environment (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990). Student success is mostly defined by grade point average, time to completion, persistence from semester to semester, retention, and graduation (Hagedorn et al., 2000; Hunter, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; O’Keefe, 2016; Sydow & Sandel, 1998; Tinto,1999) most fail to account for the importance of adjusting to a new environment as a factor in students’ overall success in college.

The women who participated in this study were able to identify the barriers to student success, from not only their own limitations, like not listening or making mistakes, but also

identified some of the students' barriers as well. Dorothy stated that her idea of student success means "I'm doing my job correctly," which helped to eliminate barriers that could occur for students during their registration process. "If I am not coding the class correctly, it affects the student, because we now [have to remove them from the class]. When we cancel, or we push back a date, or a date is not correct in the system...and that affects [the student's] financial aid." Dorothy wanted to make sure she was doing her job correctly so that mistakes would not be an additional barrier for students.

These participants greatly influenced the students they worked with – by changing the course of their lives in Emily's story, by telling them the hard truths that they needed to hear in Carole's case, and also by creating a sense of caring by following up with students who had consulted them, as Dorothy and Barbara recounted. These women were all active participants in the success of not one, but many students on the PCC campus. It is probably not a coincidence that this finding occurred as all the participants in the study were women. As women, they identified themselves as caregivers and mothers to the students they served. As Rhys said several times in her interview, she treated the students like she did her own child and also compared some students to the experience her son had had at PCC. Emily mentioned that both of her children had to use disability services at the colleges they attended, and she hoped that the students who were in need of those services got quality care. As mother and caregiver as part of their personal identities, this quality leaked into their work identities as well.

The second finding that emerged from this study was a lack of communication and/or awareness of what these front-line staff members do. For example, Dorothy, an administrative assistant said:

We need to communicate established procedures. I have had so many things, meetings, where we sit down and we state, 'This is how it's going to run.' And then like a week

later it's just like, 'Oh no, what are you talking about, we never said that.' You know, I'm sitting here, and I've got minutes.

According to participants, the administration did not consult the staff about ways to do their jobs better or make their jobs easier, even though research shows that "one's perceptions of the specific work situation will strongly affect the perceived level of job satisfaction" (Bauer, 2000, p, 93). One of these perceptions is the level of decision making that staff are allowed. For example, Dorothy described a process that had been working smoothly until administration decided that they needed to intervene. Dorothy had had another staff member giving her information about students, and the administration decided that was not the proper way to do it. Dorothy recalled, "So I did my job. And I got yelled at for it...because [administration said the staff member] couldn't dictate whether the student [needed this process]...it had to go through the manager." The new process made the staff do more steps and it took more time to process. Essentially, if the administration had consulted the people doing the job, they would not have changed the process in the first place. Once it was determined that the new process was taking much longer, the office went back to doing it the old way.

The final finding that emerged from this study was the lack of professional development afforded to these front-line staff members. Each participant noted that there were no offerings that helped them better conceptualize how to support students, what skills and/or competencies would help them support students better, or even mechanisms that would help them better understand their scopes of responsibility. In fact, several staff members noted that they were formally penalized for what seemed to be "helping too much." Because the study interviewed only women, could the way that they were treated be considered sexism? It is possible, but many of the participants worked for women administrators for most of their careers. I see these penalties as more of a cultural issue than an issue involving sexism.

The biggest finding that emerged was that these front-line staff wanted to help students. They felt they needed more information to be able to do that, but they were not encouraged to find out that information. For example, Barbara stated:

You try not to step on toes and you try not to veer into someone else's policies and departmental procedure and constantly are being told to stay in your lane. Focus on your job and what relates to your job. And that's it. That's all... I wouldn't say it was a college issue because not everyone thinks that way. But it's definitely part of the culture here.

In this way, PCC continued to create silos of information that were only housed in the relevant departments. For participants, they feel that administration cannot have it both ways.

Administration cannot expect front-line staff to be "Student Support Specialists," yet when staff try to do exactly that, they are written up for "helping too much." Several of the participants mentioned that administrators tend to see student issues in black and white. Emily said, "I think there is always a grey area in which you can help somebody." Importantly, Emily had been written up twice.

Expecting the staff to be "Student Support Specialists," yet not provide any training on what that means to administration or what the expectations for that are, appeared to become a double-edged sword for support staff. It meant keeping front-line staff in the dark about expectations around student support and being punished for asking for information that could help staff do that. It is similar to what the college used to do, and in some cases continues to do to students. There was never any "code of conduct" document available for students' information on how the college expected its students to act, yet there were considerable punishments such as expulsion from the campus for relatively mindless slights. That has since been remedied, but it is a similar experience for the front-line staff.

In order for our support staff to understand and be a part of the college goal of student success, they need to be informed not only what that means to the college but also get training on how PCC expects them to support students. Bauer (2000) wrote that training for staff is important in that it not only increases productivity, but indirectly increases self-esteem and helps empower employees to make decisions. However, there is not much literature, if any, about training staff about student success (Farrell, 2009; Graham, 2012; 2013; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; Regan, Dollard, & Banks, 2014; Schmitt, et al., 2015). Professional Development Day should be used as the vehicle to provide training about student success. The day used to be called “All-Campus Convocation” and was held during one of the busiest times of the semester, the Thursday and Friday before classes started. However, after many people complained about not being able to attend, the date was changed to early October so that offices could be closed and everyone could attend. This day would be perfect to do training about student success and information sharing, or as Barbara said, “Let’s learn about each other.” The training should allow for the needs of the staff to learn about their coworkers and what they do.

### **Recommendations**

The literature stated that student learning and success should be a campus-wide effort (Harrill, Lawton, & Fabianke, 2015; Hunter, 2006; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010), yet at Portulaca Community College, the support staff was rarely, if ever, included in those efforts. Given the findings from this study, the following recommendations emerge:

- 1.) Front-line staff deserve to have professional development opportunities in the area of student success and information about how they can continue to serve students better.

This professional development should be required of and expected for all support staff and should perhaps be incorporated into the yearly required staff evaluations.

- 2.) All departments should contribute to a “reference book” that outlines the services available to students and information about what each department does. This should be a fairly easy task, since all managers are currently updating or working on their Quality Assurance Reports for institutional effectiveness. This information can be collected from the section which outlines the departmental description and core functions of each area.
- 3.) For all committees and task forces, there must be at least one representative from the front-line staff workers who come into direct contact with students.
- 4.) Front-line staff members should be considered part of the educational process. The culture of the college should reflect that everyone who works with students is implicit in their learning and, in effect, change their positions to “front-line educators.”

### **Conclusion**

Front-line staff members are critical helpers on college campuses. As evidenced by this study, administration and board members must have an understanding of those roles and what training and tools the staff feel they need to promote student success. The findings from this study help the support staff better understand their role in the general college goal of student success. The implications are that support staff who understand their role in student success need to be hired and placed into positions that come into the most contact with students. It ultimately helps community colleges with information about how to better serve their student populations to get them what they need to succeed. As Dorothy concluded her interview, she summed it up: “There’s a lot that can be discussed on how [the college] can be better. First of all, for good successful students, the first impression [students] get is this is how you treat students, whether it is by servicing them, or whether it’s going beyond [a staff member’s] job description, that is



what is going to stay for the student.” Students’ first impressions come from the front-line staff they encounter; let us make sure that that it is a positive experience.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SCHOLARLY REFLECTION**

#### **Introduction**

This was my second doctoral program. The dissertation process in my first program was complicated and confusing. It was the main reason I did not complete my dissertation, even though I had completed all the coursework and the comprehensive exam. The process was not explained very well, if at all. Once we got to doctoral dissertation hours, it was mainly self-study. Also, my program advisor was not on top of his game. I started working my first full-time teaching position the same semester I registered for my first dissertation hours, and even though I worked in the same building as my advisor, I never saw him. It was only during the last week of the semester (while I was trying to grade five classes of final papers) that he told me he needed my first three chapters by Friday (I believe it was on a Wednesday). Additionally, I had written my research proposal about studying the extrinsic reasons behind my developmental students' failure to complete coursework. After working a semester researching and writing my proposal, the chair of the department told me that I could not continue pursuing that topic, since someone in the cohort before mine had a similar research topic. I was going to have to start over. I was discouraged and angry.

Fast forward—twenty some years. I have been working at a community college in suburban Chicagoland. I left my full-time faculty position in Arkansas and came home to the suburbs at the request of my then-husband, who hated Arkansas. I found a job at my community

college as the director of Institutional Research. Several lateral job moves later, I was working as the manager of the First-Year Experience office and my boss was retiring. I applied and interviewed for the position, but did not get it. I was told they were looking for, and hired, someone who had a doctorate, so I began my educational journey with Northern Illinois University that same year.

### **Reflection on the Dissertation Process**

At the beginning of my program, I would have told you I was going to research something to do with first-year students. Intentional advising was one of the topics I was batting around, and I wrote several papers on advising methods for my doctoral courses. I then had a situation occur which made me think differently about what topic I wanted to research. A trans\* student at my college was “outed” in front of an entire class. Our registration system could not handle “legal name: versus “preferred name,” and both names had been printed on the course roster. The faculty member grilled the student about why there were two names on the roster in front of the rest of the class. The student was embarrassed and ashamed, and the situation caused him to withdraw from the college entirely. I was enraged, but I did not know what to do. At that time Northern Illinois University was hosting a conference about LGBTQIA+ students, and I decided to attend. It was the most interesting conference I had ever attended. I learned so much about the population and wanted to know more. I decided to write my dissertation focused on LGBTQIA+ students’ sense of belonging at my college, and again, I researched and wrote several papers about this population of students in my doctoral coursework.

This changed when I started reading qualitative research studies about the LGBTQIA+ population. I realized that in order to do research, I was going to have to “out” students in a way I was not comfortable with given our current government. I had nightmares of doing research

and the government coming in to steal my records so they could then attack and imprison my research subjects, much as ICE was doing with immigrants. At that point, I realized that ethically and morally I could not be comfortable with that as a possibility; I had no dissertation topic once again.

I met with my advisor one morning in her office at Northern. I felt like a failure. My cohort members were choosing committees and announcing their research topics. I had nothing. It was going to be another debacle and I would have to leave NIU without having completed yet another program. I just knew it. I had spent the night at the Red Roof Inn in DeKalb, worrying and not sleeping. How was I going to tell my advisor that I had nothing? I had a bit of an idea, but I did not think it would work. I wanted to do something with creating an advising handbook, or something with communication between departments, or maybe doing surveys among the support staff employees to figure out how to help students better. I walked in to Dr. Jaekel's office with a jumble of unrelated ideas, and she helped me figure out what I wanted to research. I walked out with my research topic and a hope that I would and could complete this one: support staff and student success.

I feel like this research project brought to light issues that people knew were happening but no one wanted to say out loud because they did not have proof. The neglect and poor care of an entire population of employees had been happening under our noses, but everyone was scared of blow-back and repercussions from administration for telling their stories. I learned that not only do I care about each and every one of the employees that I interviewed, but I wanted to hear their experiences, I wanted to know how they perceived their world, and I wanted to do something to change the injustices that were happening.

I learned that the front-line staff that I work with on an everyday basis believe that they are helping with student success. I heard about how those employees viewed their value and self-worth when it came to working with students, listening to the students' stories and helping them to find their success. The most touching part of my interviews was when Barbara started crying when she talked about seeing students from the first moment they walked into her office, knowing nothing, and then watching them walk across the graduation stage. It is not just work for these women; it is a daily labor of love. That is what I will remember the most on days when I am frustrated with the college as a whole and angry that I cannot make the path easier for my students. The front-line staff truly care about students, and they will if necessary, be reprimanded by their supervisors, just to make sure students are truly served and helped.

The research process went well. I was grateful for having done some practice interviewing in our qualitative research class, so I was less nervous about the interviews with my research subjects. Both of the research classes helped me to understand the process of writing a research proposal, how research should be presented. In both classes we had to write mini-reports, and I found that very helpful when writing my research proposal and Chapter Two.

I am still trying to get the hang of literature reviews. I have a feeling they will always be the worst part of the research process for me. While I do not mind reading a plethora of research articles, I get bogged down by all of the research. What do I include? What do I not? What if I missed something? One of my best friends is a tenured faculty member with a Ph.D. in technical writing. She has to publish five articles a year, and she told me the literature review is what slows her down every time. She has been told by many, and has told me, that once you find a niche, stay there so that you do not have to do tons of research for every article. Literature reviews then become simpler. I hope that is the case.

If I were to do this research project again, I would increase the interview and focus group time to at least an hour and a half. There were several times that I felt like I was rushing the end of the interview so that I would not go over the time limit. I also feel like I only skimmed the surface on some of the issues – like the “staying within your lane” discussions. I had originally not considered that until my first interviewee said it (but I could not use that interview since she had not worked in the position for a full year). I incorporated that question into all of the interviews and focus groups after that interview. I am also still perplexed by how anyone could get written up for trying to help a student. In my viewpoint, every employee at the college should be working to make sure we give students as much assistance as we can. Sometimes I think our administration is more worried about policy than they are about people.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

Coincidentally, as I was finishing up my research, I became a supervisor in my department. I had already had several conversations with the vice president over my department about some of the things I had found. The one that bothered me the most was “staying in one’s lane.” As someone who believes students come first, the thought that someone had been trying to help a student and then got written up for doing too much made me really uncomfortable. I would never say that to one of my coworkers or colleagues. I believe that we should do all we can to help students succeed.

One of the first conversations I had with the Vice President (who started in July 2019) was about helping students. In that conversation he told me that he would never punish anyone who in good faith was trying to help a student. When the college went virtual, all advisors had a “chat room” in which we could post questions, which was especially relevant in the beginning of the virtual college experience since so many procedures and policies were changing daily. I

clearly remember advocating in this chat that advisors should have a clear opportunity to change things – because nothing was the same – for example, how we communicated with the rest of the college, how we interacted with faculty and students, and how we communicated between departments. I quoted our vice president at that point in time also. However, the old adage, “the more things change, the more they stay the same,” is definitely relevant here.

When I began as the head of the FYE department, one of the first things I advocated for was changing the title of the advisor position in the First-year Experience Office to FYE Navigator. This position is now designed as a position that works with the students from their acceptance through their completion of their first year at the college. The navigator provides a holistic approach for student development and educational attainment. The job duties now include helping students with financial aid, payment options, and placement testing and no longer is focused on just advising of the first-year students.

I had never even considered writing a journal article before I started this program. My previous director always talked about writing one with her dissertation research, but she never did so. It was not as complicated as I would have previously thought and it actually gave me an opportunity to look at my research as something that could and would help fill the gap in the literature. I do plan to try to publish an article, and I am looking forward to doing more research in the future.

I am thinking about doing a similar study, but focusing on the time during which the college was virtual and online. Front-line staff, in many areas, were still vitally important, even though we were not on campus. They were overworked and exhausted, and instead of seeing hundreds of students a day, they were communicating with them through emails, chat boxes,

phone calls and video calls. Communication issues were very much still apparent between departments and between staff and administration, and while some communication got better interdepartmentally, it still was a huge issue. For example, the advising team (including FYE) had an instant message system set up from the first day we went virtual and created a shared document with frequently asked questions, yet if I looked back over that chat session, I would be able to count the many times someone said – “and why weren’t we told that?” The administration dictating what support staff were or were not doing from home, and what actions should be taken to increase enrollment during our virtual campus, was obviously apparent from the comments and the actions of some administrators. For example, two administrators came up with the idea of “rapid registration,” which gave students an on-campus opportunity to meet with advisors and front-line staff from other departments like Financial Aid. However, no staff were part of this decision, and administrators were heard to say that staff were critical of it because they did not want to actually work and that they were not doing anything from home.

I hypothesize that the virtual environment actually was a microcosm of the face to face environment, and that many, if not all, of my findings from my study would still be relevant. I might just focus on the communication problems. All in all, this was an incredible experience for me. The program at Northern Illinois University gave me the opportunity to finally finish my goal of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) that I started so many years ago in a galaxy far, far away. My major regret is that my father passed away before seeing me start and *complete* this adventure. This one is for you, Dad.



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APPENDIX A

IRB EXEMPTION LETTER



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Office of Research Compliance,  
Integrity & Safety**

*Division of Research & Innovation Partnerships*

**Exempt Determination**

03-Dec-2019  
Lee Helbert (Z1818376)  
Counseling, Adult and Higher Education

RE: Protocol # HS20-0178 "What does the staff say?: Support staff perceptions of role in student success"

Dear Lee Helbert,

Your application for institutional review of research involving human subjects was reviewed by the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety on 03-Dec-2019 and it was determined that it meets the criteria for exemption 2.

Although this research is exempt, you have responsibilities for the ethical conduct of the research and must comply with the following:

Amendments: You are responsible for reporting any amendments or changes to your research protocol that may affect the determination of exemption and/or the specific category. This may result in your research no longer being eligible for the exemption that has been granted.

Record Keeping: You are responsible for maintaining a copy of all research related records in a secure location, in the event future verification is necessary. At a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB, and any other pertinent documents.

Please include the protocol number (HS20-0178) on any documents or correspondence sent to the IRB about this study.

If you have questions or need additional information, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at 815-753-8588.

APPENDIX B

DRAFT OF EMAIL FOR PARTICIPANTS



Greetings,

As you may or may not know, I am currently working on my dissertation project for my Ed.D. at Northern Illinois University. The topic for my dissertation is looking at the role of support staff in student success. I feel that you have important roles to play, and I would like to determine what you feel about your role in student success and what the college could be doing to support that role. I am asking for your participation because you are a staff member who works extensively with students.

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research. However, I will be providing a report of my findings to the administration. All the information I share will be anonymous.

If you are interested in participating, I am looking for volunteers for individual one-hour interviews. After the initial interviews, I will be conducting focus groups to make sure that the data I am collecting “rings true” before I do further analysis. You can volunteer for an interview, a focus group, both, or neither. Participation is voluntary and you will not experience any negative consequences for not participating. I have attached a copy of the consent form for you to read over and consider before you volunteer.

I am happy to answer any additional questions you may have. Thank you for your consideration,

Lee Helbert

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

### Part I: Interview Protocol

1. Review consent form in detail; signature
2. Conduct interview
3. Remind participant about data collection next steps:
  - a. Audio digital recorder formulated into narrative form through transcription
  - b. Remind them that all data collected will be reported anonymously
  - c. Possible focus group to triangulate findings

### Part II: Interview Questions

#### **Participant Information Questions:**

1. What is your current position at the college?
2. How would you describe what you do?
3. How long have you served in this role?
4. What is your educational background?

#### **Themed Interview Questions**

- What does student success mean to you as a support staff member?
- What types of trainings and/or professional development opportunities have there been for you to learn more about student success?
  - Follow up options:
    - What training would you like/do you need to support students better in your job?
    - What resources, training, professional development opportunities do would help support you in how you interact with students?
- What are things that you feel you do that support student success?
  - Follow-up options:
    - Can you give me an example of what you mean by that? Can you explain that further?
    - If not addressed: Are there policies or procedures that students need to know to be successful?
- What do you see, as someone in your role, as the benefits of supporting students?
- What do you see as possible barriers in supporting students?
  - Follow up Options:
    - What do you need to be able to support student success better? Is there anything that administration could do to help? What is not so helpful behaviors?
    - What are things that are helpful for you to support student success?
    - Can you tell me about a time where you feel like you really supported a student? Can you tell me about a time where you wished that you could have supported a student better?
    - What do you wish your supervisor knew about your role in student support?

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

## Part I:

### Welcome

Introduce myself to group. Thank you for taking the time to join us.

### The Topic

My topic is looking at the role of support staff in student success. I feel that you have important roles to play, and I would like to determine what you feel about your role in student success and what the college could be doing to support you in that role. I will be using the results to complete my dissertation, but I will also be providing a report of my findings to Dr. Anthony and the administration. All the information I share will be anonymous. You were selected for the focus group because you are a front line staff member.

### Guidelines

- This is an open forum, and there are no wrong answers to any questions.
- I am recording this, so please try to speak clearly and not speak over each other.
- You do not need to agree with everything that is said, but I need you to listen respectfully to others as they share their viewpoints.
- If you have a cellphone with you, please silence it. If you must respond to something, please leave as quietly as possible and rejoin the group as soon as you can.

## Part II:

We are going to be using first names, so let's go around the room and introduce yourself. Tell us which office you work in, how long you have worked here, what you do in that office, and a little bit about your educational background.

### Opening question

As a support staff member, what does student success mean to you?

### Additional Questions and Follow-Up Options

- How have you experienced communication with students as contributing to their success?
  - Follow-up option: Can you give a specific example?
- How do you help a student to complete their goals?
  - Follow-up options: If I use the phrase "following up with students", what does that mean to you? Can you give me a specific example?
- What aspects of your job contribute to student success?
  - Follow-up option: Can you explain that further? Can you give me a specific example?
- What do you feel are the benefits of supporting students?
  - Follow-up question: How do you know you have done a good job supporting a student? Can you give a specific example?

- What types of trainings and/or professional development opportunities have there been for you to learn more about student success?
  - Follow-up option: What training would you like/do you need to support students better in your job?
- What challenges do you face when it comes to student success?
  - Follow-up options: What challenges do other departments present? What challenges do administration present? What challenges do students present?
- How do you feel about what administration knows about student success?
  - Follow-up options: How do you feel about what administration knows about your job? Is there anything administration could do to support student success better?
- Why might there be so much resistance/reluctance by support staff to coming to these interviews/focus groups?

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of Study:** What does the staff say?: Support staff perceptions of their role in student success

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**Investigators** Lee **Dept:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name: Name:** Helbert **FYE Dept:** \_\_\_\_\_ **708-709-3639 Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Dept:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Key Information

- This is a voluntary research study on staff perceptions of their role in student success.
- This study involves either participating in a focus group or an individual interview for approximately an hour.
- There are no benefits; the risks include that you may feel uncomfortable disclosing information to a focus group or I. If this occurs, one can leave the group or interview without any negative consequences.

### Description of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore support staff's perception of their roles in supporting student success at Prairie State College. The term "support staff" is understood here as employees of the college who are not directly involved with teaching or administration, but support students in a variety of ways. The three guiding questions for this study are:

- (1) What role do support staff members see themselves as having with student success?
- (2) What do support staff members perceive as the challenges to supporting students? and
- (3) What do support staff members perceive as the benefits of supporting students?

Findings from this study aim to better understand how support staff view themselves in the overarching college goal of student success. This project aims to explore how PSC can provide additional resources, remove barriers, and give support to the employees who are on the front line dealing directly with students.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete either a focus group or an individual interview. It will take approximately one hour of your time. The dates and times of the focus groups as well as location will be provided in a separate document. The interviews can be set up at the participant's convenience. Both the focus groups and interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All names and identifying information will be kept anonymous.

### Risks and Benefits

You may feel uncomfortable at times discussing your experiences. As such, you can stop participation at any time during either the focus group or the individual interview. All



participants will be asked to keep the information disclosed in the focus groups confidential, but if at any time you feel uncomfortable, you can leave the focus groups and request an individual interview or leave the study entirely without negative consequences.

If you decide to participate in this study, there will not be a direct benefit to you. A report will be shared with administration in order to communicate the findings of the research.

### **Confidentiality**

- Only I named in this document, and no other administration from my campus will be present at the focus groups or interviews and they will not have access to raw data, notes, recorded audio or transcripts.
- All the information shared will be anonymous and any research will remove identifiers such as name and other identifiers.
- Any quotes used in a dissertation, report to the administration, conference presentation, and/or published papers will have all identifying information removed.
- It should be understood that, when participating in a focus group, confidentiality among the members of the group cannot be guaranteed.

In addition, the information collected will be kept in a password protected file, on a password protected computer in the researcher's home office.

### **Your Rights**

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Lee Helbert at [LHelbert@prairiestate.edu](mailto:LHelbert@prairiestate.edu) or by telephone at 708/709-3639 or you may contact her research chair, Kathryn Jaekel at [kjaekel@niu.edu](mailto:kjaekel@niu.edu) or by phone at 815/753-0788. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.

**Future Use of the Research Data**

Your information collected as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

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Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the focus group or individual interview.

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Participant's Signature