

**How Students Develop a Sense of Belonging to
their Academic Community:
A Qualitative Study of Students' Experiences in a
For-Profit Entertainment Arts College**

by

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B.A. (Hons., Fine Art), McMaster University, 1998

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Abstract

How Students Develop a Sense of Belonging explores the experiences of non-traditional students during their first year of study at Entertainment Arts College, a broad-access for-profit private institution in a major city in British Columbia, Canada. The purpose of my study was to grapple with a practice-based problem: the unheard voices of non-traditional students in the for-profit private sector. Due to the paucity of research on students' sense of belonging in the Canadian post-secondary system, where few public and virtually no private-sector studies have occurred, I purposefully explored a broad range of factors in relation to the student participants' sense of belonging in this specific context.

At the post-secondary level most of the research studies that have focused upon the fit between the student and the institution have done so from an institutional perspective. To better acknowledge the agency and contexts of students, some researchers have turned to more dynamic fit concepts including students' sense of belonging. Building upon these examples, I utilized the concepts of belonging, structure and agency to explore how student participants negotiated their sense of belonging within The College's academic community. Qualitative methods included a quasi-ethnographic form of educational criticism. To co-construct student participants' cultural experiences, I conducted several phases of in-depth interviews and collaborated closely with entertainment arts students, faculty, and administrators throughout the student participants' first year of study. The participants were also encouraged to represent their perceptions about belonging in non-verbal ways by submitting creative artifacts such as artwork, poetry, and images to complement the primary data set.

Eight major themes emerged from the data including: a) Corporate Culture; b) Economic Capital, c) Academic and Artistic Capital, d) Self-Concepts, e) Support from Academic Staff, f) Student Participants' Representations of Self-Concepts, g) Support from Service-Based Departments, and h) Peer-Support. Multiple data-sets and the contributions of faculty and administrators' provided for a more holistic interpretation of student participants' sense of belonging. The findings revealed that their sense of

belonging is a multi-dimensional process that is more complicated than traditional research on the student-institution fit suggests. The implications for theory and practice at The College are discussed.

Keywords: fit concepts; sense of belonging, for-profit; higher education, ethnography; entertainment arts; structure and agency.

I dedicate my study to my wife who encouraged me to undertake grad school, and my children, Josh and Paisley, who I hope to inspire by achieving this goal. I also dedicate my study to those individuals who are on the academic fringes, who may at times experience self-doubt, anxiety, or question whether or not they have what it takes to adapt and overcome their fears. Finally, I dedicate my study to my father who was definitely an underdog of sorts. Somehow, he planted the notion that I might one day achieve this goal – a goal that was beyond his reach, but not his aspirations. In the true spirit of belonging, together we can overcome any obstacle.

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To my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Steve Marshall, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation for calmly and patiently steering me towards the conclusion of this project. I would also like to thank my committee member Dr. Michelle Nilson, for helping me believe that I belong to this process. Your invaluable input, guidance, and support were essential to this conclusion.

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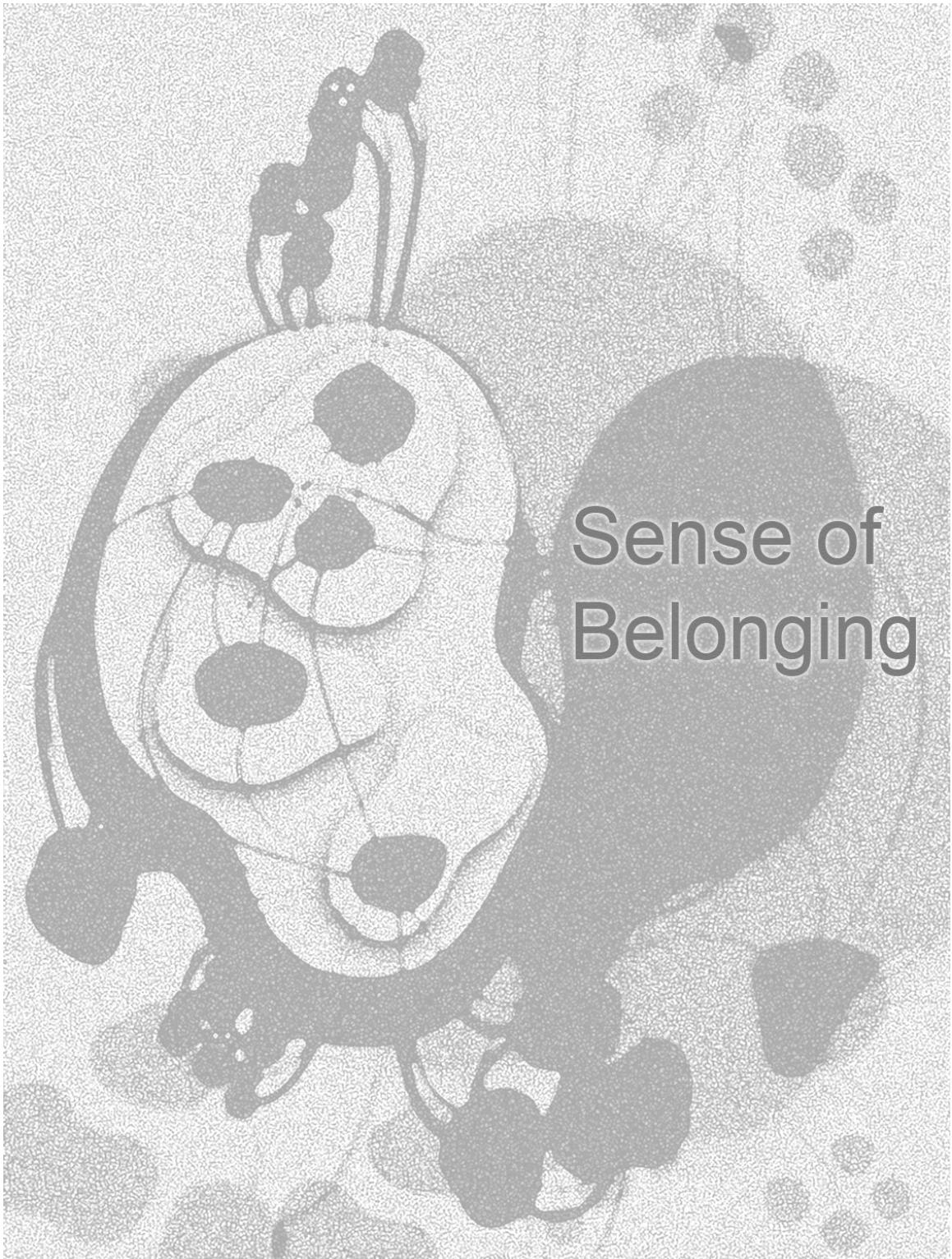
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List of Acronyms

EAC	Entertainment Arts College
EAI	Entertainment Arts Industry
EAP	Entertainment Arts Program
GVA	Greater Vancouver Area
IT	Information Technology
VFX	Visual Effects

Glossary

3D	3D refers to the production of digital or computer generated assets for entertainment arts programs as well as the entertainment arts industry. In the field of animation the term 3D originated with the advent of digital animated productions or the shift from analog, two dimensional classically animated films, to fully digital productions.
Entertainment Arts Industry	Greater Vancouver's local Entertainment Arts Industry spans the fields of Animation, Games, Film, Television, and Visual Effects. It is globally recognized as a hub for highly skilled workers and quality products including feature films, television, game productions and other entertainment properties.
Entertainment Arts Programs	Broadly defined entertainment arts programs may encompass any program that trains workers for Greater Vancouver's Entertainment Arts Industry. In relation to this study, Entertainment Arts Programs refer specifically to programs that train workers for the fields of animation, games and visual effects.
Greater Vancouver Area	The metropolitan area surrounding the city of Vancouver. Greater Vancouver is synonymous with the geographic area governed by Metro Vancouver's regional district.
Student-Centered Teaching	Broadly defined, student-centered teaching focuses upon the needs of the student, including for their abilities, interests, and learning styles. Theorists including John Dewey and Jean Piaget were influential in the movement towards student-centered teaching (Kember, 2009). Student-centered teaching is widely used in proprietary education in Canada (Skolnik, 2006).
For-Profit or Proprietary Institutions	Refers to for-profit post-secondary education institutions that do not operate on government funds secured through tax revenue in the United States and Canada. However, these proprietary institutions obtain revenue through government subsidized tuition (Kinser, 2006a). In Canada, for-profit proprietary institutions typically deliver fast-track career training certificate and diploma programs to non-traditional students (Skolnik, 2006); however, an increasing number of these institutions offer associate and bachelor-level degrees, particularly in the US (Kinser, 2006a)
Structural Research	Refers to studies on students' adaptive outcomes (e.g., Astin, 1993) that utilize the conditions of institutional social structures to explain what student-agents do and how they behave.
Visual Effects	Visual Effects or VFX refers to a range of film and television production services including but not limited to pre-visualization, 3D animation, compositing, and modelling.



**Sense of
Belonging**

1. Introduction

Only one half of a percent of all Canadians who were between the ages of 15 and 24 attended University in 1901 (Axelrod & Reid, 1989). In 2008, a national study developed by HRSDC reported that 79% of participants ($n=12,360$) aged 18 to 20 attended Canadian post-secondary institutions between 1999 and 2005 (Shaienks, Gluszynski, & Bayard, 2008). Andres (2004) reported that between “1984-85 and 1998-99” full-time enrolment in the community college sector increased by 25%, due primarily to the increased participation of non-traditional students including women, persons from diverse cultural and social-class backgrounds, Aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, as well as mature individuals (p. 1). Beginning in the post-World-War-II era and accelerating towards the end of the twentieth century, dynamic political, economic and social changes resulted in new access opportunities for students who were formerly underrepresented in Canada’s post-secondary system. The participation of new-comers has dramatically increased at the college-level, as these institutions focus specifically upon the needs of these relatively new, non-traditional populations. At a system level, increased demand for access has resulted in the development of for-profit private institutions in British Columbia and other provinces (Skolnik, 2006).

Improved participation rates do not necessarily mean that institutions are prepared to address concepts that are central to the success of non-traditional students, such as their sense of belonging to their academic communities. While access has generally improved due to the expansion of the system, today’s students are confronted by an increasingly complex post-secondary system - one characterized by public and private entities, differentiated mandates, new credentials, field professionalization, rising tuition costs, and varied funding sources (Andres, 2004). These dynamic shifts have escalated concerns about how post-secondary institutions are able to address the needs of non-traditional learners in Canada and around the world (e.g., Andres, Andruske, & Hawkey, 1996; Campbell & Li, 2008; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kember & Leung, 2004;

Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2004; MacFadgen, 2007; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Strayhorn, 2012).

Spady (1970) developed an influential research model to assess how various social and academic influences may inform a student's integration within their academic institution—he termed this phenomenon “normative congruence” (p. 40). Since this landmark study, most subsequent research investigating the fit between students and their institutions has fallen under the rubric of retention research. To a lesser extent, researchers have also utilized Holland's (1973, 1985) theory of person environment fit to explore the relationship between individuals' personality and educational environments (Feldman, Smart, & Ethington, 1999; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Smart & Umbach, 2007). Retention studies have generally focused upon traditional-aged student populations (18-24), where students lived on campus at four year colleges (Andres & Carpenter, 1997; MacFadgen, 2007), and have generally focused upon or extended Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) interactional retention model.

This body of research has generally precluded inquiry into non-traditional sub-populations and factors that are external to the institution's academic and social communities. In keeping with the theoretical underpinnings of Tinto's model, students' level of integration and ultimate decisions to stay or leave their educational program have been interpreted by measuring selected behaviors and dispositions that are believed to correspond to the act of dropping-out. Many studies that build upon Tinto's work often place the onus of integration into the institutional environment upon the student. Thus, they limit the role of the institution as well as exogenous factors in the process of integration. Hurtado and Carter (1997) noted that interactional retention models often emphasize participation in “mainstream activities” and do not consider the “social distance” between the activity and non-traditional participants who for a variety of reasons may not be comfortable participating in mainstream activities (p. 327).

These approaches emphasize the power of social structures. Furthermore, they lack focus on the agency and context of students, the complexity of the institution, and the diversity represented in academic communities. I respectfully suggest that such approaches are therefore not suitable for grappling with the complexity of the process of developing a sense of belonging at EAC. In recent years, there appears to have been a

movement to enhance what Andres and Carpenter (1997) have referred to as “early student-institution fit models” (p. 12). This is evidenced by research on students’ sense of belonging. Within this developing field there has also been a concerted effort to address the plight of non-traditional learners by focusing upon their agency, as well as multi-dimensional factors and external social structures that impinge upon their sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Read et al., 2003).

Most studies that focus upon students’ sense of belonging are situated in the United States (e.g., Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b; Strayhorn, 2012), the United Kingdom (e.g., Read et al., 2003; Yorke, 2004) and other countries including New Zealand (Campbell & Li, 2008), and China (Kember, Lee, & Li., 2001; Kember & Leung, 2004). Few studies have occurred at the post-secondary level in Canada (Marshall, Zhou, Gervan, & Wiebe, 2012). Furthermore, most of these studies occurred in public institutions. Kinser (2006a, 2006b) noted that for-profit institutions enrol high proportions of non-traditional students, including students who have lower levels of academic preparation. Little attention has been focused on how these institutions support student success (Kinser 2006b). What is lacking in research, then, is a an understanding of how non-traditional students develop a sense of belonging to their academic communities in for-profit private Canadian institutions and what factors contribute to or diminish their sense of belonging in these specific settings.

Focusing on non-traditional students, my study explores the complexity of their educational experiences and how they negotiate their own sense of belonging in a for-profit proprietary college setting, namely, Entertainment Arts College (EAC). Focusing centrally upon 24 in-depth student interviews as well as creative artifact submissions, the study is based primarily upon student participants’ subjective perceptions about the factors that contributed centrally to their belonging or fit within The College’s academic community. In addition, this study incorporates administrator and faculty data in order to lend multiple perspectives to students’ experiences and to develop a more complete interpretation of their sense of belonging. Within a conceptual framework that acknowledges multi-dimensional social structures, students’ individual agencies and experiences, I sought to broadly explore emergent themes and their connection to non-traditional students’ sense of belonging. This area of research remains largely

unexplored. I was unable to locate any studies that explored the contextual experiences and belonging of non-traditional students in the Canadian for-profit college sector.

This introductory Chapter contains a discussion about the context and significance of this study, my personal narrative, and the research questions. Chapter 2 provides an overview of relevant literature on sense of belonging in relation to: a) institutional environments; b) non-traditional students; c) economic capital; and d) the concept of sense of belonging in relation to interactional retention and environment-fit models. The rationale for adopting a multi-dimensional conceptual framework is also articulated in Chapter 2. I have included a description of my research methodology for conducting the quasi-ethnographic form of educational criticism is in Chapter 3. Findings in relation to theory and practice including recommendations for educational leaders, faculty, and student support staff at The College are presented in Chapters 4 and 5. Finally, Chapter 6 presents my conclusions as well as the limitations, and practical implications for The College.

1.1. Study Context

The purpose of my study was to enhance understandings about how non-traditional students developed a sense of belonging to their academic community at EAC, a publicly owned private for-profit college. Like their United States counterparts (Kinser, 2006a), in Canada, most for-profit private institutions have broad-access missions, offer career-focused undergraduate level programs to non-traditional learner populations, and appear to uphold “learner-centered” pedagogical models (Skolnik, 2006, p. 19). It appears that one key difference between Canadian and US systems is that there are far more stockholder-driven, or publicly owned institutions, in the US than there are in Canada. In the United States the growth of enrolments in for-profit private institutions has out-paced those in public and non-for-profit sectors “by an average of nine percent per year for the over the past 30 years” (Wilson, 2010, p. 1). However, little appears to be known about the quality or equity of learning opportunities in these settings, or how well these institutions are able to fulfill their mandates (Kinser, 2006a). In light of the success and remarkable growth of for-profit institutions like EAC, which are owned by publicly traded companies (Ruch, 2003), there is renewed concern about how

well for-profit institutions are able to serve the public good (Washburn, 2008). Given these conditions, it is a critical time to investigate the student experience in the Canadian for-profit sector.

Non-traditional students are those who “for a complex range of social, economic, and cultural reasons were traditionally excluded from or underrepresented in higher education” (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 309). Although some research has occurred in relation to student affairs at for-profit institutions in the United States (Kinser, 2006b), it remains to be fully understood how unsubsidized for-profit entities cope with the resource and support service demands of their clients and what impact such allocations make in terms of non-traditional students’ sense of belonging. Furthermore, little is known about the role that academic and social discourses play in constructing who belongs in mainstream institutions (e.g., Lehmann, 2007; Longdon, 2004; Magolda, 2000; Read et al., 2003; Reay, 1998), let alone for-profit institutions. How can for-profit private institutions level the playing field for non-traditional learners? Such concerns are increasingly vital to explore as non-traditional students are markedly different than conceptions of traditional students (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985) and formulate perceptions of belonging to their academic communities in different ways (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

As one of the larger for-profit private entities in British Columbia, EAC represents an ideal site to explore non-traditional students’ sense of belonging. This opportunity is made more valuable given The College’s location within the Greater Vancouver Area (GVA), where many public and for-profit private post-secondary are focused upon training workers for the local Entertainment Arts Industry (EAI), which spans the fields of Animation, Games, Film, Television, and Visual Effects. Vancouver’s EAI is globally recognized as a hub for highly skilled workers and quality products including feature films, television, game productions and other entertainment properties. This growth corresponds with cultural and technological transformations in the broader society, emerging industries, new and revolutionized occupations. Despite a demographic decline in traditional-aged college enrolments across Canada, Entertainment Arts Programs (EAPs) have experienced enormous growth over the last number of years in the GVA.

For example, between 2008 and 2010 private post-secondary program enrolments falling under the National Occupational Classification (NOC) code 5241, grew substantially from 1247 students to 1568, an increase of over 25% (Appendix A). This particular NOC code corresponds to occupational titles such as 3D Animator, Character Animator, Digital Animator – Artist, Electronic Games Designer. Code 5241 also corresponds to BC's second largest source of private enrolment revenue at \$24,535,269 (PCTIA, 2010). The popularity of entertainment arts has not been lost on public post-secondary institutions. In just the last decade significant cultural and capital investments occurred in the GVA. In 2007 the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT), the University of British Columbia, Emily Carr, and Simon Fraser University jointly launched The Centre for Digital Media and started BC's first Master's in Digital Media program (Centre for Digital Media, 2007). In 2012, Capilano University opened the Nat and Flora Bosa Centre—Western Canada's largest public post-secondary film and animation campus (Capilano University, 2012). Furthermore, in recent years, BCIT, Emily Carr, and the University of the Fraser Valley have added animation programs. Given strong public interest, high private sector tuition fees, and a favorable regulatory environment, many public institutions have run these programs for profit or at cost. The lack of scholarly interest in these emergent fields is perplexing considering their cultural impact and worldwide proliferation (Boellstorff, 2006).

Institution and program selection are important factors in a students' belonging (Read et al., 2003; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; Longden, 2004). The new field of entertainment arts education has a complex interrelationship with the stereotypical college student (18 to 24, likely supported by his/her parents, studying a major discipline full-time at a public institution, living in residence, and paying subsidized fees). For instance, in my practice I have noticed that many young adults believe that the act of making games in college will be synonymous with the act of playing them. Belonging to a new academic community is made more tenuous by the stereotypical student's lack of knowledge or ability to decode the academic field—the field of educational options, as well as potential career options. Selection is exacerbated by the sameness of marketing strategies and promised benefits. For instance, a number of institutions publicly claim to offer the best EAPs. Most tend to market smaller classes, personalized attention, industry faculty, superior resources, and software, etc.

Conceptions of one's fit within a social structure have arguably become more complicated due to changes in technology and society. The distinction between the individual and overlapping communities is blurred by technology and media that span local and global communities. Furthermore, young adults are generally immersed in consumer culture, and their ideologies may be formulated upon values such as "modern individualism", "free-agency", and "mutual benefit" (Taylor, 2004, p. 1, 17, 21). This emergent individualist and multi-dimensional view of the social/cultural world of young adults has particular relevance to The College's students, who frequently enroll at the formative stage of high school completion.

Given the heterogeneity of student populations in the Canadian post-secondary system there is a need for student-profile definitions to move away from broad categorizations towards the investigation of the biographical sequences that a student experiences on their way to post-secondary enrolment (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Non-traditional students may encounter many or all of the challenges that confront the stereotypical student. In addition, non-traditional students must also contend with their own unique individual attributes, background experiences, and unconventional "educational biographical sequences" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 314-315). These factors arguably make fitting into an academic social structure more complicated. Although I have characterized EAC's students as being non-traditional, this is a re-conceptualized use of the term. They are not non-traditional according to popular definitions that tend use shallow criteria such as being older than 24, not living in residence, and/or studying part-time (Bean & Metzner, 1985). MacFadgen (2007) was critical of such definitions and called for characterizations that speak to the "multifaceted nature" of non-traditional students' lives (p. 9). Other researchers have pragmatically defined non-traditional learners based upon the criteria of former exclusion or underrepresentation in post-secondary education, or in specific program areas (Agbo, 2000; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Building upon these ideas, I have utilized the term non-traditional in a more individualized and context-based manner.

My research draws upon the biographical sequence framework developed by Schuetze and Slowey (2002) to evaluate what constitutes a non-traditional learner in my study at EAC. This framework assisted in qualifying student-participants as non-traditional on the basis of one or more of the following criteria: a) unconventional

educational biographies or a meandering route to their program; b) unconventional entry qualification or entry without rigor; and c) modes of study that include accelerated patterns or intensified interaction between study and other aspects of life (Schuetze & Slowey, p. 315). In Chapter 3—Student Participants, I have characterized Schuetze and Slowey's (2002) model and participants' educational biographical sequences in more detail. For EAC's students, the process of belonging is inextricably linked to their non-traditional status and study context.

For-profit institutions generally target non-traditional learners (Kinser, 2006a). Consequently, many students in this sector have travelled unconventional pathways to arrive in their program. Their academic preparation and family background experiences are markedly different than those of the stereotypical student. For example, many researchers have attributed lower levels of economic, academic and cultural capital to non-traditional students (e.g., Kinser, 2006b; Lehmann, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Read et al., 2003). The intensity of study in for-profit programs is often accelerated. As opposed to conventional 3-term public sector programs, many programs in the for-profit sector run year-round in shorter terms or academic quarters (Kinser, 2006c). As such, the interaction between a non-traditional student's study-life and other obligations (i.e., domestic, work, and social) may be more complex and potentially more challenging (Kember et al., 2001).

In the context of British Columbia, public sector EAPs that are similar to those offered by EAC have limited seating and higher admissions requirements. For instance, The British Columbia Institute of Technology's 3D Animation certificate program enrolls two student cohorts annually in October and April (BCIT, 2012). EAC's 3D Animation diploma program has eight intake periods and no cohort maximum per intake. An art portfolio or equivalent is not required for entrance to The College's EAPs.¹ Admission requires proof of high school graduation or equivalent, and/or proof of mature status (19 years or older), as well as a short written statement. The College's promotional information appears to indicate that students need only be committed to their discipline and career goals to be successful. However, the College's admission criteria do not

¹ To maintain the anonymity of Entertainment Arts College, I elected not to provide information about The College that could be sourced by the public on The College's website.

guarantee or even assess if students possess even basic artistic capabilities or the academic skills necessary to complete their program. Given this, a key focus of my study was to increase understandings about how students' artistic literacy and academic preparation may or may not relate to their perceptions of belonging at The College.

To summarize the unique attributes of The College's general student population, I have drawn upon The College's 2011 Noel Levitz Survey (see Appendix B) to provide some distinctions about characteristics within the context of the literature on student retention and belonging. Many students who attend The College come from outside of Canada (13%). Although numbers of mature registrants are increasing (21% aged 25 or older), most enroll following high school completion. Given the low academic/experiential qualifications for entry, all EAC students' entry routes can be characterized as unconventional. Many have not demonstrated a propensity for academics as would be expected for comparable EAPs in the public sector. As there was no on-campus residence; all students commuted to The College. The general population had a wider range of developmental needs, steeper financial obligations, and generally lower levels of economic and cultural capital than the stereotypical college student. The College is not provincially subsidized; therefore, all students and/or their sponsors pay the whole cost of tuition. Despite institutional policies aimed at encouraging full-time study, almost half of the students surveyed (47%) expressed that they were working to subsidize their tuition costs. Most indicated that obtaining adequate financial aid was a challenge (Appendix B). Students' tuition costs are higher than those in competing public sector programs and some private institutions. I was interested to learn how these factors may impact student participants' sense of belonging, and to what extent EAC's mission, support services and learning model may address such factors.

As mentioned, The College's promotional materials describe a broad-access environment. Due to this, I have made the assumption that many students who select EAC do so in order to belong or perhaps to challenge traditional notions of higher education (e.g., elite or research-based institutions, quest for new knowledge). However, in a contradictory way many students enrolled at The College were precluded from having a variety of program choices due to lower academic qualifications. According to the Noel-Levitz student survey summary (2012), 23% of respondents

reported EAC as their second choice. Is the decision to attend EAC “resignation to the inevitable”—the acceptance of a dominant “disposition” on the part of the prospective student (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 372)? I aimed to discover from the student participants if selecting EAC was a logical choice—a place where they may belong; or, if it represented the opposite of an elite access route. Through the in-depth interview process and the analysis of creative artifacts, I observed how such factors relate to students’ sense of belonging.

As Read et al. (2003) stated, dominant academic cultures have the potential to shape and select who belongs by asserting “the wider socio-cultural construction and representation of the university, influencing individuals’ conceptions of themselves as [a] potential university student” (p. 261). From this perspective, my study at The College presents an intrinsically unique case. It remains to be understood how EAC’s academic community and the related EAI, for example, influence who belongs. I was intrigued to know if college rhetoric, such as the notion that every student can learn to draw, would bear out in reality; or if student participants’ individual agency may factor into their sense of belonging. Furthermore, I was interested in understanding how their experiences at The College related to available literature on non-traditional students’ sense of belonging

Given that many students at The College have come from working-class backgrounds, are first generation students and have travelled unconventional pathways to enroll in their programs, I also focused upon comprehending how these factors might relate to their compatibility within their new academic community (Brigham, 2012). For example, Pan-Canadian studies on post-secondary students’ trajectories illustrate an important connection between the value parents place upon post-secondary education and their children’s participation (Dietsche, 2007; Shaienks et al., 2008). For instance Shaienks et al. (2008) reported:

[The participation of] youth whose parents thought post-secondary education was important was almost two times higher (84%) than those whose parents thought it was not important (48%). Among those who attended post-secondary education, more than twice as many went to university compared to those whose parents thought post-secondary education was not important. (p. 11)

Researchers have also identified that belonging is particularly important for those students who perceive themselves to be on the “margins” of the academic community in cultural (Campbell & Li, 2008; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008a), linguistic (Kostogriz & Tsolidis, 2008), and social-class (Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2004; Ostrove & Long, 2007) terms. In this sense, belonging appears to be inextricably linked to overlapping social structures.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that practical factors such as commuting to school, not living in residence, and off-campus responsibilities (e.g., family, work, etc.) are linked to students’ sense of belonging (Kember & Leung, 2004; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983). As I will explain more in Chapter 2, I suggest that for non-traditional students, establishing a sense of belonging to their program at EAC may be a far more intricate and multi-factorial process than research under the rubric of interactional retention models and college impact have suggested.

EAC’s student population includes many non-traditional students. The College has a unique value proposition and many characteristics (e.g., accelerated learning paradigm) that are pertinent to the experiences of non-traditional learners. Therefore, as a study site EAC provided a unique opportunity to explore how non-traditional students develop a sense of belonging. Given the increasing participation of non-traditional learners in the post-secondary system, and the growth of for-profit education in British Columbia, Canada, and around the world, educators need a benchmark to frame future inquiry in this specific context. To accomplish this, I explored non-traditional students’ circumstances and experiences to ascertain which factors enabled or constrained their sense of belonging during their first year of study at The College. I employed a quasi-ethnographic form of educational criticism to investigate the process of belonging within the social structure of the academic community.

Relying primarily upon in-depth interviews, I augmented students’ rich narratives (24 interviews) by conducting analyses with several stakeholder groups including faculty and administrators who were directly involved with the student group. Furthermore, I gained a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon by analyzing the participants’ creative artifacts. Analysis of the findings permitted the development of factor themes

that were used for developing recommendations for institutional strategies to enhance non-traditional students' sense of belonging

Research at The College provided an excellent opportunity to assess the challenges that non-traditional learners face in a specific for-profit post-secondary institution, and to consider the specific resources and support programs that may be critical factors for enhancing their sense of belonging. When I undertook this project, EAC was a major entity in the provision of EAPs in the province of British Columbia. It offered a wide range of certificate, diploma, and degree-level programs in the fields of design, media, sound, and the culinary arts to over one thousand students. From the perspective of The College, my study has direct links to retention programs, the quality of the student experience and the institution's bottom line. Gaining a deeper understanding about how the College's primary clientele, non-traditional learners, develop a sense of belonging has provided The College with a vehicle to reflect upon current practices, and data relevant to the development of support programs for this specific group.

1.2. Personal Narrative

I have included a personal narrative to situate this project within the context of my practice as a former educational administrator at EAC, and to make explicit the key values that underscore my theoretical choices and methodological direction. The ethnographic approach dictates that researchers "be aware" and openly share their context/role in a manner that "honors and respects the participants" (Creswell, 2008, p. 485). As a former educational administrator at The College and given the privileged position of trust, I made known my personal assumptions about this study in an attempt to garner the trust of participants and to pursue investigative processes without influencing their contributions. Furthermore, I am more deeply entangled in the journey of the student participants having undertaken study and significant industry work in the entertainment arts sector. I believe that my own assumptions must be subjected to scrutiny and analysis to identify and potentially limit my authority in the research process.

Various aspects of my professional background informed my decision to research non-traditional students' sense of belonging. I was inspired to define my research topic by tapping into many of the issues that I care about and have focused my attention on throughout my professional career—namely, my previous responsibilities in higher education including educational leadership, program management, research, curriculum development and teaching. More specifically, I refer to my research on students' sense of belonging (Marshall et al., 2012), involvement in persistence programming, program development, institutional effectiveness initiatives, accreditation, and one-on-one work with at-risk students. A common inspiration for my practice is the transformative power of education as well as my interest in enhancing students' access opportunities and successful integration into academic life.

I decided to undertake a study involving non-traditional learners in the for-profit post-secondary sector as this group is often neglected in the literature. Based upon my practice, I have noticed that non-traditional learners often exhibit substantial needs and encounter barriers to their success. I suspected that such issues may be amplified in this for-profit post-secondary context. As mentioned, the entry routes of all EAC students are unconventional as there are no academic requirements nor equivalent experienced based assessment (e.g., portfolio) for acceptance to The College's EAPs. As such, my research largely stems from the frustration I felt with my inability to develop a program for academic departments to help enrolling students fully comprehend the scope of their educational choices—the hefty commitment required of full-time study, for example.

The plight of non-traditional learners is also personal, as I consider myself to be a member of this group. I am a first generation student who grew up in a working-class rural Ontario community. Neither of my parents completed a post-secondary degree program. Cognizant of my cultural capabilities and place, and despite being offered a modest scholarship, I opted against attending an affluent university in Ontario that had an excellent reputation for fine arts programming. Instead, I chose the institution that was not well known for fine arts programming but took a personal interest in me through an interview process. At the undergraduate level I struggled to decode the field of academia. It took me a considerable amount of time, 5 years to complete a 4 year Bachelor of Arts (Hons., Fine Arts) program and to learn how to be successful in

university. Interestingly, I performed much better in an applied post-graduate animation diploma program that more closely resembled the programs offered at EAC. To assimilate the field and language of academia, I needed to acquire skills that were not inherent to me or passed along from my family. Today, I am non-traditional in another sense, by virtue of my age and external responsibilities. With a robust leadership role higher education and a busy family life (one child in college and the other in daycare), I have returned to academia. I am keenly aware that my research questions, approaches, and data interpretations have been influenced by my professional and personal background experiences as well as my values.

1.3. Research Questions

As a foundation for this study, I constructed a primary research question that provided for an exploratory investigation of non-traditional students' sense of belonging, namely: "How do non-traditional students develop a sense of belonging to their academic community in a for-profit private Entertainment Arts College?" Two supplementary research questions were employed to guide the research and data collection. These are as follows: "What key factors contribute to or diminish non-traditional students' sense of belonging?" and "What actions should educational stakeholders at The College take to improve students' sense of belonging?"

As I will explain further in Chapter 3, to address the research questions I conducted a quasi-ethnographic form of educational criticism—a longitudinal study encompassing a series of in-depth interviews (63 in total) with three participant groups including: a) non-traditional students, b) faculty members, and c) administrators (see Figure 4—*Methodology Diagram*). I aimed to explore their specific college experiences and life circumstances including external factors that impacted their sense of belonging at The College during their first year of study. In every interview it was my goal to seek deeper levels of meaning through participants' own experiences and psychological perceptions. Therefore, I added another layer of data by analyzing students' creative artifact submissions (i.e., poems and artworks) in tandem with in-depth interview transcriptions.

It was my intention to assess the dynamic nature of students' experiences over time and space. At intervals during student participants' first year of study, I asked all participant groups questions corresponding to key themes in the literature on sense of belonging (Appendices E, F, and G). As explained in greater detail in Chapter 3, the questions focused on: a) the belonging concept and students' sense of belonging, b) students' support experiences and interaction at The College, c) exogenous factors including students' academic and artistic literacy, family and external life circumstances, and d) recommendations for the college. Furthermore, all participant groups were asked to submit creative artifacts (e.g., images, ideas, artworks, and writings) to supplement their interview responses about students' sense of belonging (Appendix D).

1.4. Summary

In this chapter I have situated Entertainment Arts College against the backdrop of an expanding and increasingly complex post-secondary landscape—one characterized by institutional differentiation, and new opportunities for non-traditional learners to engage in institutional cultures that possess broad-access mandates. Given the tremendous success and growth of publicly owned institutions and institution systems that are similar to the system EAC is a part of (e.g., University of Phoenix), and given the success of for-profit schools that offer popular programs in the entertainment arts, it is a critical time to investigate students' experiences in this sector. Locally in British Columbia, there appears to be no research on students' sense of belonging in the for-profit sector. EAC and many for-profits cater to non-traditional students, and have their own unique characteristics. However, little is understood about the factors that enable or constrain students' sense of belonging in this sector. Although the findings of this study are limited to the participants and EAC, my study provides what appears to be a window into the experiences of non-traditional students in an institutional context that is under-researched.

In Chapter 2, I illustrate what a sense of belonging is, its importance for students, and why it is a central concept in this study. As mentioned above, Chapter 3 fully explains my research methodologies. In relation to practice at EAC and the broader

literature on belonging, Chapter's 4 and 5 reveal the major themes that impacted student participants' sense of belonging. Chapter 6 discusses the limitations of the study's findings in greater detail, and synthesizes the implications for theory, practice, and policy.

2. Introduction to the Literature Review

In this chapter I have outlined the theory of belonging and research on students' sense of belonging in relation to educational environments, non-traditional students, and economic capital. In this analysis, I have presented a considerable amount of research that explains students' adaptive outcomes through structural and agent-driven conceptualizations of students' experiences. I made some distinctions between studies which follow Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) integration, Holland's (1973, 1985) environment-fit, and Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness. This analysis illustrates the theoretical limitations of structural integration models for the assessment of students' agency in relation to their experiences and outcomes. Using critical examples from the literature, I emphasize the need for new theoretical directions and methodological approaches to explore multi-dimensional aspects of students' sense of belonging.

In my analysis, I have highlighted various studies that emphasize the transformative capacities of student-agents and conceptions of the academic environment that are not bounded in spatial or temporal terms. Central to this review are studies that encompass broad conceptualizations of students and institutional agencies. This analysis was essential for selecting a theoretical paradigm that was appropriate for addressing the research questions or for exploring in-depth how students develop a sense of belonging to their academic community and for assessing the key factors that enable and constrain that process. Following other researchers, I have argued for a re-conceptualization of what it means to be successful in college (Pidgeon, 2008).

2.1. Definition of Terms

2.1.1. Academic Community

Drawing upon the work of Hays (1994), the academic community is constituted by its own durable "cognitive and normative" systems and those of other overlapping

cultural structures; the Academic Community's durable patterns are "both the shared product of human interaction and the producer of certain forms of human interaction" (p. 65). Non-traditional students at EAC therefore negotiate their sense of belonging amidst a complex structural system that is at least partially constituted and continually modified, whether subtly or significantly, by other sub-cultural structures as well as the experiences, views, and behaviors of agents in the academic community. From this perspective a student's sense of belonging to their academic community is informed by a broader range of factors than traditional retention models (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) and college impact models (Astin, 1993) suggest.

2.1.2. Agency

In my interactions with the participants I wanted to avoid the potential to conceive of students as merely passive agents, or agents who dutifully attempt to carry out reproduction of the social structure they inhabit, namely the academic community. I aimed to remain open to observing their active agency and role in forming a sense of belonging. For these reasons, I have drawn upon Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration to select an agency framework. Giddens's theory spans a reciprocal bridge (Giddens uses the term "recursivity") between structures and agents—it empowers and constrains both. Most importantly, his theory acknowledges that agents are capable of actions that have the potential to enact changes within the social structures they inhabit. In doing so they may modify and re-constitute structures. In discussing the concept of agency Giddens (1984) stated:

To be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends on the capability of the individual to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power... power is logically prior to subjectivity. (pp. 14-15)

Giddens' (1984) also posited that social patterns and conduct can be transformed by agents who decide to act differently than they have in the past (p. 9). These conceptual ideas were utilized in my study to capture in-depth insights into the agency of non-traditional students, faculty, and administrator participants, as well as their academic community and interrelated sub-cultures.

2.1.3. *Culture*

There are several ways I have applied the concept of culture analytically in my study. Culture is understood as the structural outcome of agents' social interactions, as well as being partially responsible for what agents do (Hays, 1994). The academic community at EAC is a culture and it is also the primary social structure of focus in my research. In this sense, I have applied the terms culture and structure as being essentially synonymous. I have tended to refer to the academic community as the primary social structure and have reserved the term sub-culture to describe other cultures that are not of central focus, but which overlap and intersect the academic community.

From the student perspective sub-cultures that intersect the academic community may include their connections to social communities that are not geographically situated on campus such as family, religious, or workplace communities. From an institutional perspective EAC's agents are also tied to sub-cultures including, for example, the corporate, regulatory, and Entertainment Arts Industry communities. All of these sub-cultures may have bearing upon a broadly defined academic community at EAC, its social patterns, and the actions and behaviors of students and college staff.

2.1.4. *Duality of Structure*

In general, I agree with Giddens's theory of the duality of structure or that structure is "both the medium and outcome of the practices that constitute social systems" (Giddens, 1981, p. 27). Sewell (1992) found that Bourdieu's habitus more concretely explained how agents acquire knowledge and enact it within social structures. Like Sewell, I do not view structure as being completely responsible for "all of agents' thoughts, perceptions and actions" without exception (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95). In *Duality, Agency, and Transformation* Sewell (1994) compellingly reconciled these issues, stating: "in the world of human struggles and strategems, plenty of thoughts, perceptions, and actions consistent with the reproduction of existing social patterns fail to occur, and inconsistent ones occur all the time" (p. 15). For the purpose of my study, I have adopted Sewell's (1994) definition of the duality of structure as follows:

Structures, then, are sets of mutually sustaining schemas and resources (or mental structures and objects) that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action. But their reproduction is never automatic. Structures are at risk, at least to some extent, in all of the social encounters they shape—because structures are multiple and intersecting, because schemas are transposable, and because resources are polysemic and accumulate unpredictably.

2.1.5. *Sense of Belonging*

Following other researchers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwseman, & Collier, 1992) I have defined students' sense of belonging as their need to develop mutually beneficial and positive interpersonal bonds within their academic community: the necessity to feel as though they are valued, accepted, and respected members of that community over time and space. To acknowledge the dynamic and multi-dimensional features of this definition, I conceived of this relationship in the broader sense of the academic community or in both intra and extra-institutional terms. Students' sense of belonging is conceived as being informed by multi-dimensional social interactions (past and present) that occur or manifest within the academic community and overlapping social structures or sub-cultures. In my study, as in the literature, the meanings of the terms sense of belonging and fitting in are to a certain extent synonymous and used interchangeably. The theoretical underpinnings of my study's sense of belonging definition are explored further in Chapter 3.

2.2. The Theory of Belonging

Many researchers have theorized the importance of having a "sense of belonging" in relation to human behavior, physical, and psychological health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In his theory of motivation, Maslow (1954) distinguished belongingness and love as being more fundamental than needs such as self-actualization and esteem. Research on belongingness and related concepts can be found in the fields of nursing, psychiatry, and in education. Therefore, the concept of belonging has been interpreted in a number of ways. In the field of psychiatry, sense of belonging has been defined as a "sense of personal involvement in a social system so that persons feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system" (Anant, 1966, p. 21). At the

adolescent school-level, Goodenow and Grady (1993) defined belonging as “the extent to which they (adolescent students) feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment” (p. 60-61). In higher education Johnson et al. (2007) theorized that belonging describes students’ “fundamental need to feel that they are an important part of a larger community that is valuable, supportive, and affirming” (p. 527). Similarly, from the literature on student affairs, belonging is a central concept in Schlossberg’s (1989) theory of mattering.

Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) meta-analysis of the empirical literature on belongingness demonstrates the utility of this concept for explaining human motivation and behavior. These researchers proposed belonging to be a basic, almost universal need in humans—“a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that belonging needs may explain why humans seek power, achievement, interpersonal connections and the approval of others (p. 498). With few exceptions, the empirical evidence they examined revealed that, when satisfied, the need for belonging is associated with improved health, stability, and positive emotions (e.g., happiness, calm, and elation) in humans. By contrast, the absence of belonging was associated with more physical and psychological health related problems in humans. For example, Baumeister and Leary (1995) noted that illness, conflicts, anxiety, depression, and negative emotional responses (e.g., hostility, loneliness, and jealousy) are associated with the absence of belonging. In more extreme situations, the deprivation of healthy bonds was linked to pathologies, crime, disorders, and suicide (p. 511).

Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) findings suggest that humans are driven to invest a lot of energy to form positive interpersonal bonds with others. When belonging is satisfied, it appears that less energy is spent thinking about it, seeking it, and more energy can conceivably be dedicated to other activities. Given the social nature of education that, at the core, features interpersonal relationships of teachers and students, and students and their peers, these findings have significant implications for educational contexts. The concept of education as a social enterprise is not new. Dewey (2007) suggested that education process was analogous to “community life” and like community

life he said it “requires thought and planning” (p. 23). Dewey implicated the educator as playing a critical role in ensuring all students have an opportunity to contribute to the social process of learning:

The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activity ties to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something. (p. 23)

If Dewey is correct, it stands to reason that belonging may explain a lot of students’ decisions, behaviors, and outcomes in relation to how their teachers plan and organize their educational experiences.

2.3. Sense of Belonging and Education

2.3.1. *Institutional Environments and Sense of Belonging*

Organizational research has long incorporated a basic relationship between worker personality, environment, and worker outcomes (Holland, 1973). More recently, research examining student success in education has explored the relationship between students’ sense of belonging, institutional culture and/or practices, and students’ outcomes. The concepts associated with students’ sense of belonging and educational environments are diverse and have been applied in different ways. For example, at the adolescent and elementary school levels researchers have studied school-belonging (Goodenow, 1993), identification with school (Finn, 1989), school climate or cohesion (Stewart, 2008), sense of community (Osterman, 2000), and caring communities (Solomon & Battistich, 1993). Similarly, at the post-secondary level researchers have examined institutional governance (Astin, 1993), campus climate (Hoffman et al., 2002), campus racial-climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007), university and campus belonging (Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Schlossberg, 1989) in relation to students’ sense of belonging and other critical outcomes.

Many educational researchers have suggested that students’ sense of belonging is one of the most vital factors relating to student success (Finn, 1989; Hoffman, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). Sufficient

evidence exists to verify that when students experience a sense of belonging in relation to their institutional culture or cultural practices, they experience positive behavioral and affective outcomes (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000; Osterman, 2000). Researchers have also examined the impact that working conditions have on faculty practice (Johnson, 1990; Lieberman, 1988; Solomon, Battistich, Kim, & Watson, 1996), belonging (Bosetti, Kawalilik, & Patterson, 2008), and job satisfaction. These studies have highlighted collegiality as a vital factor that impacts faculty performance, motivation, and therefore the student experience. Given this knowledge there has been some effort to enhance faculty member's sense of community in educational institutions (Kruse & Louis, 1997). However, few intervention-based approaches have been aimed at enhancing students' sense of community (Battistich et al., 2000; Solomon et al., 1996). As a concept sense of community may be understood according to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belonging hypothesis—in terms of how well an individual's belonging needs are satisfied by feeling valued through mutually supportive interpersonal experiences in a group context.

Efforts to adjust institutional cultures have occurred at the elementary school level. Solomon et al. (2000) employed an intervention-based program aimed at creating a caring institutional community in 24 schools in six United States districts over a three-year period of time. The effort to shift the institutional culture towards a caring community involved class-level, school-wide, parent-based participation, and a full program of initiatives. Solomon et al. (2000) based the project upon some underlying assumptions about the institutional environment and socialization, and the belonging needs of students:

- The social context of the school is critically important for fulfilling basic personal and social needs of students.
- Having these needs met is a prerequisite for promoting positive student development in schools.
- It would be possible to deliberately create school contexts that could meet these needs and thereby help bring about optimal student outcomes in a broad range of areas – social, ethical, and intellectual. (p. 4)

The project was also premised upon the notion that good institutions support students' psychological needs to:

- Belong to a social group whose members are mutually supportive and concerned.
- Have age-appropriate opportunities to be autonomous, self-directing and influential.
- Feel competent and effective in valued activities. (p. 4)

The results of the study demonstrated that institutions that made substantial reform progress observed benefits in students' personal attitudes, value orientations, and motivations. Benefits in academic performance were also found at institutions with a consistent reform effort and sense of community (premised upon a sense of belonging) was found to be a significant variable in relation to all of the dependent variables.

Similar findings in relation to students' sense of belonging through supportive peer and faculty relationships have been found at the adolescent (Stewart, 2008) and college school-levels (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Other researchers have identified strong connections between students' perceptions of a hostile racial campus climate and their sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan. 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008b). Findings from these studies demonstrate that belonging is also connected to various outcomes including for example students' integration, social adjustment, and academic performance. For example, Stewart (2008) found that students who felt as though their teachers and friends were supportive were more likely to form bonds with their institution, demonstrate positive academic behaviors, and have higher GPAs (p. 19). Pittman and Richmond's (2008) study suggests important links between students' friendships, college sense of belonging, and students' social adjustment to college (p. 357). Furthermore, Hurtado and Carter (1997), and Hurtado and Ponjuan (2004) found that Latino students' perceptions of a hostile racial climate were significantly related to college adjustment and integration. One variable omission from these studies is the absence of institutional governance as a potential factor relating to students' sense of belonging.

In discussing college impact on students' outcomes, Astin (1993) said that "environmental assessment is not only the most difficult and complex challenge in the field of higher education research, but it is also the most neglected topic in the assessment literature" (p. 33). Astin's research aims to explain a variety of student outcomes through environmental variables including governance, curriculum, research orientation, instructional strategies, and a wide range of faculty and peer characteristics

(e.g., liberalism, age, stress, socio-economic status, etc). Astin was one of the first researchers to map a typology of environmental characteristics across many institutions in relation to students' adaptive outcomes. Of particular relevance to my study at EAC, Astin's 1993 study accounted for environmental differences in relation to students' outcomes partly on the basis governance-type (i.e., public, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and nonsectarian). However, I presume due to the timing of Astin's (1993) study, it did not account for governance in stockholder-driven for-profit institutions that began to emerge in the 1990s (Kinser, 2006; Rush, 2003).

Rush (2003) noted differences between stockholder-driven governance in for-profit schools and stakeholder-driven models found in the public and not-for-profit private post-secondary sectors. Specifically, Rush highlighted that in stockholder-driven models everyone is aiming for the same goal—greater shareholder value. However, Rush also indicated that stockholder driven models are impacted by global economic trends in a way that is different than other institution types—stock price volatility.

At the time of my study, EAC was a wholly owned subsidiary of a major education corporation whose parent company was publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange. Corresponding to the literature, many vital decisions were enacted at The College to return shareholder value and drive the bottom line. Frequently, decisions were made to satisfy short term revenue needs as opposed to building shareholder value for the long term. Therefore, I speculated that short term decisions would in some cases have an impact on The College staff and may possibly be observed by students. I was unable to locate any literature linking stockholder-driven governance to students' sense of belonging. Therefore, this is an area in the literature on belonging that I aimed to address with my study.

2.3.2. Sense of Belonging and Non-Traditional Students

Many educational researchers have suggested that students' sense of belonging is one of the most important concepts to consider in relation to the success and outcomes of non-traditional learners (Finn, 1989; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Read et al. 2003; Solomon et al., 2000). Studies on students' sense of belonging have focused on many different types of non-traditional learners. For example, at the adolescent and

elementary school levels, researchers have studied sense of belonging in relation to students from poor and working-class families, ethnic minorities, students with lower English speaking proficiency, and lower levels of prior achievement (Battistich, 2000; Goodenow, 1993b; Goodenow & Grady; Solomon et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 2000). At the post-secondary level many researchers have also utilized the belonging concept, or the related concept of integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993) to assess the outcomes of a wide range of non-traditional student types. Belonging has been a useful construct in research upon ethnic minority students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Stayhorn, 2008a, 2008b, 2012), working-class or students from lower socio-economic strata (Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2004; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Read et al., 2003), part-time (Kember et al., 2001; Kember & Leung, 2004), international (Campbell & Li, 2008; Chan & Drover, 1997), first generation students (Brigham, 2012), and mature students (Macfadgen, 2007).

In relation to non-traditional students, the application of belonging as a theoretical construct has been used primarily to assess students' adaptive outcomes and less frequently to assess the impact of institutions on students. At the individual student level belonging and similar concepts have most frequently been examined in relation to adjustment to the educational environment, retention, academic performance, and learning outcomes (Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kember et al., 2001; Lehmann, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Macfadgen, 2007; Stayhorn, 2008a). To a lesser extent belonging has been implicated in students' pluralistic orientations (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), diverse ethnic interactions (Stayhorn, 2008b), and coping mechanisms (Kember & Leung, 2004). At the institution level, a few studies have assessed students' sense of belonging in relation to dominant academic discourses or cultural constructions of higher education (Campbell & Li, 2008; Chan & Drover, 1997; Read et al., 2003), as well as the impact caring of communities upon students' outcomes (Battistich, 2000; Solomon et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 2000).

Based upon my experiences with non-traditional students at EAC, I suspected that another vital factor to explore specifically in relation to their sense of belonging to their academic community in this specific context would be their economic capital levels.

2.3.3. Sense of Belonging and Economic Capital

By economic capital I refer specifically to student participants' ability to assess the value proposition of study at EAC—the benefits (e.g., credential recognition, expected earnings in the EAI, ability to pay down debts) versus the costs (e.g., tuition, living expenses, loans, budgeting for their entire experience, etc). I am also referring to students' actual material funds. To assess value propositions I have theorized that students will draw upon their past experience inventories. In particular, I suspected that family socialization with respect to finances (e.g., spending habits, ideas about money management, etc) may play a vital role in student participants' abilities to assess the value proposition of study at EAC.

Given the complexity of EAC students' financial strategies (as will be seen in Table 4—*Student Participants' Educational Financial Strategies*, p. 62), their first generation status (as will be seen in Table 3—*Additional Educational Biographical Participant Data*, p. 64), I was particularly interested in the research that has illustrated connections between students' social-class backgrounds or economic capital and their sense of belonging (Longden, 2002; Lehmann, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Solomon et al., 1997; Read et al., 2003). In a study of 324 students at the post-secondary liberal arts college in the United States, Ostrove and Long (2007) found that students' social class background had significant implications in terms of their sense of belonging, adjustment to college, and academic performance. Their study suggested that class-background, assessed both objectively and subjectively, explains a wide range of behaviors and outcomes in students through a sense of belonging. Ostrove and Long (2007) explained:

Class background structures a sense of who belongs and who does not, but also that a sense of belonging has crucial implications for college experience and performance. It is possible that feeling that one does not belong affects the extent of participation in class, willingness to seek help as needed and other critical behaviors that influence college success. (p. 381)

In a qualitative study of 25 students at an affluent Ontario university Lehmann (2007) found that class-cultural discontinuities and feelings of "not fitting in" or "not being able to relate to other students" explained the participants' reasons for not completing their

programs (p. 89). Lehmann's study is also important because it reveals a critical association between class-status and being a first generation student, and success in school through a sense of belonging. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with similar studies that were conducted with students at elite and state colleges in the United States (Aries & Seider, 2005), and a United Kingdom university (Longden, 2002). Longden (2002) and Lehmann's (2007) studies provide student accounts of the minuscule social processes involved in the construction of one's self as not belonging or what Read et al. (2003) has referred to as "otherness" (p. 262).

These studies have clarified some of the challenges students of working-class backgrounds experience when attending affluent institutions or institutions where they represent a minority class-culture; however, they say little about what the process of belonging looks like for working-class students who attend broad-access institutions like EAC. Read et al. (2003) examined the impact of social class upon the experiences of 175 students attending a broad-access college in the United Kingdom that enrolled a high population of non-traditional learners. Most of the students participating were of working-class backgrounds. The participants selected a broad-access institution perhaps to have a better chance of fitting into the academy, or due to lower academic qualifications. The researchers revealed that such propositions are shaped or constrained by the way in which the institution itself is socially constructed. Read et al. (2003) explained:

Even in institutions that have a high proportion of 'non-traditional' students, the culture of the academy itself still in many ways reflects the dominant discourse of the student as young, white, middle-class and male. Students should be able to feel that they can 'belong' in any higher education institution. This will not happen whilst 'elite' institutions still remain the province of 'traditional' students, government funding remains geared to the perpetuation of such elitism, and the prevailing academic culture of all institutions—despite the make-up of the student body—reinforces feelings of student 'alienation' rather than 'belonging'. (p. 275)

Taken together these studies (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2002; Ostrove & Long; Read et al., 2003) appear to suggest that students' of lower class-backgrounds experience considerable belonging challenges regardless of whether or not the institution is elite or broad-access. However, these studies do little to demonstrate

what can be done to remedy class-related belonging issues in practice. Ostrove and Long (2007) noted that the knowledge of a linkage between lower social-class position and belonging is not particularly helpful to students; however, the knowledge that this occurs through a sense of belonging does have positive implications for intervention-based research. Moreover, the literature on belonging and economic capital does not capture the impact of higher tuitions and accelerated learning paradigms on non-traditional learners—factors that are typical of EAC and many for-profit institutions.

To draw once more upon the research of Solomon et al. (1997), their longitudinal study involving 24 elementary schools suggested that students' perceptions of a caring institutional community (premised upon belonging) seemed to be positively related to a broad range of beneficial outcomes including liking school, motivation for study, improved attitudes, and behaviors. These associations were found in schools with non-traditional learners including large populations of students from poor families. In fact, sense of caring community was found to be more beneficial for students from poor families than for mainstream students. Such findings in relation to social-class are contrary to the general literature on socio-economic-status and college performance (e.g., Walpole, 2003). Furthermore, two intervention-based research projects involving students' sense of belonging at the post-secondary level have proven to be useful in mitigating feelings of alienation, enhancing students' persistence and academic outcomes (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). Research that explores what institutions can structurally do to affect sense of belonging globally seldom occurs. However, this type of research may have important implications for the future of educational policy with respect to the success of non-traditional students.

In selecting a research design, I found it beneficial to analyze the theory and practice of popular retention and college impact models as compared to more dynamic student-environment fit models.

2.3.4. *Perspectives on Integration, Environment Fit, and Sense of Belonging*

In this section it was not my purpose to provide an in-depth review of the extant literature on retention in higher education. However, it was centrally important to unpack

the concept of students' sense of belonging in relation to Spady's (1970, 1971) and Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) interactional retention models, or more precisely the concept of integration that features prominently in retention and belonging research in higher education. Many researchers have been mindful of the theoretical differences and meanings the terms belonging and integration carry (Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al. 2007; Lehmann, 2007). Others have treated these terms as though they are synonymous (Hausmann et al., 2007; Kember & Leung, 2004), and this has contributed to confusion in how these concepts are to be understood. Therefore, a key aim of this section is to make distinctions between the underlying meanings of these concepts, and make clear the roles and powers they have afforded agents and social structures in research on student success. To accomplish this task, this review frequently references Tinto's interactional retention model—one of the most influential retention theories in higher education (Longden, 2004). I have also drawn upon a body of belonging, retention, and college impact research considered to be most relevant for this analysis.

Astin (1993) suggested that program completion and credentialing are of great importance to students, parents, educators and policy makers (p. 186). Therefore, it is not surprising that an enormous body of research on student retention has been conducted since the 1970s. Retention or persistence is a student outcome that has been closely associated with students' sense of belonging from both theoretical and research practice perspectives. Many studies at both the adolescent (Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000; Solomon et al., 1997) and post-secondary (Hoffman, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kember et al., 2001; Madgett & Belanger, 2008; Osterman, 2000) level have provided evidence that has revealed a strong relationship between retention, or program completion, and the presence of a sense of belonging in students

Unlike research on students' sense of belonging at the adolescent and elementary school levels (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Solomon et al., 1997), many prominent post-secondary studies on students' sense of belonging are based at least in part on Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Kember et al., 2001; Kember & Leung, 2004; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008a; 2008b). Similarly, other researchers who have examined students' sense of belonging have sought to enhance

Tinto's interactional model (Hoffman, 2002; Hurtado & Carter 1997; Johnson et al., 2007). The undeniable influence of Tinto's model on the scholarship of belonging in higher education is important considering the model's structural character.

Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto developed interactional retention models to analyze the phenomenon of drop-out in higher education by operationalizing Durkheim's (1951) theory of social causality. More precisely, they premised their model upon the concept that human acts are explicable through the enabling and constraining powers of the social structure they inhabit—the compatibility between humans and social structures. In this manner the act of leaving college can be explained by one's integration within an educational institution in the same way that the act of suicide can be understood as being tied to one's relationship with the larger society (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975).

Curiously, Spady's integration construct included a distinct sense of belonging measure, which he used to access students' psychological perceptions about general campus warmth and interpersonal relationships. However, by measuring what he referred to as students' "reactions" to campus warmth, he thus reinforced the structural view that agents' acts, in this case reactions, are determined by social structures (p. 44). Nevertheless, Spady's sense of belonging marks an important way for researchers to acknowledge students' agency in the integration process—by accessing their psychological perceptions. Moreover, in Spady's (1971) study integration is operationalized by students' sense of belonging (p. 44). Many researchers who have adapted Tinto's integration model have done so by building upon Spady's (1971) agency-driven concept of sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007). However, such views of integration (operationalized by belonging) did not gain traction in belonging literature at the post-secondary level until nearly four decades after Spady's (1971) study.

Unlike Spady's model, belonging was not a prominent theoretical concept in Tinto's (1975) original theory or subsequent revisions (1987, 1993). Researchers' have noted that Tinto's (1993) model emphasizes the need for students to integrate into the dominant social structure rather than the structure fitting the student (Hurtado & Carter; Johnson et al., 2007; Tierney, 1992), or some measure of integration on the part of both

the student-agent and the academic community. From this perspective Tinto's agent-structure relationship is appears structurally rather than student orientated. In other words Tinto has explicated integration based upon one's observable behaviors as opposed to what one feels, thinks or perceives (subjectivism). This finding is antithetical to the social/psychological origins of the belonging concept (Maslow, 1954; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

As noted, Tinto's basic assumptions about students' integration within educational environments have been influential and broadly perpetuated in retention and belonging research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). A variety of studies generally confirm the usefulness of Tinto's interactional retention model for predicting withdrawal (e.g., Gilbert, Evers, & Auger, 1989; Grosset, 1991; Madgett & Belanger, 2008; Munro, 1981; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). However, today's students and institutions scarcely resemble those Tinto's model was designed for: full-time students attending a private residential university (Longden, 2004). Andres et al. (1996) remarked that Tinto's model and those based upon it "locate individuals within the post-secondary institution and emphasize the effectiveness of the individual to integrate socially and academically into the institution" (p. 4). Similarly, Johnson et al. (2007) reported that many researchers have found Tinto's conception of integration to be problematic because it "emphasizes student, rather than institutional responsibility for change and adaptation" (p. 525-526). Moreover, Bensimon (2007) and Pidgeon (2008) argued that Tinto's concept was culturally insensitive (i.e., to different modes of knowledge production) and therefore poorly suited for studies involving non-traditional learners who are cultural minorities. Correspondingly, the model has been problematized in belonging research that has focused upon the agency of students—studies dealing with non-traditional learners (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1987; Hurtado & Carter, 1997, Johnson et al., 2007; Kember & Leung, 2004; Lehmann, 2007).

In making claims about the structural disposition of Tinto's model, it is illuminating to consider the status he afforded the model's core integration concept. Tinto (1975) described the importance of integration on two critical fronts: being academic and social integration (p. 96). This featured status is nevertheless a subsumed status in Tinto's model (Figure 1). Integration is conceived of as a sub-analytic framework within the

drop-out model or as a component of a linear student-institution fit process that contributes to students' ultimate decisions to stay or leave school.

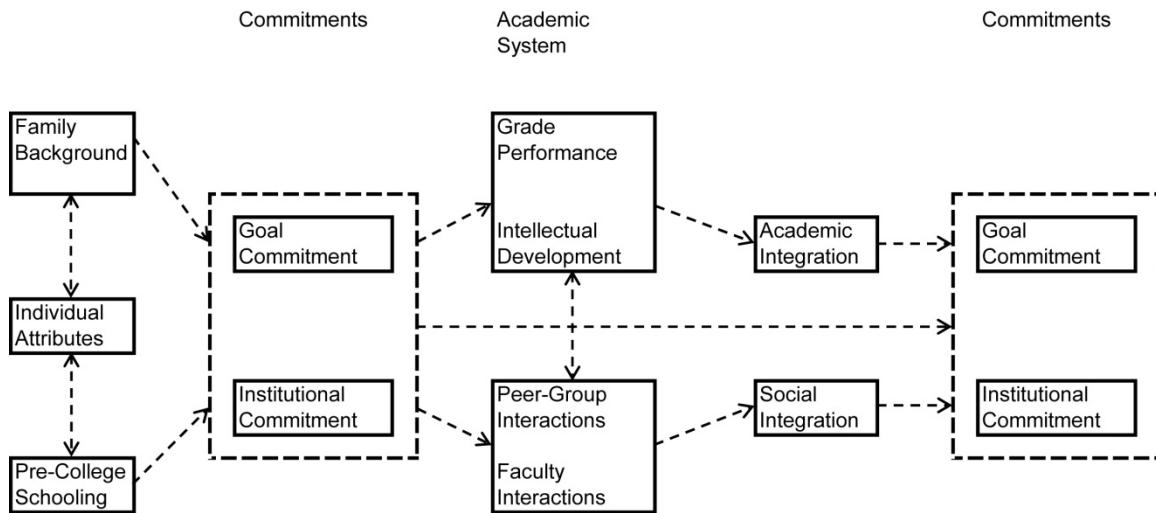


Figure 1. Tinto's Conceptual Schema for Drop-Out (Tinto, 1975)

Note. Tinto (1975); taken from A theoretical synthesis of recent literature. Review of Educational Research, 45(1), p. 95.

In Tinto's conceptual terms, integration appears to be institutionally bounded and removed from broader social contexts or external sub-cultures that may impinge upon the academic community and students' negotiation of fit throughout their educational cycle. Tinto's model and many based upon do not fully consider the social-psychological dimensions of withdrawal. The model runs the risk of confusing the researcher's external interpretation of "culture as a schema, script, or cognitive map", with the real experiences of the students within the academic community – the "intersubjective domain of experience, one that takes shape not in individual heads but in social relations" (Boellstorff, 2006, p. 31).

There is a certain amount of dissonance between Tinto's writing's on drop-out, which he has described as a "highly idiosyncratic event—one that can be fully understood only by referring to the understandings and experiences of each and every students who departs", and the manner in which his model describes the process of integration (Tinto, 1987, p. 39). Tinto's model utilizes static data inputs to proxy for

complex social and psychological factors in the student-institution fit process—family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling, for example. Such complex variables are therefore not conceptualized as interacting and informing students' integration and therefore intentions to persist throughout their college experience. From an alternative theoretical lens such as Holland's (1985) theory of environment-fit, Tinto's theory of integration appears not to account for the dynamic quality of students' personality (Figure 2).

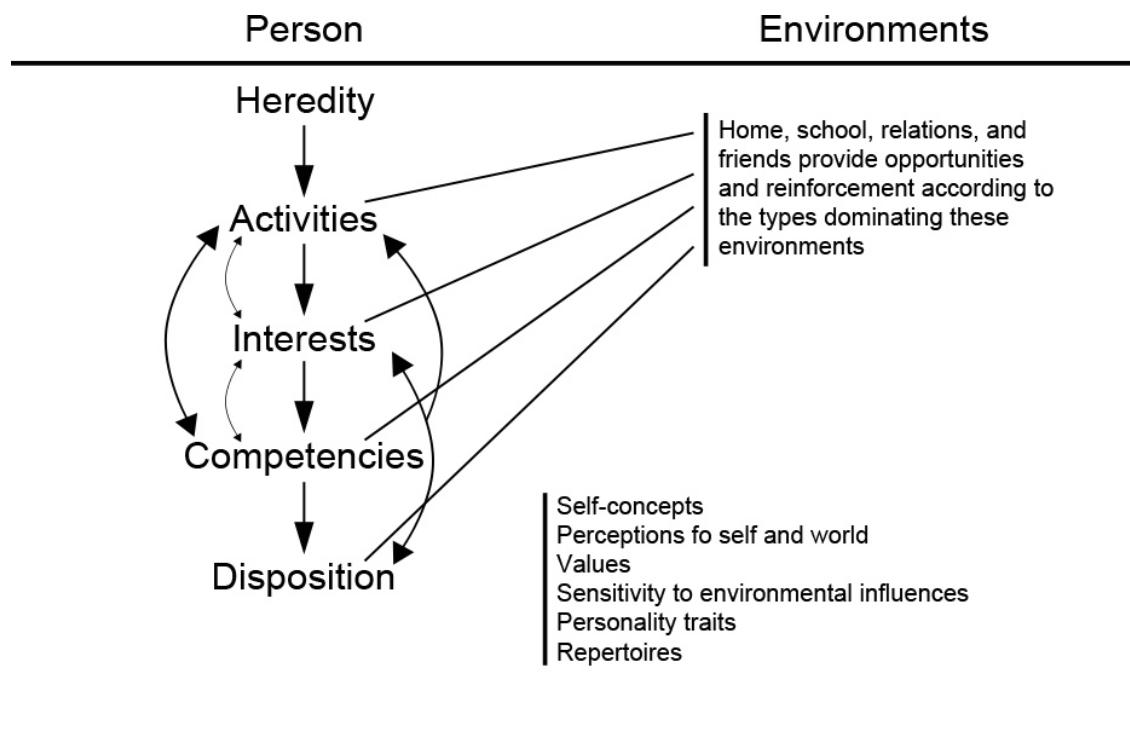


Figure 2. How Personality Types Develop (Holland, 1985)

Note. Holland (1985); taken from Making Vocational Choices. Prentice-Hall. Englewood Cliffs, p. 18.

Over the last 20 years there has been growing use of Holland's (1973, 1985) person-environment fit theory to examine students' compatibility with educational environments in relation to "patterns of change and stability in the attitudes, interests, and abilities of college students" (Smart & Umbach, 2007, p. 183). Holland's theory is premised upon a number of powerful assumptions. Much like Gidden's (1984) concept

of agent's knowledgeability and Bourdieu's (1991) concept of the habitus, Holland's concept of personality is premised upon an inventory of experiential and biological dispositions which constantly inform a person's perception of self in relation to their environment. In other words Holland's personality is an agent-driven concept. Unlike Tinto's (1975, 1987) assimilationist view of integration, fitting in for Holland is not simply a one-way proposition; it also encompasses the characteristics of the environment. One of the key tenets of Holland's theory is that the fit of students in educational environments is associated with satisfaction, stability and enhanced achievement. Empirical evidence generally supports the validity of this hypothesis (Feldman, Smart, & Ethington, 1999; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Smart & Umbach, 2007)

Although Tinto's theory of discusses a variety of exogenous variables that may influence students' sense of fit (e.g., socio-economic status, family support, high school climate), he also states that a student's "own ability (at the college level) is even more important" (p. 100). Perhaps this accounts for why many researchers in the field have passed over the study of exogenous variables in retention research, such as Holland's (1985) personality. Most have focused upon institutional variables, or academic integration, by utilizing objective measures of academic performance (Grayson, 1998; Iverson; Madgett & Belanger, 2008; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1997).

More recently, Tinto's conceptualization of the institution's academic and social domains has been criticized, as they preclude notions of interplay and interdependence between these structures in both intra and extra-institutional terms. For example, Tucker (1999) stated that Tinto's discrete conceptions of these systems are "arbitrary and not really distinct, especially in the minds of students" (p. 170). Other researchers have questioned Tinto's de-emphasis of seemingly exogenous factors upon students' college lives, and the notion that students need to separate from prior communities in order to completely integrate into the college environment (e.g., Andres et al., 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Giddens (1984) theorized that "time-space relations cannot be pulled out of social analysis" (p. 286). Similarly, Kostogriz and Tsolidis (2008) stated that the perception of "bounded places" deemphasizes "how places, or rather groups of people

that are situated in them, occupy social space and hence enter into relationships with other places" (p. 129). From these theoretical viewpoints a student's potential to develop a sense of belonging within their academic community is not solely predicated upon their level of integration within the institutional system, but may extend to enabling and constraining social forces that operate both within and outside of the institution.

I argue that Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory and popular studies based upon his model diminish the scope of the academic community (as defined in my study) and preclude or anecdotally acknowledge the role of non-institutional factors or other sub cultures in the students' integration within educational structures. This may be due to Tinto's conceptualization of the institution, which he has treated as being parallel to but separate from the larger society, and therefore other social structures and communities that may impinge upon it. Building upon Spady's (1971) conceptualization of the academic community as a social system, Tinto (1975) states:

When one views the college as a social system with its own value and social structures, one can treat dropout from that social system in a manner analogous to that of suicide in the wider society. One can reasonably expect, then, that social conditions affecting dropout from the social system of the college would resemble those resulting in suicide in the wider society. (p. 91)

Tinto's construction of a quasi-reality within an institutional vacuum diminishes the potential field of variables in the process of integration. From an alternative theoretical lens such as Giddens' (1984) duality of structure or Holland's (1985) environment-fit framework, Tinto's bounded notion of the academic community seems contrived and diminishes the complexity of students' actual educational experiences.

Given these challenges, a number of researchers have called for new retention theories (Pidgeon, 2008; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora 2000). Others have adapted or passed over Tinto's model to address these static/mainstream notions of what are complex and multi-dimensional factors such as students' minority (e.g., Strayhorn; 2008a, 2008b) and social status (Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2004; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Reay et al., 2001). In the literature, there are a handful of studies in the fields of retention and belonging that link the institution to other social communities. For example, Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that successful integration and adjustment to college are positively influenced by parental support and encouragement. This latter

finding is contrary to Tinto's (1987) theoretical assumption that college adjustment is predicated upon severing background community ties.

Similarly, another study explained the withdrawal decisions of non-traditional students based upon their perceived lack of cultural capital, or their cultural incongruence with the institutions they attended (Longden, 2002). Here, cultural capital can be viewed as a multi-dimensional variable that is presumably informed by a student's background or home experiences (which manifest during their program), as well as constrained or enabled by the educational system (e.g., political factors, institutional cultures), that may or may not be equipped to address the needs of non-traditional students with lower levels of cultural capital. Hurtado and Carter (1997) remarked "for Latino students who attended a predominantly white university, feeling at home in the campus community is associated with maintaining interactions both within and outside The College community", including membership in religious and other social communities (p. 338). Furthermore, in the field of nursing Hagerty, Williams, and Oe's (2002) research suggests that the sense of belonging of adult college students is strongly linked to childhood antecedents, including such factors as perceived caring by parents, parental divorce, and family financial problems (p. 793).

In my study I elected to avoid narrowly defining the space of the academic community. The College's environment and its enduring and ever-forming modes of operation contribute significantly to the academic community at EAC. However, the academic community is also conceived of as being tied to other related communities, stakeholders, and modes of interpreting/negotiating the social world that are not necessarily geographically, organizationally, or temporally connected to The College. Families, a workplace, and other social structures/communities also encroach upon the academic community. Gidden's (1984) remarked:

In contemporary societies individuals are positioned within a widening range of zones, in home, workplace, neighbourhood, city, nation-state and a worldwide system, all displaying features of system integration which increasingly relates the minor details of daily life to social phenomena. (p. 85)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, as a social structure, my conception of the academic community at The College therefore breaks with structural notions of the institution.

In my review of integration and belonging concepts, I developed an appreciation for the union of structurally girded theories and the practicality of objective or quantitative methodologies. However, as I reflected upon my own experiences as a practitioner who has been responsible for helping students develop a sense of belonging through advising and persistence programming, I realized that Tinto's theory of integration would not be a suitable for assessing students' sense of belonging in my exploratory study at EAC. Most for-profit private institutions in Canada cater specifically to non-traditional learners, have unconventional modes of delivery, and provide education to students who come from more diverse academic and social-class backgrounds than typical post-secondary institutions (Kinser, 2006b, 2006c). As I reviewed the literature, I became skeptical about how well Tinto's model may be suited to address the multi-contextual agencies of non-traditional learners in for-profit institutions.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

2.4.1. *Sense of Belonging*

One of the primary aims of my study was to explore in-depth how non-traditional students develop a sense of belonging to their academic community. To achieve this goal, my study required a conceptual framework that was capable of tapping into students' psychological perceptions about their sense of belonging and their dynamic experiences. To articulate the analytic rationale that I used to develop this framework, it was useful to deconstruct the definition I provided earlier in this chapter. As noted, I have defined students' sense of belonging as their need to develop mutually beneficial and positive interpersonal bonds within the academic community, and to feel as though they are valued, accepted, and respected members of the community over time and space. By emphasizing students' feelings, this definition draws upon the psychological aspects of belonging that are highlighted in Baumeister and Leary's (1995) meta-analysis of belonging literature from the fields of social and personality psychology.

Other researchers in the field of higher education (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2004; 2007; Read et al., 2003) were influential sources for developing the concept's spatial and temporal attributes.

By building upon the framework provided Baumeister and Leary's (1995) meta-analysis, I was able to develop an integrated and holistic conceptualization of how non-traditional learners may formulate their sense of belonging within The College's academic community. Baumeister and Leary (1995) surmised that a broad belonging hypothesis may have positive implications for the field of psychology that has been criticized at its conceptual roots for being fragmented (p. 498). For instance, they purported that human beings have a need for "frequent, non-aversive interactions within a temporally stable and enduring relational bond" and that the "need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation" in humans (p. 497). Their perspective about the enduring quality of belonging provided me with the impetus for selecting a longitudinal research design so that I might observe this process over time and space. I also captured this idea in my own definition. At the same time, Baumeister and Leary's (1995) synthesis of psychology literature aimed to strike a balance between the concepts of agency and structure by "assigning some fundamental causal power to [the] psychological forces" of the individual (p. 498). Therefore, in developing a conceptual belonging framework I aimed to fully capture students' psychological representations of belonging. To do so, I anticipated that I would need to analyze in-depth students' core motivations and explore where these may originate. It was for this reason that I selected a qualitative research design.

As noted previously in this Chapter, research falling under the rubric of retention often precludes the analysis of students' psychological sense of belonging or a psychological dimension (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado and Carter, 1997). For example, Hurtado and Carter (1997) noted that researchers have failed to acknowledge the psychological perspectives of students in popular retention studies: "Educational researchers appear to have abandoned this component of integration in favor of the development of other constructs that capture students' participation in the social and academic systems of a college" (p. 325). Although this problem has not been uniformly or extensively addressed in the literature, there are a handful of studies that utilize qualitative research methods to tap the psychological dimensions of students' sense of

belonging within academic communities. For example, Hoffman et al. (2002) re-conceptualized the notion of integration by developing and testing an “empirically distinct sense of belonging construct” using focus-groups as the primary method of data collection (p. 228). Focus groups were also the primary data-collection method in a study that explored non-traditional learners’ sense of belonging at a broad-access United Kingdom institution (Read et al., 2003). Lehmann’s (2007) study demonstrated the effectiveness of in-depth interviews for exploring the relationship between a student’s social-class status and his or her psychological sense of belonging. Similarly, Sedgwick and Yonge’s (2008) study at rural northern Alberta/Yukon hospitals utilized interviews, a focus group and students’ own journals to explore their sense of belonging in nursing preceptorships. The aim of their ethnographic study, to uncover a “system of cultural meaning, a sense of belonging” (p. 1), closely paralleled my research objective at EAC.

As mentioned, the work of Johnson et al. (2007) was influential in terms of acknowledging the dynamic links between the student’s agency, their sense of belonging, and the academic community. They describe this reciprocal quality as follows: “Rather than expecting students to bear sole responsibility for success through their integration into existing institutional structures, sense of belonging illustrates the interplay between the individual and the institution” (p. 526). Furthermore, the conceptual framework presented in my study avoids the spatial and temporal partitioning that is prominent in interactional retention models. The research of Read et al. (2003), Reay (1998), Reay et al. (2001) was influential for formulating the broad scope of social factors (past and present) which that exert influence upon students’ sense of belonging in the academic community. Read et al. (2003) stated:

Academic culture is not uniformly accessed or experienced. Whilst financial constraints have a major impact on student entry and retention, students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds are also disadvantaged by institutional cultures that place them as ‘other’. Individuals do not passively receive these cultural discourses, however, but actively engage with them and attempt to challenge them. (p. 261)

In other words, students’ sense of belonging is not predicated solely upon their experiences within an encapsulated view of the institution. As in prominent retention studies, students’ sense of belonging is not viewed as process outcome or solely as a

means to predict their intentions to persist. Belonging is viewed as a way to tap into a more subjective, psychological, and holistic understanding of students' compatibility within the academic community. I was hopeful that such understandings may relate to a broader range of adaptive outcomes than simply school completion.

2.4.2. *Structure and Agency*

Research falling under the rubric of student success has analyzed students' agencies and institutions' structural powers from different theoretical perspectives. On this subject Hays (1994) remarked: "conceptual ambiguities are often driven by powerful ideological commitments" (p. 59). At one end of the spectrum are researchers who embrace the idea of a scientific ordering of the world. From this perspective social structures control the patterning of social life by enabling and constraining the actions of agents. Agents in this sense possess little ability to exercise power over social life or structures. Popular student retention (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993) and college impact models (Astin, 1993) advance this view. At the other end of the divide are researchers who view the world as being socially constructed by agents. From this viewpoint agents are not merely passive vessels who carry out the patterns of social structures; they are viewed as being at least partially responsible for the creation and ongoing re-formulation of social structures (Read et al., 2003). As these concepts carry a range of meanings and speak to how social life is constituted, it was vital for me to select meanings appropriate to my research on non-traditional students' sense of belonging.

Since the 1960s, art educators have been aware of "culture conflict" in art education or the idea that students are "forced to accept the values and demands of institution" and forgo their own (Chalmers, 1981, p. 8). Similarly, in the field of higher education, concepts of structure and agency have been the subject of considerable debate since the 1970s (Sewell, 1992). Researchers who have examined student success have implicated institutional climates as having a wide range of effects on students' social and academic outcomes (Astin, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lehmann, 2007; Solomon & Battistich, 1993; Tinto 2005; Titus, 2004). Of particular relevance to my research, Astin's (1993) study identified a relationship between different institutional governance structures including public, Protestant, Roman Catholic and non-sectarian and student outcomes (p. 33). As EAC is owned by a publicly-traded

company, I was very interested to understand what impact the College's corporate culture may have upon students.

Andres et al. (1996) point out that in the field of higher education, popular retention and college impact "models and empirical analyses have not addressed the dynamic relationship between students as agents within societal institutions and institutions as living structures that impact on the lives of students" (p. 5). In other words, structural retention and college impact models have not fully addressed Giddens' (1984) theory duality of structure. Frequently studies which follow the work of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) and Astin (1993) do not acknowledge the dynamic qualities inherent in the process of belonging such as the active nature of agents, and the inherited forms of unique knowledge they enact in structures. For that matter, these studies do not acknowledge the multiplicity of social structures, or the potential for agents to re-produce structures, just as structures reproduce agents through recursive patterns passed along time and space.

Notwithstanding the power of social structures, in my study I have conceived of student-agents as being able to deploy a measure of causal power in their negotiation of a sense of belonging at EAC. They are considered to be at least partly responsible for the creation and ongoing re-formulation of my study's primary social structure—the academic community. Shilling's (1992) writings on the "macro-micro" gap (p. 69) and Giddens' (1984) theory of structure and agency were influential in formulating these ideas. My conception of structure as it relates to The College also breaks with popular student retention (Tinto, 1975; 1987; 1993) and college impact models (Astin, 1993) that tend to be institutionally focused or explain what happens to students through the social structures they inhabit rather than through students' individual agencies. In contrast, I have conceived of EAC's academic community as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing layer upon layer of socio-cultural influences. In this section I have elaborated upon the connections between The College's academic community and overlapping sub-cultures. My focus was to highlight how an evolved structure and agency framework may better address the dynamic character of structure and agency in my study of non-traditional students' sense of belonging. To illustrate this idea, I developed a diagram that explains the multi-contextual and multi-faceted character of belonging (Figure 3 below).

I argue that structural integration and college impact models have static and finite conceptions of both student-agents and academic social structures. To address the issue of students' agencies, I have drawn upon Giddens' (1981, 1984) theory of structure and agency to inform my own ideas about structure, agency, and belonging. My goal was to adopt a framework that would provide greater balance in terms of the causal powers both agents and structures are afforded. Giddens' argues that social patterns and conduct can be transformed by agents who decide to act differently than they have in the past (1984, p. 9). I wanted to be able to conceive of student-agents as being able to wield some power in the negotiation of their sense of belonging and to possess at least the potential to enact transformative change in the academic community. In the structure and agency framework I have re-envisioned, such powers are also extended to the academic community and its agents.

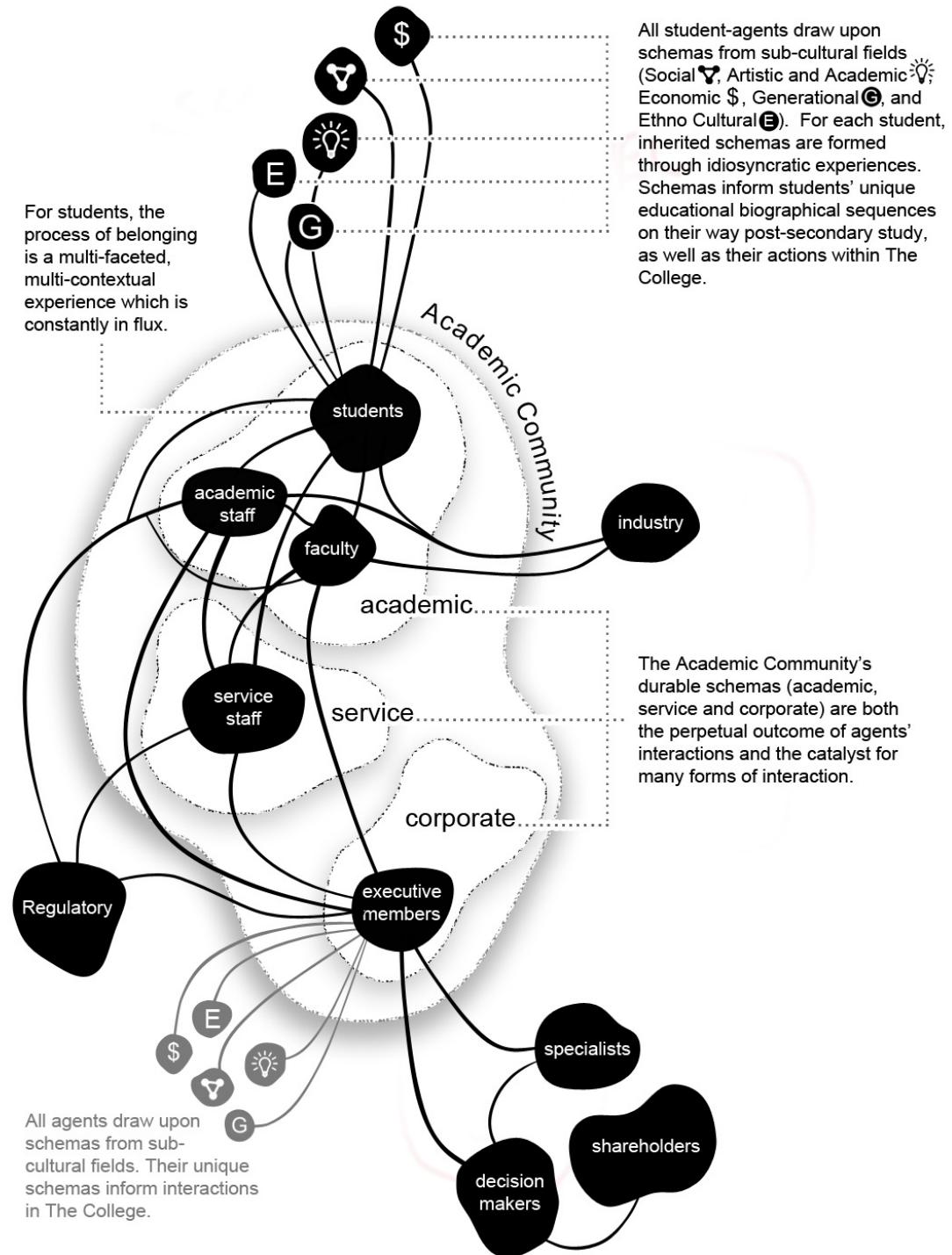


Figure 3. EAC Structure, Agency and Belonging Schema

Note. Gervan (2013); Original diagram.

Hays (1994) said that people make structures at the same time as structures make people: through everyday practices, the choices made by agents serve to create and recreate structures continuously" (p. 62). Although the social structure of the academic community may produce powerful influences upon student-agents, belonging is not simply about what students do to belong in the structure. It is also about how they employ their own contextual knowledge inherited from other sub-cultures and respond to social interactions within the academic community, including interactions with teachers, administrators, resource providers, and their peers. Figure 3, visually outlines the dynamics of such interplays. I found Giddens' (1981, 1984) theory of structuration to be particularly useful for shifting the discourse away from what institutions do to students, to examine more closely students' agency in their the negotiation of a sense of belonging.

Andres et al. (1996) stated: "Agents (students) enter post-secondary institutions enabled or constrained by varying levels of competencies, resources and strategies" (p. 5). However, traditional retention and college impact models have had a tendency to partition the academic and social zones of inquiry to those within the scope of the academic institution (e.g., the classroom, the campus, interactions between peers, interactions between the student and the instructor). As such, they have precluded the possibility to meaningfully assess the role that overlapping structures play in students' negotiation of belonging within their academic community. As mentioned previously in this chapter, a number of researchers have adapted or passed over interactional retention models to address factors that go beyond the boundaries of the academic community (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2002; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008a; Read et al., 2003). These studies demonstrate that what occurs in overlapping social structures, may also impinge upon students' sense of belonging to their academic community. By extending these ideas, I adopted a view of the structure and agency relationship that may acknowledge how the central participants' experiences (past and present) may impinge upon their sense of belonging in the academic community.

I became intrigued by the idea that past or present social structures may have a bearing upon a student-agents' sense of belonging. This idea had particular relevance for my study upon non-traditional students given the focus upon mapping their "educational biographical sequences" (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 314), where they

came from (i.e., social structures), and what capacities or knowledge they carry with them as they transitioned into The College. I wanted to investigate how students' previous or current social experiences may inform their sense of belonging within The College's academic community. In Figure 3 (above), I have visualized these experiences as occurring in sub-cultural fields and as giving rise to forms of knowledge or schemas. In spatial and temporal terms, Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration was instrumental for establishing this broader conceptual framework. Giddens' (1984) acknowledged the spatial and temporal dynamics of his theory when he stated: "The structural properties of social systems exist only in so far as forms of social conduct are reproduced chronically across time and space" (p. xxi). In this manner, I viewed the day-to-day experiences of student-agents in the academic community, as being at least partially patterned or consciously enacted based upon the recursive discourses that they have experienced, or continue to experience, in other sub-cultures.

As Andres et al. (1996) argued: "it is time to take the next step in understanding the post-secondary student experience" which requires "the exploration of the agency-structure nexus" (p. 5). Building upon this idea, I argue that in the case of non-traditional students it is particularly important to consider the active role that sub-cultures outside of the academic community play in forming students' subjective sense of belonging. For instance, many researchers have found connections between non-traditional students' social and cultural backgrounds, their educational communities, and their sense of belonging (e.g., Lehmann, 2007; Longden; 2002, 2004; Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001; Strayhorn; 2008a, 2008b). There is some evidence that demonstrates that broad-access institutions continue to perpetuate dominant academic discourses and the construction of students as being "young, white, middle-class and male" (Read et al., 2003, p. 274). Based upon an extensive review of the literature, it was apparent that my study upon non-traditional learners' sense of belonging also needed a theoretical framework which was capable of exploring students' social origins.

Giddens' theory of structuration provides agents with the potential to knowledgably enact changes within a social structure and it explicates the duality of structure or the notion that a structure is "both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems" (Giddens, 1981, p. 27). However, researchers have questioned what precisely Giddens' structures, comprising rules and

resources, consist of, as well as how agents become knowledgeable (Sewell, 1992; Thompson, 1984). In *Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu compellingly demystified the processes involved reproducing a structure by agents' use of what he termed mental structures and the world of objects (analogous to Giddens' rules and resources).

Searching for clarity in Giddens' theory of structuration, and following Sewell (1992), I turned to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. The habitus is a powerfully structural theory of human behavior. In basic terms I understand the habitus to be the embedding of cultural beliefs within a social structures and the perpetuation of those engrained norms through the memory of agents. The concept of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984; 1990; 1991; 1993) helped me to conceptualize how previous or concurrent sub-cultures may play a significant role in my participants' formulation of a sense of belonging. I became intrigued by the potential research applications—the possibility of exploring how non-traditional students' inherited knowledge from other cultures (past or present), may relate to their sense of belonging within The College's academic community. Bourdieu (1993) remarked that the habitus "constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world" (p. 88). He explained how agents adapt their practices to different contexts and premised agents' actions based upon culturally engrained perception schemes or "mental structures" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 91).

For example, Reay (1998) stated that the habitus "invokes understandings of identity premised on familial legacy and early childhood socialization" (p. 521). A number of other researchers have utilized the habitus concept to explore discontinuities between students' social class status and their experiences in educational structures (e.g., Lehmann, 2007; Read et al., 2003; Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001). Similarly, others have invoked Bourdieu's related concept of cultural capital to grapple with issues such as educational inequities and minority status (e.g., Longden, 2002, 2004; Strayhorn, 2008a; 2008b; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Given the close connection between these themes and my study, I thought the habitus may be a suitable lens for conceptualizing non-traditional students as being multi-dimensional representations of their current and previous experiences; as individuals who are continually formulating their identity and fit within a field of interrelated social structures (Bourdieu 1990).

In his theory of social reproduction, Bourdieu (1977) describes the structure and agent relationship as “an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions and no others” (p. 95). In principle, I agree with a conception of structure that is powerfully inducing of agents’ social activities. However, as I immersed myself further into the literature, I encountered some criticisms of Bourdieu’s theory (Sewell, 1992; Thompson, 1984), and I realized that I did not completely agree with his idea that all of agents’ thoughts, perceptions and actions can be attributed to structure all of the time. To address this issue, Sewell (1992) proposed an alternative view of the duality of structure encompassing five key tenets including: (a) “the multiplicity of structures, (b) the transposability of schemas, (c) the unpredictability of resource accumulation, (d) the polysemy of resources, and (e) the intersection of structures” (p. 16).

Sewell’s definition has particular relevance to my study of non-traditional learners sense of belonging at EAC. For instance, EAC’s students come from *multiple structures* or sub-cultures where they inherit *transposable* forms of knowledge and dispositions which they may apply to a range of structural scenarios including those they encounter in the academic community (Figure 3, p. 44). If Sewell’s theory of structure and agency is applied to my study context, agents become “capable of applying a wide range of different and even incompatible schemas and have access to heterogeneous arrays of resources” (p. 17). The portable nature of student-agents’ knowledge may have implications in terms of their sense of belonging. For example, I suspected at the onset of this study that non-traditional students’ inherited learning modes and approaches to visual and technology based problems may frequently not be congruent with established practices at The College.

For example, if a student were to approach the task of modelling a three-dimensional human figure in a software application with only cursory knowledge of anatomy, form, and space, the consequences of applying their knowledge in a formal class setting may yield *unpredictable* results in terms of their potential for *resource accumulation*. One might assume given The College’s broad-access mandate, that faculty members would typically have the foresight to pre-assess their students—to assign suitable project-levels that took into consideration the range of knowledge

students may apply in a particular project or course. However, it has been my experience that faculty serve what at times appear to be conflicting mandates (e.g., student satisfaction, learning centred model, employable standards, retention objectives, etc). Furthermore, I have also noticed that faculty *transpose* their own inherited knowledge of practices in the class context, knowledge inherited from unique and multiple contexts. No two faculty members have identical and at times even similar understandings of fundamental principles within their discipline. For instance, different faculty members may understand and therefore teach the 12 principles of animation in different ways—according to the knowledge they have inherited about those principles in other sub-cultural contexts.

Similarly, a student who looks at the empty artwork display case on campus, which has been empty for months upon months, may through the application of their own inherited *schemas* interpret The College and its students' to lack creative spirit. Another student may view the empty display case as an opportunity for cultural expression by hanging a group project, a means of contributing to a collective sense of pride in their work and program. The multiplicity of interpretations of resources is what Sewell refers to as *the polysemy of resources* (p. 18). Sewell explains that multiple meanings can be explained by the *intersection of structures*, or in other words, the various and unique forms of knowledge that agents inherit from the multiple structures they inhabit.

Upon review of these theoretical frameworks, I became more attuned to the processes of knowledge accumulation and enactment. This, coupled with close scrutiny of the data enabled me to develop a conceptual illustration of the structure, agency, and belonging framework at EAC (see Figure 3, p. 44). Given the idiosyncratic nature of students' knowledge, I found Sewell's concept of the duality of structure to be useful for interpreting how a wide range of factors enabled and constrained students' sense of belonging to their academic community at The College. His theory also provided the impetus to more closely consider the factors linked to students' sense of belonging in the literature, as well as the factors that I have observed based upon my own practice with non-traditional students. Many of the factors in the literature are inextricably linked to non-traditional students' inherited schemas and educational biographical sequences identified in Chapter 1, previously in this chapter and briefly as follows: a) minimal entry

criteria and generally lower academic qualification requirements; b) non-residency and significant commute times; c) higher tuition costs; d) more complex interaction between study and other life commitments as a result of the accelerated learning paradigm, limited options for part-time study, and the need to work to offset higher tuition costs; and e) lower levels of capital (i.e., economic, academic, artistic) which may put the participants' at risk of feeling positioned as "others" in EAC's academic community (Read et al., 2003).

The research discussed in this section provided me with the analytical framework to model a structure, agency and belonging framework for EAC (Figure 3, p. 44). EAC's academic community consists of a number of sub-cultural structures that have the potential to enable or constrain students' sense of belonging. These are the faculty, student, industry (e.g., faculty who come from industry and industry advisory boards), and corporate sub-cultures. These sub-cultures exist seemingly within the local or institutional context and they exert influence upon the overall academic community and its agents. If we simply consider the tremendous influence of share-holders upon the activities of corporations, in this case an education corporation, of regulatory standards upon the ways in which institutions interact with their corresponding industries; or of a Facebook complaint thread upon the actions of educational leaders, it is reasonable to theorize how sub-cultures may overlap and exert influence upon agents within the academic community. This logic also applies to sub-cultures that are seemingly external to the academic community (e.g., familial, workplace, religious, social). In my view a sub-culture may exert varying levels of influence upon agents' social interactions, regardless of whether or not the sub-culture is situated locally or externally. I argue the reverse is also true—agents continually modify and re-formulate the academic community and its sub-cultures.

I have summarized the cultural components of EAC's academic community as follows: a) it is the primary social structure of focus, b) it is a social structure and a culture, c) it comprises recursive patterns or norms that are continually modified by internal, external and overlapping sub-cultures as well as the actions of agents within those sub-cultures (including students), and d) it wields constitutive powers that are partly responsible for the actions of agents by enabling or constraining their behaviors.

These characteristics represent a departure from structural research models that are prominent in retention and college impact research.

To fully understand how EAC students develop a sense of belonging, I needed to pursue their feelings, ideas, and perceptions in one-on-one interviews—I needed to ask them. I decided that for this initial exploratory study it would be necessary to uncover non-traditional students' cultural stories, an aim that may be difficult to achieve solely through a structural theoretical lens or objective methodologies. In order to belong to their academic community, the student participant group had to grapple with both conventional and unconventional adjustment challenges. Such circumstances required investigation from multiple perspectives and contexts. Sewell's modified theory of structure and agency thus provided an appropriate lens through which to explore this intrinsically unique case of non-traditional learners' sense of belonging with an emphasis upon their social origins, unconventional entry routes and modes of study (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

3. Research Methodology

I utilized qualitative methods for studying non-traditional students' sense of belonging to their academic community at EAC. A quasi-ethnographic approach was selected for the purpose of developing a holistic account of their experiences, factor identification and exploration, and for recommending possible actions educational stakeholders may take at The College to enhance programs that focus upon students' belonging needs (see Figure 4—Methodology Diagram below). By quasi-ethnographic, I mean that I followed the essential parameters of what constitutes a good ethnography (i.e., Spindler & Spindler, 1987); however, I used this term to acknowledge my emphasis upon in-depth interviews as a primary source of data collection (although supplemented by creative artifacts), as well as an interpretation of the data that was not purely emic in a shared sense at the synthesis stage.

After completing a broad review of the literature on retention and belonging a group of influential studies and texts were analyzed to develop and select key conceptual frameworks, including sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Read et al., 2003; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008), and structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990, 1991, 1993; Giddens's, 1979, 1984; Hays, 1994; Sewell, 1992). As my study necessitated a dynamic conceptualization of the student-environment fit, these constructs were deployed to underpin my methodological approaches for data collection and analysis. As expected, these conceptual frameworks allowed for the analysis of the student's sense of belonging across sub-cultural fields that fall within broader conceptualizations of both the student-agent and the academic community (Figure 3, p. 44). From the student-agent perspective these include, but may not be limited to, sub-cultures within the academic community (e.g., student, faculty, academic staff, service, corporate), as well as their own past or current social, artistic and academic, economic, generational, and ethnic sub-cultures. From The College perspective, internal sub-

cultures include those that fall within the academic community's corporate, academic and service domains; and, external regulatory, corporate, and industry sub-cultures.

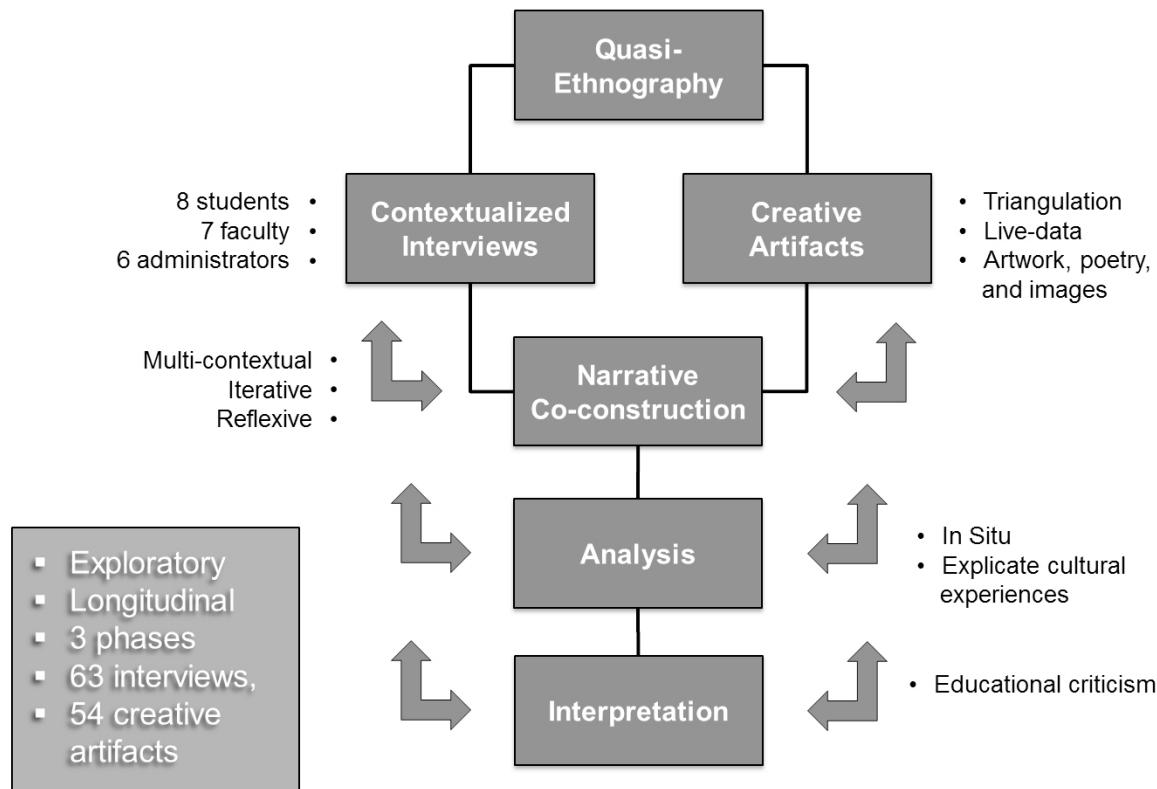


Figure 4. Methodology Diagram

Note. Ted Gervan (2013); Original Diagram.

In addition to the primary student data set, secondary analyzes were conducted on data accumulated from other stakeholders: faculty and administrators who interacted with the student participants during their first year of study. Their perspectives were utilized to compliment and more fully explore students' sense of belonging by describing their ideas about the process of belonging. Faculty and administrators also provided critical information about the macro landscape of the academic community (i.e., the faculty, student, industry and corporate cultures, organizational practices, resources and services, etc), which may not be readily apparent to students. I was uncertain if the perspectives of faculty and administrators would offer consistent or alternative perspectives about the factors that significantly informed non-traditional students' sense of belonging. By conducting in-depth interviews with all stakeholders during three

phases of the students' first year of study, I was able to compare their responses over time and space. Also, I analyzed all participants' resource submissions to juxtapose their verbal and creative representations of belonging, add richness to their individual and collective narratives, and to more deeply explore factor themes. The methodologies and analysis procedures are outlined in this chapter under the headings Quasi-Ethnographic Method, Student Interview Process, Faculty and Administrator Interview Process, Interview Summary, Creative Artifacts, Data Collection and Instrumentation, Data Analysis, and Quality. At the end of this Chapter I also discuss how I addressed ethical issues associated with this research and the limitations of the study.

3.1. Quasi-Ethnographic Method

The aim of my study was to create a rich account of non-traditional students' educational experiences and explore the factors that had a significant impact upon their sense of belonging. I selected qualitative approaches, and chose in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection. In doing so, I aimed to co-construct "thick" narrative descriptions of participants' experiences and belonging perceptions based upon successive interview transcriptions and creative artifact submissions (Ryle, 1949; Geertz, 1973). This approach was best suited to the task of tapping into students' psychological perceptions and supported my aim of revealing the participants' voices and multi-contextual experiences. Although interpreting participants' memories and perceptions is a form of abstraction, I found qualitative approaches to be suitable given the exploratory nature of my study and my aim to uncover the meanings students' attributed to their evolving sense of belonging at The College (Morgan & Smirich, 1980). I felt that my role in explicating non-traditional students' sense of belonging was to render a comprehensible portrait of their story and culture. If that story were to become recognizable to the reader, then I would view this endeavour as a success. Of relevance to my study, Tesch (1990) provided a good description of the goal of qualitative analysis:

(Is to build) a representation in the same sense that an artist can, with a few strokes of the pen, create an image of a face that we would recognize if we saw the original in a crowd. The details are lacking, but a good "reduction" not only selects and emphasizes the essential features, it retains the vividness of the personality in the rendition of the face. (p. 304)

I now go on to outline how ethnographic concepts informed my quasi-ethnographic research approach and complimented other frameworks for the purpose of more completely exploring how non-traditional students' developed a sense of belonging in the specific context of The College.

My quasi-ethnographic approaches were derived from my readings of philosophical and practice-based ethnography. Geertz (1973) stated: "if you want to understand what a science is – you should look at what the practitioners of it do" (p. 1). Through my readings, I developed an appreciation for the process of field work and the notion of co-constructing my participants' individual and collective stories for the virtue of the experience. Ethnography has its criticisms in terms of validation and interpretive pitfalls. In my view, these are not without merit. I do not view ethnography as a hard science or as a process through which one can formulate laws or replicable results (Tesch, 1990). I view it as an interpretive practice. Fundamentally, however, I agree with the notion that a thick "construction of other people's constructions" (Geertz, 1973) is a more suitable approach for understanding a complex-psychological phenomenon, than is "a body of uninterpreted data", or "thinned" quantitative descriptions (p. 5). These insights caused me to explore the ideas of other researchers who have utilized qualitative methods in arts education. Simultaneously, I sought a methodology that would allow me to transmit insights from my own practice in entertainment arts education, and the EAI.

My concerns about how to best investigate non-traditional students' sense of belonging within The College's EAPs were attended to by Boellstorff's (2006) philosophical writings on games and culture. Boellstorff argued for a close partnership between anthropological research approaches and games based upon the relationship between games and culture, and a perceived need to address more reductive approaches (i.e., semiotic and symbolic approaches). For Bollestorff (2006), it is the anthropological approach that makes it possible to investigate "the emergent, incompletely understood, and thus unpredictable" field – to "develop a theory for how a culture is lived—for its norms and its feel—that may not be reducible to rules" maps or schemes (p. 32). Boellstorff's ideas helped me consider the linkage between culture and new fields of practice including games, animation, and visual effects.

In my study, I speculated that these linkages might occur within the academic community at the cohort and program-level. Furthermore, they may possibly extend to overlapping sub-cultures such as the EAI and related communities (i.e., social, consumer). For instance, a cohort may have a particular orientation towards a new form of media or new type of practice. Simultaneously, a program's faculty members may uphold traditional cultural standards in terms of aesthetics and art production, or, they may teach art forms for which there is a current appetite in the local and global marketplace. As I analyzed the data, I recognized that I needed to be attuned to complex local and global interplays, as well as multi-contextual influences in the process of belonging. For instance, I was attentive to the cultural trends that faculty and student participants expressed and stood for, and how these may relate to students' belonging within their academic community.

The terms that I settled on to define my qualitative methodology are "quasi-ethnographic" and "educational criticism". In the literature, there are many definitions that highlight the distinguishing features of ethnography and how it differs from other types of qualitative research. To describe my process for developing an ethnographic approach, I began with Spindler and Spindler's (1987) summary of ethnography criteria:

- Observations are contextualized
- Hypotheses emerge *in situ*. Judgment is deferred until the orientating phase of the field study has been completed.
- Observation is prolonged and repetitive. Chains of events are observed more than once to establish the reliability of the observation.
- The participants' view of reality is attended through the various forms of ethnographic inquiry (including interviews and other eliciting procedures).
- A significant task of ethnography is to make what is implicit and tacit to informants explicit.
- Since the informant is one who has the emic, native cultural knowledge, the ethnographic interviewer must not predetermine responses. The interview must be carried out so as to promote the unfolding of emic cultural knowledge.
- Any form of technical device that will enable the ethnographic to collect more live data-will be used. (p. 18-19).

I chose this summary as a means of outlining ethnographic approaches and principles to consider for my study. Upon completion of data collection, I reviewed the Spindler and Spindler's (1987) criteria again. I tentatively concluded that I had dutifully followed all of

the best ethnographic practices. I, the researcher, was involved in the study of *contextualized observations* (and in-depth interviews) in the natural context of the study, the academic community at EAC. As a senior educational administrator, I was privileged to be immersed in the study context, day in and day out. Having a unique background in both education and the EAI, I was able to further equate my observations of participants in The College setting, with those that occurred in related overlapping social contexts. These include the EAI, my previous experiences as a student in a related post-secondary program, as a teacher in EAPs in private and public contexts, and finally as an administrator in the private sector.

My observations were prolonged and repetitive. Formally and informally, I observed all of my participants over a 1 year period of time and have observed other non-traditional students in the same context for many years. I have maintained connections with many of the participants beyond the data collection phase of my study. *Participants' view of reality* was attended to by conducting in-depth interviews and co-constructing individual narratives. I triangulated students' perspectives with those of administrators and faculty. In addition, I collected creative artifacts (i.e., artworks, poems, pictures, and ideas) from all stakeholders and utilized emails, digital audio recordings, and detailed interview transcriptions to make the data as *live* as possible. To re-live the interviews, I personally transcribed each one. It was important to me that I make *what was implicit and tacit to informants explicit*. Hypotheses *emerged in situ*. Although during the interviews I declared my own pre-conceptions about how non-traditional students' may develop a sense of belonging (Chapter 1) to EAC, I intentionally structured my interview guides to avoid leading the participants—to attend to their *emic, native cultural knowledge*. I attempted to defer judgment about the findings until later in the process.

As I delved deeper into the literature, however, I realized that ethnography purists have further differentiated the criteria of what constitutes a good ethnography. For instance, researchers have argued that studies with an over reliance upon in-depth interviews, and which are separated from the participants' social context, may be better characterized as qualitative rather than ethnographic studies (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, & Lofland, 2008). Marshall (in press) has called for a sharper distinction of what constitutes a truly emic interpretation of the participants' reality. Rock (2008)

stated that the researcher needs to present “one’s analysis to one’s participants because it is their lives” (p. 37). Although I shared the interview transcriptions with each subject individually to co-construct their individual stories, I did not involve my informants in the process of synthesizing and interpreting a shared or summative view of the data. Given my emphasis upon the in-depth interview approach and my decision to synthesize participants’ narratives without their input, I have termed my methodology to be quasi-ethnographic. I did this specifically for the purpose of lending my own etic voice and perspective to their cultural experiences. Given my experiences as a student of entertainment arts, a practitioner at EAC, and as a former entertainment arts industry professional, I thought that it was both necessary and complimentary for me to lend a fourth perspective to the data. In summary, I used two quasi-ethnographic approaches for gathering and analyzing narrative data: semi-structured in-depth interviews, and creative artifacts in the form of idea statements, documents, artwork, poetry, and images.

3.2. Educational Criticism

As I explored writings on qualitative methodologies and arts education, I became intrigued by the field of educational criticism and how this particular approach may be relevant to my study. Bresler (1994) noted that this qualitative genre has its roots in aesthetic theories (e.g., Dewey 1934; Cassirer 1953,), and evolved from the work of art critics from a wide range of disciplines. Eisner (1979, 1991) originally developed this approach based upon his work in art education and the art studio. He stated “to know what qualitative inquiry consists of, we can do little better than analyze the work of those for whom it is a necessary condition” (Eisner, 1979, p. 190). As a latent artist, I have a strong understanding about the creative process that is grounded in professional practice as both a traditional and new media artist. From my personal experience, I would describe the creative process as being a fundamentally qualitative mode of investigation and interpretation of culture. In the field of educational criticism, the art critic also carries out forms of qualitative investigation—“the art critic aims to render the essentially ineffable qualities constituting works of art into a language that will help others perceive the work more deeply” (Bresler, 1994, p. 2-3). Having crossed the

divide, the transition from artist to educator/leader, from practitioner to observer, I have a strong appreciation for what the artist and the art critic do.

Bresler (1994) states that “a prerequisite to educational criticism is connoisseurship, the art of appreciation” (p. 3). He distinguishes connoisseurship as a purely private act, whereas criticism by contrast is a public act. Although data collection approaches to connoisseurship bear much similarity to those of a pure ethnography, there are dissimilarities in the conceptual approaches. For instance, according to Bresler (1994) educational connoisseurship involves five specific dimensions (i.e., intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative) that connoisseurs must consider. Given the exploratory nature of my research questions, I found pure ethnographic approaches to be more desirable than those of connoisseurship. For these reasons, I have adopted a quasi-ethnographic approach to data collection, and educational criticism approach to interpretation. Given my emic orientation to this study, and my access to knowledge and factors that participants may not be aware of, I believe the approach of educational criticism is complimentary. I have reached a point in my own career as an educator where I believe it is important, almost an incumbent duty, to provide my critical perspective on the cultural experiences of artists at The College – “to make what is implicit and tacit to informants explicit” to others (Spinder & Spindler, 1987, p. 18).

3.3. Student Participants

For the purpose of describing the student participants' unique educational biographical sequences and informing transfer decisions, I have presented their data in as follows. First, I have provided a general overview of the commonly shared factors which make all student participants' non-traditional. I have highlighted the differences and similarities between student participants' demographic data and The College's general student population in Table 2 (below), *Comparison between Participant and EAC's Demographic Data*. Finally, to fully characterize their individual educational biographical sequences I have provided in-depth biographical descriptions for each of the eight student participants.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, traditional notions of what constitutes a non-traditional learner are problematic when contextualizing students in mass education systems. Retention research has provided mainstream definitions (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985); however, the institutions and students those definitions refer to are significantly different today. In an attempt to demonstrate the broad scope of characteristics that make EAC's students non-traditional, I have adopted Schuetze and Slowey's (2003) Educational Biographical Sequences framework (Table 1). Their framework specifies several key criteria for the purpose of identifying non-traditional learners including students' *Educational Biographies*, *Entry Routes*, and *Modes of Study* (Table 1).

Table 1. Educational Biographical Sequences Framework

Category	Description
Educational Biographies	The biographical stages of the—in the case of non-traditional learners—mostly winding path to higher education and the varying significance and motivation of studying in a person's life-cycle.
Entry Routes	Access to higher education and time of enrolment: regular (that is, after secondary/grammar school with a school leaving certificate or a regular university entrance exam) or alternative (for example on the basis of work experience or after a special admission test for students without the conventional higher education entry qualification).
Mode of Study	The patterns, and intensity of studying (actual rather than bureaucratic definitions of full-time or part-time) and the interaction between study and other major commitments, including in particular, work, domestic, and social.

Note. Adapted from Participation and Exclusion: A Comparative Analysis of Non-Traditional Students and Lifelong Learners in Higher Education, by H. Schuetze and M. Slowey, Higher Education, 44:13, p. 315. Copyright 2002 by Kluwer Academic Publishers, Netherlands.

In my study each student participant's educational biographical sequence was idiosyncratic. However, there are several common ways in which they can be defined as non-traditional. To begin, all participants' *Entry Routes* were unconventional. For instance, they were not subject to entry criteria that are common in other British Columbia applied arts institutions, both private and public, including an entry exam or portfolio review. Such criteria are typically used to determine the prospective students' program suitability or likelihood of success in a given program. For full admission to EAC's diploma programs, as stated earlier, the student participants were required to

write a 250 word essay and demonstrate proof of high school graduation, GED equivalency, or mature status (over the age of 19).

In addition, all student participants' *Modes of Study* were intensified in several ways including their commutes to campus, The College's accelerated term structure, and withdrawal and full-time study policies. EAC's only student sponsored residence was off-campus or 25 minutes away from The College on major public transit. Therefore, all student participants commuted to The College—several commuted a long distance each day (see Table 3 below). Building upon the theme of intense *Modes of Study*, all student participants were pursuing 21 month diplomas with no formal breaks longer than two weeks. Rather than operating on a conventional 3-term annual system, as in the Canadian public post-secondary system, EAC ran year-round on an 11-week on 2-week off cycle. To deter students from prolonging their study The College did not have a leave of absence policy. Students' who elected to leave had to withdraw from their program and were subject to changes in tuition or curriculum should they decide to return in the future. All student participants enrolled in full-time study, three or more classes, and most took five courses per term which was consistent with The College's demographic data and full-time study policy. Given these factors, for all student participants the interaction between study and other major life commitments was more complex than for the average undergraduate student in the public sector.

For the purpose of building upon these broad distinctions, in this section I have highlighted the differences and similarities between my participants' demographic information and those of The College's general student population in Table 2, *Comparison between Participant and EAC's Demographic Data*, Table 3, *Additional Educational Biographical Participant Data*, and Table 4 (below), *Students' Educational Financial Strategies*. In general, the participants' demographic data closely resembles the general student population at EAC. Through analysis of I have highlighted several notable exceptions. By comparing the data sets I noticed that the student participant sample included a higher ratio of mature students aged 25-34 and a smaller ratio of students aged 19-24 than in EAC's general population. Table 2 also revealed that the ratio of participants in off-campus housing was higher than in The College's student population. Furthermore, the ratio of student participants coming to EAC from outside of British Columbia was higher than in The College population.

It has been my personal observation that The College attracted many students with disabilities. I noticed that the student participants had a much higher ratio of disabilities than those who reported having a disability in The College population. From their narratives and email member-checks, three of the four student participants who reported having a disability or a serious medical condition also expressed that these were key factors in their educational experiences that impacted their *Modes Of Study*. In Chapter 3, *Students' Biographical Descriptions*, I have provided more information about individual student participants' disabilities (p. 64).

Table 2. Comparison between Participant and EAC's Demographic Data

Category	Participants		The College	
Age Category	<i>n</i> %		<i>n</i> %	
< 18	0	(0)	47	(25)
19-24	4	(50)	289	(68)
25-34	3	(37.5)	77	(18)
35-44	1	(12.5)	8	(2)
45 >	0	(0)	4	(1)
Gender	<i>n</i> %		<i>n</i> %	
Female	4	(50)	183	(43)
Male	4	(50)	242	(57)
Disabilities	<i>n</i> %		<i>n</i> %	
Yes	3	(37.5)	17	(4)
No	5	(50)	408	(96)
Living Status	<i>n</i> %		<i>n</i> %	
Off-Campus Sponsored Housing	2	(25)	25	(6)
Own Home	0	(0)	37	(9)
Room/Apartment Off-Campus	3	(37.5)	207	(49)
Parents' Home	2	(25)	131	(31)
Other	1	(12.5)	25	(6)
Employment Status	<i>n</i> %		<i>n</i> %	
Part-Time Off Campus	4	(50)	132	(31)
Full-Time Off Campus	0	(0)	47	(11)
Part-Time On Campus	0	(0)	8	(2)

Full-Time On Campus	0	(0)	13	(3)
Not Employed	4	(50)	225	(53)
Residence Classification				
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
From BC	4	(50)	234	(55)
From Canada (outside of BC)	4	(50)	132	(31)
International	0	(0)	59	(14)
Course Load				
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Full-Time	8	(100)	391	(92)
Part-time	0	(0)	34	(8)

Note. Demographic data adapted from the student participants' narratives and Appendix B: Noel Levitz Survey Results (2011). The Noel Levitz Survey was an annual institutional survey administered voluntarily to all EAC students in their classes. It includes self-reported demographic information from 38% (n425) of the College's student population, which was collected in 2011—during the data collection phase of my study. This data was obtained with permission of EAC and the student participants.

For the purpose of describing other relevant demographic information that was not captured in Table 2, I developed Table 3 (below), *Additional Educational Biographical Participant Data*, from the students' narrative descriptions. From this table, I realized that only two of my eight student participants had been out of school for less than one year prior to enrolling at The College. The majority or six students did not attend EAC directly following high school. This realization further underscores the students' non-traditional status on the basis of their meandering *Educational Biographies* or "mostly winding path" to EAC (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p. 315). In terms of previous educational achievement, three of the student participants completed high school or their GED equivalency, one completed a technical apprenticeship, three others had taken some university or college-level courses, and one completed an undergraduate degree program. The student participants' parents' levels of educational achievement varied from no education beyond the elementary school level to university and college course work. However, none of their parents completed an advanced or undergraduate degree.

Table 3. Additional Educational Biographical Participant Data

Marital Status	n	%	Dependent Children	n	%
Single	6	(75)	None	7	(87.5)
Married/Common Law	2	(25)	1-3	1	(12.5)
Participants' Highest Level of Educational Attainment	n	%	Parents' Highest Level of Educational Attainment	n	%
Less than High School	0	(0)	Less than High School	2	(14)
Grade 12/Equivalent	3	(37.5)	Grade 12/Equivalent	0	(0)
Apprenticeship Training	1	(12.5)	Apprenticeship Training	1	(7)
Some Univ/College	3	(37.5)	Some Univ/College	10	(71)
Certificate/Diploma	0	(0)	Certificate/Diploma	1	(7)
Undergraduate Degree	1	(12.5)	Undergraduate Degree	0	(0)
Post-Graduate Diploma	0	(0)	Post-Graduate Diploma	0	(0)
Graduate Degree	0	(0)	Graduate Degree	0	(0)
Missing	0	(0)	Missing	2	(14)
Elapsed Time in Formal Education	n	%	Commute Length	n	%
< 1 years	2	(25)	< 1 Hour Per Day	3	(37.5)
2-5 years	3	(37.5)	1-3 Hours Per Day	2	(25)
5-10 years	2	(25)	> 3 Hours Per Day	3	(37.5)
10 > years	1	(12.5)			
Serious Medical Condition	n	%			
Yes	1	(12.5)			
No			Missing		

Note. Adapted from the student participants' narratives with permission.

Paying for their educational experience at The College added further complexity to student participants' *Modes of Study*. For the purpose of demonstrating this complexity, Table 4, *Student Participants' Educational Financial Strategies*, demonstrates that the student participants (pseudonyms were used for confidentiality) used multiple strategies to finance their educational experiences and college tuition

including student loans, family support, personal savings, scholarships, bank loans, and part-time employment. None of the student participants used a single financial strategy (e.g., loans or personal savings)—the mean was three strategies. Seven of the eight student participants were using British Columbia provincial as well as federal loans. I found it concerning that half of the student participants were working despite EAC's full-time study policy. This particular strategy may be indicative of the high cost of tuition, the students' lack of economic capital or possibly both. The effect of work and study is more fully discussed in Chapter 4, *Economic Capital*.

Table 4. Student Participants Educational Financial Strategies

Name	Family Support <i>n</i>	Personal Savings <i>n</i>	Student Loan <i>n</i>	Line of Credit <i>n</i>	Scholarship <i>n</i>	Working PT <i>n</i>	Planning to Work <i>n</i>	Strategies Per Student <i>n</i>
Amanda			1	1		1		3
Rodrigo	1	1	1					3
Aurelia	1		1					2
Trevor		1	1			1		3
Gord		1	1		1			3
Nicole	1				1		1	3
Lisa	1	1	1			1		4
Oscar	1		1			1		3
<i>n</i> %								
Total Strategies	5 (62.5)	4 (50)	7 (87.5)	1 (12.5)	2 (25)	4 (50)	1 (12.5)	3

Note. Adapted from the student participants' narratives with permission. Pseudonyms were utilized to protect the participants' anonymity.

All eight participants completed all three stages of in-depth interviews. In order to assist in transfer decisions, a short descriptive profile of each interview participant follows below. The descriptions provided below are limited to the information provided in in-depth interviews.

3.4. Students' Biographical Descriptions

3.4.1. *Amanda*

Amanda is a 21 year old Canadian woman who prior to enrolling at The College had been out of school for some time. She did not complete high school but did complete her GED equivalency. After having an uninspiring college experience where she felt the teachers' "looked down upon her," she had both optimism and doubts about her potential to be successful at The College. Amanda's concerns about study at EAC were not surprising given her *Educational Biography* and unconventional *Entry Route*. Amanda had not necessarily demonstrated a propensity for academics in the past. Given the limited requirements for entry Amanda was very surprised by the ease of the enrolment experience. In her early stages of the Game program at The College Amanda perceived herself to be an "awkward outsider." For instance, during her first term if other students out-performed her in a particular class, she would feel as though she did not belong. Amanda enrolled in the Game Design program on a full-time basis (five courses per term). To pay her tuition and living expenses she took on a student loan and a line of credit. Another hurdle for Amanda was general wellness. She coped with ADD, frequently experienced illness and generally struggled to afford and maintain good nutrition.

Amanda first became interested in art at a young age. She would paint and draw all of the time. Her mom played video games with Amanda and always encouraged her to pursue creative activities. As she matured, Amanda developed an interest in writing and video games. For her, playing games and making art were good ways to relax and help make sense of her own emotions/thoughts. In the past due to her ADD, Amanda found it difficult to maintain creative focus and complete individual tasks. However, at EAC, she found that her program made it easier to bring focus to her art. One of Amanda's biggest challenges was the educational cost associated with her goal to become a game designer. Her mother was sick and living on disability and as such family support of a financial nature was not an option for her. During this research project she found it stressful to negotiate study while actively pursuing employment. Amanda often spoke of friends helping her out with a meal or groceries. Financial concerns did intensify Amanda's *Modes of Study*. For instance, she lost time that could

have been spent studying or socializing with her peers. She also became ill due to excessive worry and concern about money.

3.4.2. *Rodrigo*

At the time of my study, Rodrigo had recently become a landed Canadian immigrant. He was on his own living in the Greater Vancouver Area. He missed his home and family in a Latin American country. At the age of 31 he enrolled in the VFX program at The College on a full-time basis (five courses per term). Rodrigo was pursuing his dream of becoming a VFX artist for the promise of “a better life.” He lived a short 20-minute commute to The College. To pay for his tuition and living expenses, Rodrigo used personal funds and a BC student loan. However, he also took comfort in the fact that he had strong family support if needed. Rodrigo did not see his mature status as a detriment; in fact, he said “The College should be looking to attract a slightly older audience” and students who have “worked” before. Rodrigo’s cultural transition, mature status and the time that he spent away from formal education are all factors that have contributed to a unique *Educational Biography*.

For Rodrigo, The College experience had importance on both practical and experiential levels. Although his parents did not attend a post-secondary program, he has strong family support. Rodrigo knew that he needed an applied education to gain a foothold in the local industry; however, he is also studying for the value of the experience. Prior to enrolling, he had a strong interest in art and filmmaking. Rodrigo previously completed an undergraduate degree in filmmaking and post-production in his home country; however, pursuing the applied arts in his home country was not without challenges. He said “there are not really any good art schools” there, and that his skills are better appreciated in Canada.

Rodrigo has been drawing his whole life. He mentioned that a part of the challenge in learning the creative skills for a specific vocation is the need to “break” from older traditions and his own “personal style”. Attending EAC presented for Rodrigo new cultural *Modes of Study*. He encountered challenges such as “language” and “methods of study”. Rodrigo described the education at The College as being more intense, applied, and less theoretical than what he experienced in his home country. Although

different, those previous educational experiences at the post-secondary level helped instill a sense of self-confidence and purpose in Rodrigo. For him, this undertaking was not something he was unsure about or testing out for the first time. He described it is being like riding a bike: “when you have not done the bike for years and years you can just go back”.

3.4.3. Aurelia

Aurelia enrolled full-time, five courses per term, in the 3D Modeling program at the age of 20. She is a Canadian student who moved away from her home in Alberta to study 3D Modeling at The College. Aurelia had some financial support from her family and also had an Alberta government student loan. She was a resident in off-campus student sponsored housing, which is a short 25 minute commute to The College. Aurelia attended a previous post-secondary college program. It was not a program that she wanted to go into because she was not certain about her career path. One of the good things about that experience was that it provided Aurelia with an opportunity to be close to her mother who worked at that college and who sadly passed away when Aurelia was 18 years old. For Aurelia, the experience of trying another college, then stopping for a period of time and restarting at EAC have contributed to her unique *Educational Biography*—a winding path to her program at The College.

Aurelia always wanted to work in an art-related field. She was 7 years old when she played her first video game system. A favorite past-time was playing video games with her mother, who was supportive of Aurelia’s interest and who was also immersed in game-culture. Both of her parents attended post-secondary programs. Aurelia was incredibly optimistic about her potential to be successful; however, in pursuing her educational goals she has also had to grapple with the significant loss of her mother as well as her disability. With medication Aurelia successfully managed ADD and Aspergers. During our interviews and subsequent emails she emphasized that these conditions had little impact upon her studies and belonging to The College.

3.4.4. Trevor

To arrive in his program at EAC, Trevor's travelled a lengthy *Educational Biographical* path. At the age of 40 Trevor enrolled full-time, five courses per term, in the VFX program at The College. He sold his home in Alberta and left a lucrative career in information technology to pursue the dream of becoming a VFX professional. His age sometimes made him feel "a little outside the crowd". At different times during our interviews Trevor would characterize his age as being a factor in his sense of belonging and at other times he would say it was not a factor. Although Trevor did not complete high school he did achieve his GED equivalency and went on to complete a two-year Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert (MSCE) information technology (IT) program. His father attended a post-secondary apprenticeship program to become a Journeyman Carpenter.

Trevor suffered from a rare medical condition called Kallman's syndrome. He explained that this genetic condition impacted his pituitary gland and his body's ability to produce testosterone. Trevor's condition had a negative impact on his energy levels, sleep patterns, mood, and physical appearance. To cope he took medication to stabilize his testosterone. Although this helped regulate sleep and energy levels, Trevor's condition added an extra layer of complexity to his *Modes of Study* at EAC. During our interviews and subsequent email member checks, Trevor explained that Kallman's impacted his sense of belonging to The College.

Trevor lived a 30 minute train ride away from The College. Life as a student involved juggling an accelerated program schedule, part-time work and caregiving for his two large dogs. Trevor was completely responsible for financing his education and planned to do so by using personal funds and a student loan. Due to complications with the transition to college, Trevor said money was "flowing like water". This concerned him as he had planned to live off his own savings for the entire duration of his program. Recognizing the need to supplement his savings, Trevor struggled to find work while studying full-time. During the first nine months of the program he took on a job delivering pizza which did not work out. Subsequently, he pursued part-time work in the VFX industry as an overnight Render Wrangler. The necessity of sourcing additional funds added further intensity to Trevor's already full educational plate—his *Modes of*

Study. Beyond the study framework Trevor found part-time IT work at UBC, which caused him to reduce his course schedule. Some months after the conclusion of the study Trevor withdrew from the program.

For Trevor, the decision to pursue this new educational path was multi-dimensional. Although talented with technology, Trevor was unsatisfied with his former IT career. During our interviews he said he had difficulty getting out of bed and was ill frequently. Finally, Trevor's doctor intervened and he took a leave of absence from his former workplace. He ultimately made the decision to pursue a latent interest in art. Trevor had to pull away from his career in order to be afforded the time and space to realize what he really wanted. In Trevor's words, "nobody encouraged me to make art." His dad never saw the value in it, which is a part of the reason why Trevor pursued IT. Trevor realized that in order to make good on his childhood dreams, he was going to need field specific training. The College's Game program was ranked high on the Princeton Review, which drew Trevor's attention. Ultimately he enrolled in VFX as he recognized that this related field has experienced a lot of growth.

3.4.5. Gord

Gord, a Canadian student from Alberta, enrolled on a full-time basis (5 courses per term) in the Game Design program at The College. At 30 years of age Gord thought it may be "tougher" to fit in and hang out with other students. He attempted to draw in high school but was admittedly was not very good at it. However, he was firmly focused on his educational and career goals and was not planning to allow mediocre high school results or his gap in formal education stand in his way of success at EAC. Prior to enrolling, Gord experimented with 3D computer animation. He had also attempted poetry and creative writing, which is one of the reasons why he became interested in the Game program. His interest in video games began at the age of 17. Gord liked the idea of being able to present his ideas in a visual medium.

Being the father of two young children provided Gord with a lot of motivation and focus. He was sacrificing a great deal to be away from his family and home. For Gord, fitting in at the college was a secondary need. His primary motivation was to obtain a career that would sustain his family. Gord was taking his opportunity seriously and said

he was “all business”. When I first met Gord (prior to this study) I was concerned about Gord’s well-being and potential for success in the program. He showed up at my office at the end of the work day with a suitcase in tow. It was the first week of class and Gord looked exhausted because he had been sleeping in a car. His loan and scholarship financing were not quite in place and he could not afford any sort of accommodation until funding commenced. We discussed various possibilities to solve his temporary accommodation problem. After some time Gord found accommodations about an hour away from The College. For the first month and a half of study Gord’s lack of funding added a lot of intensity and complexity to his *Modes of Study*.

3.4.6. *Nicole*

Nicole had “some doubts about coming” to The College. Although she had previous experience studying fine arts at a major public post-secondary institution in British Columbia, the adjustment to The College was worrying on multiple levels including concerns about finances, academic readiness, and loneliness. Furthermore, at different points in her life Nicole had been diagnosed with related medical disorders including: Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Depression, as well as an eating disorder. Nicole explained that these disorders “flare up” at times and she considered these conditions to be a form of disability. While enrolled at EAC, Nicole suffered from Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Of her disorder Nicole said “my anxiety usually runs high in any new situation any stressful situation, when I am getting graded, and when I’m meeting new people.” During our interviews I learned that Nicole’s disorder was a critical factor in her experience and her sense of belonging.

When I asked Nicole what the college experience meant to her she expressed “I guess the college experience is just something that you do after high school,” “everyone has always told me you need college,” so “I never really thought of working or anything else”. Nicole enrolled in the 3D Modeling program on a full-time basis (five courses per term) at traditional college going age of 19. She had a lifelong interest in the arts, which began at the elementary school level. As a small child Nicole recalled drawing on the walls of her room. Although some family role models did not think that art would lead to a proper job, Nicole’s parents were very supportive of her creative interests. For instance, they used to buy her new art supplies. As an adult Nicole has continued to

draw and more recently she began using Photoshop as a design tool to touch-up sketchbook drawings. According to Nicole she does not possess a creative background in industry sense. She said that her background was not “orientated towards movies or games or anything that is the focus of this school”. When the faculty talked about the “fast pace” of the industry, it was worrisome to Nicole.

On a financial level Nicole was also concerned. Although money had been set aside by her parents and Nicole was on a partial scholarship, she did not qualify for loans and her family was “not in the best financial situation.” This situation caused Nicole to doubt her decision to enroll. Nicole grew up in a small rural town in B.C. Living so far away from her family and friends has also been a major adjustment. This experience was her first time living in a “big city.” Her desire to belong to a new community and make new friends was challenging given the three hour commute each day. Nicole expected that she would need to find work in order to offset the financial costs of the program. For Nicole, her Generalized Anxiety disorder, lengthy commute and doubts about her academic capacity simply exacerbated the already challenging *Modes of Study at The College*

3.4.7. *Lisa*

Lisa was a 29-year-old single woman with no dependants; however, she had pets. Although a domestic student, Lisa described her ethnicity as being Asian-Chinese-Taiwanese. While a student at The College Lisa worked two jobs and secured a student loan to help pay for what she viewed as expensive tuition. She commuted over three hours each day to get to class. She was enrolled on a three course per term schedule, which by Student Aid BC standards was the minimum number of courses to be considered a full-time student and therefore by eligible to receive funding. According to the college Lisa was considered a full-time student.

Lisa’s travelled a unique *Educational Biographical* path to arrive at EAC. She attended a contemporary arts program at a major public post-secondary institution in British Columbia to obtain minors in contemporary arts and philosophy. Furthermore, she had worked previously as a sculptor. According to Lisa, the other program at university emphasized theory over practice. She recognized that she did not possess

the technological skills to enter new applied fields such as the entertainment arts industry. Lisa enrolled in the 3D Modeling program, which corresponds to a variety of potential creative/technical employment opportunities in the game, film, and television entertainment industries.

Growing up, Lisa had the dream of one day becoming an artist, but was unsure how to achieve this and survive financially. In her home country, students were not educated to become artists. For Lisa, attending EAC held the promise of opening a new career path. She was keenly aware of the obstacles that she must overcome to be successful. For instance, she experienced feelings of isolation in a relatively unknown community and ethnic culture. Furthermore, she also grappled with her mature-status and the high cost of the program and her commute—all of which contributed to complex *Modes of Study* for Lisa.

3.4.8. Oscar

Oscar enrolled full-time, four courses per term, in the 3D Modeling program at the age of 19. He is a domestic student who described his cultural background as Polish. He was born in Poland and his family immigrated to British Columbia, Canada, when he was a boy. Oscar commuted over three hours each day from a Metro Vancouver suburb to attend his program at The College. When asked about his parent's post-secondary attainment Oscar was unsure, but thinks his dad may have attended university back in Poland. To help with tuition fees, Oscar had taken out a provincial loan and lived at home with his parents. Over time Oscar realized the full-financial burden of his education and he started a part-time job in his community. This situation added further complexity to Oscar's *Modes of Study* in his program.

Oscar first became interested in art by taking a drawing class at the age of 13. He would draw animals, still-life scenes, and make abstract pieces. When he moved to Canada he gave up on those kinds of applications, but he continued to draw in his sketchbook. When he enrolled in the 3D Modeling program he was not sure what he was getting into, but he knew he wanted to work in that field. Oscar did not know much about EAC; he just knew that this is what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. When I asked Oscar about the other schools he checked out, he said "not really, kinda here and

there". For him, the career services offered by the College during study and upon graduation were very attractive. He had the perception that if you go to a university you are basically finding your own way post-graduation.

3.5. Procedures

I utilized purposeful sampling techniques and approaches associated with qualitative methods, to identify my study's participant group (Creswell, 2008). As a key aim of my study was to expand and deepen understandings about the complexity of non-traditional students' experiences at The College, I employed maximal variation sampling to represent the "multiple perspectives" of various groups within The College including faculty, students, and administrators (Creswell, 2008, p. 214). In doing so, I aimed to enhance the quality of the research through data triangulation. Given the quasi-ethnographic approach and my declared interpretive aims—I viewed the concept of triangulation as being crucial for advancing multiple interpretations of students' sense of belonging. In this manner, I aimed to partition my perspective alongside the perspectives of three other groups—students, faculty, and administrators.

By surveying their experiences from different vantage points, I aimed to locate, or at least more closely approximate the story of their belonging, which consisted of multiple realities. Furthermore, given the possible political implications of this study, I aimed to elicit many perspectives—an approach Seale (1999) suggests is useful in projects that are "politically driven" (p. 475). Many of the faculty and administrators were specifically selected due to their affiliation with the student group (i.e., teaching a course, administering a program, resource or service, etc). For instance, I selected only administrators who frequently interacted with students. Furthermore, I selected specific participants who were knowledgeable observers of the study's central topic – how students' develop a sense of belonging.

In the summer of 2011, I met with specific faculty and administrators one-on-one to explain my study's purpose and to invite them to participate. For students, I briefly introduced my study purpose during an orientation meeting and in several classes during their first week of study. All candidates who expressed an interest to take part were

given an Introduction letter, which included details about the study's purpose (Appendix C). Those who contacted me were invited to meet one-on-one at The College to review more information about the study. Of those who volunteered, I narrowed the candidate pool for all participants (students, faculty and administrators) from 40 to 21. Those selected were asked to review and complete a Letter of Informed Consent to acknowledge their participation (Appendix D).

It is my view that all students attending EAC are to a greater or lesser extent non-traditional, given their entry routes and unconventional modes of study at The College, and also given their unique educational biographies (see *Participants*). I therefore qualified students primarily on the basis of gender, age, program enrolment and study load in an attempt to obtain a somewhat representative sample of the general population. Another selection requirement for all participants was their willingness to share in-depth stories and perceptions about their sense of belonging. Student participants included equal numbers of males and females, four each. All students were studying three or more classes per term and were therefore full-time students.

My selection processes resulted in a student participant group that was more or less reflective of the general population at The College, and a staff sample that the students would normally encounter in their program on a day-to-day basis. In total, I conducted my quasi-ethnographic inquiry with eight first-year entertainment arts diploma students, seven faculty members and six administrators. As expected, given The College's broad-access mission, the participant group represented a diverse amalgam of non-traditional learners corresponding to the literature. Student participants were all given a ten dollar cafeteria voucher as an honorarium.

The entertainment arts students studied in a cohort model, a supportive structure that permits new students to enroll together in common art and technology courses throughout their program. These cohorts were conveniently timetabled together. Literature on retention and belonging in the public sector suggests that learning communities such as a cohort model can positively impact students' sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002). I was curious to learn what role the cohort model would play in students' sense of belonging at EAC.

3.5.1. *Student Interview Process*

I developed five interview guides (Appendix E) for students based upon my own professional experiences working with similar students, my recollections of being an entertainment arts student, and based upon themes identified in the literature. Given the multidimensional and ever-changing character of students' sense of belonging, the guides were utilized to obtain rich data at three intervals during students' first year of study. In the principal interview guide, eight questions were designed specifically to obtain in-depth descriptions about non-traditional students' sense of belonging to their academic community. Six were aimed at exploring students' literacy in both academic and artistic terms. One question was designed to elicit information specifically about students' transition to college. Five others addressed the academic and social dimensions of fitting in at The College. One closing question asked students to provide some additional demographic details. During the first interview, all students were asked to provide a creative resource (e.g., idea, image, artwork, poetry) to best symbolize how they belong to their academic community. Many of these questions served multiple functions. For instance, a wide range of questions produced rich data about students' experiences at The College.

An in-depth pilot interview was conducted with a student volunteer from the 3D Modeling program to test the primary interview guide. During this session we focused upon testing the questions and developing strategies for creating a comfortable dialogue. I also reviewed the interview guide questions with internal and external colleagues, including my senior supervisor, and incorporated their feedback into the initial guides. During the student interviews, I would in certain circumstances modify, as well as pose additional questions to the participant in order to pursue topics that were relevant to the research questions. This occurred when factor themes emerged that were beyond the scope of the guide.

Initially, I built three interview guides corresponding to the three phases in students' first year of study (i.e., interview guide one during term one, guide two during term 2, etc). I realized that these guides would not effectively tap the desired themes for students who may leave their program. For this reason, I initiated an amendment to SFU's Department of Research and Ethics and incorporated two additional student

interview guides into the data collection framework specifically for students who withdrew (Appendix E). Both students who withdrew from their program during the study did so at the end of their first term. I utilized the first withdrawal guide to interview the students who withdrew during a time period that corresponded with students' second term of study. The second withdrawal guide was used in a timeframe corresponding to the third term of study. Except for one student who left the program and who requested email participation, I elected not to send any interview guides to students electronically in advance. I wanted to obtain their immediate, unrehearsed perspectives. In total, I conducted 24 semi-structured student interviews. 20 of these were face-to-face. Two remote interviews were conducted by phone and two others by email to involve those students who withdrew and were not able to come to The College in-person.

3.5.2. Faculty and Administrator Interview Process

I developed three distinct guides for both faculty (Appendix F) and administrator participants (Appendix G). I personally interviewed all faculty and administrators during the weeks following each of the three student interview phases. In general, the guides followed the same theme format: belonging, academic and artistic literacy, transition, academic and social integration, recommendations for the college, creative resource submissions, and general demographic information. However, the questions were re-orientated to suit these groups.

I wanted to ensure that faculty and administrator participants were unfettered during their interviews. I asked colleagues for their input on the interview guides who were either knowledgeable observers of students' sense of belonging at The College, or external researchers in the field of higher education. The guide questions underwent several re-drafts to minimize my perspective as a researcher, remove closed or narrow questions, excessive funneling techniques, and to develop an interview style and format that would allow participants the freedom to formulate their own responses based on their individual perspectives. I did not conduct pilot interviews with the faculty and administrator participant groups. In total, I conducted 39 semi-structured interviews with faculty and administrators during three phases of students' first year of study. 33 of these were face-to-face interviews. Two interviews were conducted by phone to suit the

schedule needs of a part-time faculty member who was at The College 1 day a week. Four others were conducted by email as per faculty preferences.

3.5.3. *Interview Summary*

Overall, I co-constructed 63 in-depth narrative descriptions from all participant groups. Twenty-four were from the student participants, 21 from the faculty participants, and 18 were from the administrator participants. In total, 53 face-to-face interviews were conducted across all participant groups. I estimate that each participant, regardless of group, dedicated at least two full hours (126 total participant hours) to share their experiential stories and perceptions about students' sense of belonging at EAC. Due to work schedule conflicts, one of the faculty members elected to conduct phone interviews for the second and third interview phases. Two other faculty members elected to transcribe their own narrative responses to the second and third phase narrative guides and submit these by email. Similarly, due to her departure from the collège, Nicole elected to conduct phone interviews for the second and third interview phases. Finally, Lisa also elected to submit her own transcribed responses to the second and third phase interview guides for withdrawal students—she submitted these by email.

I was particularly interested in the students' perspectives and what it meant to be a non-traditional student studying in a for-profit, broad-access, entertainment arts college. I wanted to learn how this experience may inform their sense of belonging. In particular circumstances, I modified the guide questions to pursue relevant topics. For instance, if factor themes emerged that were not necessarily addressed in pre-defined theme categories, I asked additional probing questions to tease out more information. I wanted to share my own emic/etic perspective on students' sense of belonging with my participants to bring to light issues and contexts that would otherwise be unknown to them. However, to minimize my role in the interviews, I focused upon participants' stories, and reserved my contributions until the data analysis phase.

The College ethics review committee approved my study in the Spring of 2011, and human ethics approval was confirmed by Simon Fraser University's Office of Research Ethics in June, 2011 (Appendix I). Using a semi-structured individual interview protocol, the primary student data set was collected during the five weeks

following the start of their first term of study (Summer 2011). Secondary and tertiary student data were collected during the same time interval in the following terms (Fall 2011 and Winter 2012). The student data collection phase occurred between July 2011 and May 2012. Faculty and administrator data sets followed the same phase schedule; however, these were conducted between weeks five and ten of each term following the student phases. Within two weeks (usually a few days) of each in-depth interview, I emailed each participant a full unedited electronic transcription of their interview. Participants were invited to provide additional information, make changes and take an active role in the construction of their story. Many took the opportunity to clarify meanings and to expand upon various themes relating to the research questions.

At a certain point in the research, I realized that some of the participants' data sources were sensitive in nature. Although The College and most study participants indicated it would be acceptable to be directly cited in this study, I elected to assign pseudonyms to The College and all participants in order to protect their privacy, and to avoid any potential for misinterpretations of the study goals. Participants met with me in one of several private meeting rooms at The College. All participants agreed to have their voices digitally recorded. I transcribed 53 in-person and four phone interviews in total. Six other narratives were submitted via email by participants who were based remotely or who simply preferred email.

3.5.4. *Creative Artifacts*

To further reveal students' cultural experiences beyond the individual written narratives, and to elicit additional information about the research questions, all study participants were also asked to submit what I called creative artifacts to best describe their sense of belonging to their academic community. This secondary data set also served as a form of data triangulation, to reveal the complexity of the process of belonging. As The College's programs were firmly grounded in entertainment arts, I made the assumption that for students, art production would be a critical factor in their sense of belonging. Thus, analyzing their art was a logical approach to compliment the primary interview data set.

In general, and per the interview guide question, I encouraged students to submit creative artifacts including their ideas, images, artworks, and poems. While not excluding creative artifacts, my approach for faculty and administrators included the suggestion of institutional documents. This term was intentionally broad to allow for many interpretations (e.g., press release, newsletter, curriculum, policies, advertising, and marketing). During the interview process I learned how to pitch the concept of resource submissions so that the participants could access it in a way that made sense to them.

By the end of the interview process I had collected 54 creative artifact submissions to compliment the interview transcriptions. Students provided 11 artworks, four poems, two emails and 15 ideas about their sense of belonging. Administrators provided seven ideas, one picture, and one newsletter. Furthermore, faculty provided 13 ideas. The resource contributions highlighted diverse perspectives about students' sense of belonging, including positive and negative representations, and links to a broad range of factor themes.

As will be discussed in greater detail in the *Data Analysis* section of this chapter, I reviewed artifact submissions several times in conjunction with the primary interview data set to reveal eight major factor themes. This study includes the in-depth analysis of nine artifacts that best represented the emergent themes and students' cultural experiences. These artifacts added additional layers of meaning that were particularly useful for revealing the factor themes in a way that would not be possible based purely on interview narratives. For example, the poem submissions by Lisa (p. 104) and Trevor (p. 127) were particularly relevant to research questions one and two because they emphasized the psychological nature of the process of belonging, and highlighted factor themes that were of greatest import to students' belonging needs.

3.5.5. *Data Collection and Instrumentation*

Bresler (1994) stated: "the requirement to maintain an outside perspective (in educational ethnography) implies that the ethnographer usually examines other cultures rather than their own" (p. 7). As that is not the case in this context, I made every effort to deliberately view my interactions with participants from a new vantage point. Although I

have been a student, teacher, administrator, and industry professional in the entertainment arts, I recognize that I have not lived the experience of non-traditional students at EAC. I attempted to put aside memories from hundreds of meetings with at-risk students, and attempted to partition my previous interactions with students at The College. One way that I was able to do this was by attempting to reserve my own assumptions, interpretations and judgments until the analysis phase of this study. Although at times I shared my views with participants during interviews to establish trust, I also bracketed my own views to the best of my ability as necessitated by my professional station. I fully recognize researcher subjectivity as a limitation of the study—a topic explored more fully in Chapter 6. To address this limitation, I aimed to provide as many perspectives as possible through data-triangulation (i.e., multiple participant groups, sources of data, and data collection phases) in an attempt to validate my interpretive capacity.

All interviews and resource submissions were captured digitally and organized by the data source type, and by the time or interview phase (i.e., one, two, or three) of the study. I did not hire a research assistant. For instrumentation, I used a portable digital audio note recorder. The device had a stop-start feature and a speed playback control. Conducting and transcribing the interviews was an engrossing project. However, the dual process of conducting interviews and personally transcribing the recordings was an incredibly immersive, iterative, and therefore reflexive practice. I became far more attuned to the surface, sub, and layered meanings of my participants' narratives. The speed playback control allowed me to interpret the precise words and meanings of the participants in greater detail than was possible during the interviews. In many circumstances, I found myself modifying and building upon my original interpretations from in-person or phone interviews. This process provided me with the time and space to question meanings. Frequently, I asked participants to clarify my interpretations or to expand upon particular ideas. Therefore, this process was incredibly important to the exploration of the subject's voices, perceptions, and experiences.

3.5.6. *Data Analysis*

The final transcriptions and creative artifact submissions formed the basis upon which I approached coding and established themes. In preparing the data for coding, I

decided to develop two chronological and categorical documents—one for the interviews and one for the creative artifact submissions. The interview document included each participant's full narrative transcription. The creative artifact document included digital copies of all creative artifacts (i.e., poems, images, artworks) along with corresponding descriptions that were obtained from the participants during their interviews. I organized both documents by participant group (student, faculty, and administrators) and interview phase (terms one, two, and three). Two assumptions guided these data display decisions. Ultimately, I wanted to be able to triangulate themes across participant groups to establish group themes or to confirm the lack of consistency across groups. Second, I wanted to be able to explore changes in participants' perceptions about students' sense of belonging over time and space.

When examining these sources, I remained attentive to recurring thematic elements, and the patterns that were noticeable. Beyond the toils of data collection, Geertz (1973) stated that the ethnographer is attempting to first grasp the "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another" and then explicate the subject's culture in a meaningful portrayal (p. 3). Drawing upon my study's conceptual frameworks (i.e., structure and agency, and belonging) I thought of themes as though they were connective threads that may explicate the multi-faceted, multi-structural experiences of non-traditional students in The College's academic community—elements that may bring to light patterns of meaning and facilitate deeper understandings of how students' develop a sense of belonging in this specific context. The conceptual frameworks enabled me to remain open to observing both micro and macro level factors in the process of belonging.

I used a combination of inductive techniques and processes to decode the ethnographic data as outlined in Creswell (2008). To identify themes and patterns within the participants' narrative texts, I proceeded through a number of critical steps. As mentioned, I began by personally transcribing each of the participants' interviews, to gain a nuanced view of their individual experiences. To gain a sense of the whole, it was necessary to then read all of the individual transcriptions and review the creative artifact submissions several times. I then selected several texts and creative artifacts that left an impression upon me, and I considered these more carefully. Drawing upon Creswell (2008), I asked "what is this person talking about", and I began to formulate

some underlying themes (p. 251). As the primary research question focused upon how students develop a sense of belonging, I elected in my first round of analysis to focus on student participants' data—to position their stories at the forefront of this project.

I proceeded to conduct initial coding of all phase one student participants' narratives and creative artifact submissions. To establish themes, I first employed a visual cuing methodology that quite literally allowed me to see the thematic patterns based upon the frequency codes emerged (Appendix H). During several in-depth readings of students' narratives and creative artifacts, I electronically flagged recurring themes by assigning comments and comment codes (e.g., economic capital, artistic capital, friendships, etc). In this manner, I then coded the remaining two phases of data comprising both the interview and creative artifact documents. In my second round of data analysis, I employed the same approaches by coding the three phases of faculty members and administrator's narratives and creative artifacts.

I then divided all primary interview texts (all groups) and creative artifacts into meaning segments. During this process 34 codes emerged from the data. These were also sub-divided by phase category. Through further analysis I organized the codes in a series of grouping exercises and by asking critical questions (i.e., which codes most frequently occurred, had the most evidence, and best represented students' cultural experiences). This process yielded 22 codes. I further assimilated these into eight broad theme categories including: *Corporate Culture, Economic Capital, Academic and Artistic Capital, Self-Concepts, Support from Academic Staff, Students' Representations of Self-Concepts, Support from Service-Based Departments, and Peer Support*. During this process, redundant codes were re-organized under appropriate headings and less important codes were removed. From the major themes, I developed structural descriptions and added my own reflective and summative comments amongst the data sources. Thus, I highlighted the particular pieces of data that were most relevant for conveying students' cultural experiences at EAC.

In Chapter 4 and 5 (*Results Part 1 and 2*), I present how the eight primary themes established from the analysis of all participants' data and creative artifacts rendered a detailed portrait of how students' developed a sense of belonging to their academic community at The College.

3.5.7. Quality

In general terms, I agree with Seale (1999) that qualitative research is an endeavor that emphasises “creativity, exploration, conceptual flexibility, and a freedom of spirit” (p. 467). Although I have attempted to avoid the criteriology trap, I have bracketed the rigor of my study with five guiding naturalistic strategies derived from Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Seale (1999) as follows: credibility; transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. To address *credibility*, I have acknowledged the potential to observe multiple constructed realities through “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). For example, I checked participants’ stories by emailing all of their individual transcriptions to them after each interview was conducted to confirm the authenticity of how I recorded their data. Furthermore, I asked all participants to validate the content and to modify or extend their ideas, thoughts and perceptions. In addition, I also collected two different forms of data: in-depth interviews and creative artifacts—a design choice which also addressed *dependability*. Finally, I collected data throughout the students’ first year of study so as to understand how their experiences and belonging may change over time and space.

To aid other researchers in assessing the *transferability* of the results to other contexts, I developed an in-depth explanation of The College (see Study Context in Chapter 1). Also, I provided background information relating the emergence and popularity of EAPs, as well as robust information about the participants. In particular, in *Students’ Biographical Descriptions*, I provided individual statements describing each student’s unique educational biographical sequence to aid other researchers in making informed decisions about portability. Furthermore, I triangulated the central phenomenon by inviting multiple stakeholder groups to provide their own perceptions about non-traditional students’ sense of belonging.

To enhance the *dependability* of my process, I employed several strategies including: a) the personal transcription of all in-depth interview audio recordings, b) the involvement of a peer review team, and c) by reporting my research design processes. As mentioned, I found the process of transcribing interviews to be incredibly illuminating. As I played back the recordings at different speeds and listened intently to each and every word the participants uttered, I gained new insights and wrote down ideas and

questions for the participants. When I distributed the transcribed individual narratives, I posed follow up questions via email. Frequently, this approach extended the dialogue both electronically and at times by informal discussions on campus.

As I coded the data, I kept a running log of additional ideas and questions that surfaced. I continued to connect with the participants to clarify meanings and further explicate their experiences. I wanted to provide a non-biased view of the findings. To this end, I enlisted a peer review team comprised of an EAC instructor who was not a participant, as well one student and one administrator who were participants. This team provided confirming and disconfirming input on my study findings, *Results Parts 1 and 2*. Finally, to assist other researchers in evaluating the effectiveness of the methods in the event that they may wish to undertake a similar project, I included detailed descriptions of the study design, implementation processes, and step-by-step details about data gathering (Shenton 2004).

Many texts on qualitative research methods note the challenges associated with real *confirmability*, due to the tendency for researchers' aims to find their way into the research design and reporting. I addressed the aim of confirmability primarily through the process of data triangulation (i.e., multiple subject groups and multiple forms of data collection). Secondarily, the longitudinal design also served to reference several stages of participants' changing perceptions about phenomena over time and space. As I moved on to successive transcription phases I found myself looking backwards to compare the current transcriptions to those I had previously completed.

Fundamentally, the aim of my study was to make what was unknown, or only partially understood by the participants, comprehensible to outsiders. As mentioned, for this reason I have conducted a quasi-ethnographic form of educational criticism—to lend my oversight and knowledge to the data synthesis and findings. Miles and Huberman (1994) posited that the degree to which the researcher makes known his or her own predispositions is a key factor in determining confirmability. To address this, I developed a personal narrative and where appropriate have included my own reflective commentary throughout the study. As a knowledgeable observer of the central phenomenon and someone whose perspective is grounded in the culture being observed, I argue that it would be impossible and potentially detrimental to the

participants' stories to completely eradicate my own perspective and role in explicating how they developed a sense of belonging at EAC. Thus, I aimed to assist in explicating the voices and experiences of non-traditional students studying in a for-profit private college.

In the course of analyzing and synthesizing the data, there were many instances whereby a theme or event that a participant described would be only partially comprehensible to outsiders. By providing a fourth perspective, beyond those of the three participant groups, I was able to fill gaps with respect to the participants' experiences. Frequently, my perspective provided the missing operational, governance-based context that students, faculty, and in many instances administrators did not know or fully comprehend.

As mentioned previously, I fully acknowledge the bias of my perspective in the interpretation of the data; however, to enhance *authenticity* and diminish my singular perspective, I represented a range of different realities in relation to the student participants' sense of belonging in order to more fully tell their story. In Chapter 6 I explore more fully the issue of researcher bias, as well as other study limitations including interviewing, sampling, and transferability. I also aimed to cultivate more sophisticated understandings the experiences of non-traditional students in the for-profit post-secondary system. I hoped my study might be a catalyst for other researchers in this space.

3.6. Ethical Issues

At the onset of this study, ethical issues were considered during the process of developing interview plans and recording the dialogues of participants. I attended to these using the guidelines outlined in Creswell (2008), as well as interview concepts provided by Brinkmann and Kvale (2005), and Kvale (1996; 2006). In this section I provide an overview of the ethical considerations and practices that underscored my approaches. To gain the support and trust of participants, I disclosed the study purpose, potential consequences, and benefits in various ways. These were outlined in the Introduction Letter (Appendix C), the Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix D), and

during pre and actual interview sessions. Following Kvale (1995), I gave participants a measure of *counter control* by allowing them to opt out at any time in the study and by promoting a two-way exchange in the co-construction of their narratives (p. 112). All participants were apprised of my study's potential benefits including: enhanced self-awareness in the process of students' sense of belonging, reflection upon students' academic and artistic capabilities, and the opportunity to express views that are not captured in the current literature on belonging or known to educators and administrators at EAC.

Kvale (2006) posits that the qualitative interview is a "hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power distribution" (p. 484). To address this issue I openly shared my perspective where appropriate on students' sense of belonging within my professional constraints as a senior-level college administrator. I did not for instance have any desire to shake the confidence of students who may be struggling to fit in by illustrating how their situation may relate to the literature. However, at times it was apparent that certain participants needed intervention support. In such cases, I did my best to be realistic with students and to assist them in decoding their individual challenges, understanding The College's support services and accessing resources within their programs. When interviewing faculty and administrators, discussions in relation to factor themes were even more transparent.

In their critique of *ethicism* in interviewing Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) presented five strategies to assist the qualitative researcher in addressing these central ethical issues. These include the interview as: a) one way dialogue, b) instrumental dialogue, c) manipulative dialogue, and d) monopoly of interpretation. I approached my interviews with participants as two-way exchange and avoided purely *one-way dialogues*. My interview guides were just that—guides based upon themes corresponding to the literature and my own practice-based conceptions. I remained open to participants' ideas and questions. Frequently, I found that the interview process became inverted. If prompted by the interviewee, I would spend time explaining what I thought a sense of belonging means or describing The College's educational model and mandate, for example. At times we would debate concepts related to sense of belonging. If students were critical about institutional services or their classroom experiences, I did my very best to aid them in understanding how they may empower themselves to enact change

or find appropriate solutions. Furthermore, if it was apparent that the participant was uncomfortable or non-expansive on a particular line of questioning, I took those cues and moved on to the next question. To avoid a *manipulative dialogue* I aimed to be as transparent as possible. I was restrained in some cases due to my professional loyalties as an institutional agent who also needed to uphold the mission and values of the organization.

I did not seek to impose my view of the phenomena being studied through questioning or use the interview as an *instrumental dialogue*. For instance, I would have been just as happy to have learned that non-traditional students require no sense of belonging in order to perform well in their programs. As mentioned, to reduce the risk of writing a view of students' experiences that supported only my aims, I incorporated member checks, encouraging them to play an active role in co-constructing their narratives. In the stage of constructing the data interpretation, I frequently checked with student participants to ensure that I was accurately representing their realities. Many participants were actively engaged in this research project. Finally, the iterative nature of the research design, featuring successive interview phases, yielded in-depth and at times conflicting or evolving conceptions of student participants' sense of belonging over time and space. This feature reduced my potential for a *monopoly of interpretation*.

I also encountered issues of privacy at the study site. Given my role at The College, interruptions occurred frequently. Despite scheduling interviews on lunch hours or in the evenings after the work day, there were a number of situations where I had to stop an interview due to a work interruption. In such cases, I reconvened with the participant as soon as possible to complete the interview. Over time, I realized that it was best to move the interviews out of my office to a general advising office. At times, other people in The College would wind up on audio recordings due without consent. I omitted all such instances from the data transcriptions.

At the onset of the study, I mapped out the time commitment required of participants, which was substantial. I wanted to acknowledge their contributions; however, I was concerned about the ethical implications of such an action. For instance, I wondered if an incentive would affect the quality of the responses I received. Ultimately, I settled on giving students a ten-dollar gift voucher for the campus cafeteria.

Recognizing that many students simply lacked practice making healthy and nutritious meals, or did not have enough time between classes to do anything but purchase fast food, this seemed like an appropriate choice. In retrospect, I think this gift was unnecessary, although helpful for some students who were struggling to make ends meet.

4. Results Part 1: Macro Factors

In this chapter, I have drawn upon the structural description from my data analysis to explain the essential themes and factors the student participants identified as being most significantly linked to their sense of belonging. The engrossing nature of the content made it challenging to select the best stories and artifacts to address my research questions. Here, I have attempted to use only those quotes and artifacts that most authentically explicated major themes. Above all, it was important to share students' stories and to highlight the multi-contextual nature of their experiences as they attempted to negotiate a sense of belonging at EAC.

In the first round of data analysis I identified eight primary themes that were most vitally linked to the student participants' sense of belonging. In the following sections, I have presented four of these to primarily address macro-level factors in relation to students' sense of belonging including: a) The College's *Corporate Culture*; b) students' *Economic Capital*, c) students' *Academic and Artistic Capital*, as well as d) students' *Self-Concepts*. For each theme presented I have emphasized the stories, voices and experiences of student participants; however, where appropriate and relevant I have also augmented students' narratives with the perspectives of faculty and administrators participants to provide more in-depth interpretations of the data. To highlight theoretical consistencies and inconsistencies I have placed particular emphasis upon how each theme relates to the literature on belonging, as well as my study's key conceptual frameworks. To address research questions, at the end of each theme section I have summarized the main theoretical findings and have provided practical recommendations for The College. In Chapter 6, *Synthesis of Macro Themes*, I have also provided a broad synthesis of the major theoretical implications as they relate to each theme in this chapter.

4.1. Corporate Culture

At the onset of this study I was curious to know to what extent macro-level business decisions determined by The College's corporate culture may relate to the student participants' sense of belonging. By corporate culture I mean EAC's governance structure—a specific group of agents who for the most part were not based at The College. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there are some fundamental differences between governance in the for-profit sector and the rest of higher education. In discussing the stockholder-driven model or institutions owned by publicly traded companies, Rush (2003) noted that "stockholders all want the same thing, namely a return on their investment" whereas in the public and private non-for-profit sectors there are considerably more stakeholders and interests (p. 13). Rush (2003) also highlighted that stockholder-driven models bear the risk of being affected by a complex range of factors such as global economic trends in a way that is different than other institution types—the volatility of their stock price.

Elaborating upon the theme of EAC governance in Chapter 1, I speculated that stockholder-driven governance practices—in particular, short term decision making, would in some cases be observable by The College staff and possibly students. In my practice such decisions were determined by external corporate-agents that I call specialists, decision-makers, and shareholders (Figure 3, p. 44). Although based externally, the directives of these corporate-agents were enacted at the campus-level by local executive members, as well as academic and service-based agents.

Although in other post-secondary systems researchers have explored the relationship between students' sense of belonging and broad-access mandates (e.g., Read et al., 2003) and the relationship between retention and customer orientated principles (DeShields et al., 2005), I was unable to locate any such research in the Canadian post-secondary sector. I found it curious if not surprising that in Canada there appears to be no published research that has explored possible linkages between corporate or business practices and students' sense of belonging. I speculated that many proprietary institutions in Canada may not necessarily be academic cultures; that the emphasis may be upon teaching as opposed to research. Furthermore, for-profit institutions may be less likely to publish research on students' sense of belonging given

the desire not to provide competitors with valuable knowledge. During the data analysis phase, I reviewed the participants' narratives and artifacts with this gap in mind. I fully acknowledge the bias implicit in this research decision. I aimed to contribute to the literature by exploring to what extent the student participants' may perceive the value or purpose of corporate practices and how such practices may inform their sense of belonging.

For instance, I suspected that most students would perceive value in The College's customer-orientated service approaches as has been found in for-profit institutions in the United States (Diel-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006b). I assumed as well that corporately determined delivery formats and curricular characteristics such as The College's accelerated learning paradigm, career-focused programs, long class blocks and small class sizes would engender students' sense of belonging. I also anticipated that students would generally be unaware of particular policies and practices aimed at reducing institutional costs and increasing profits. Based primarily upon student participants' narratives and secondarily upon the narratives of faculty and administrators, I have presented linkages between The College's corporate culture and student participants' sense of belonging in two sections: a) Corporate Practices Supportive of a Sense of Belonging, and b) Corporate Practices Constraining of Belonging.

Corporate Practices Supportive of a Sense of Belonging

In their first term of study, few students expressed concerns about any aspect of their experiences. As I found with students' perceptions about student-based services in Chapter 5, *Support from Service-Based Departments*, student participants' perceptions about corporate practices became progressively negative over time. I found that many were highly critical about and relatively aware of particular corporate practices that they perceived not to be in their best interests. However, several student participants indicated that they valued being a part of a tight knit community of practice at EAC. They valued being a part of industry specific programs where students shared similar very similar interests and goals. For example, Aurelia, a 3D Modeling student, said The College's educational mandate was good for developing a sense of belonging:

Students get a sense of belonging quite quickly. We have the long classes and the breaks in between. We all have such close common interests for what we are studying that we all easily mesh together and talk and get along, and it's a great thing. It is easier than in universities because the programs all lead towards the same field.

Aspects of the educational experience such as the types of programs and the length of classes were completely determined in the corporate domain. This is why I attribute Aurelia's comment to be indicative of a corporate decision that was supportive of students' sense of belonging.

From the perspective of administrator participants, Pat (an administrative director) and Sophie (an academic program coordinator) explained that in their practice many EAC students have expressed appreciation for corporate policies that govern social interaction within the academic community including ethics, anti-harassment, and classroom behavior policies. Sophie said of those policies:

Students believe that these policies help to create environment which are a lot more safe and professional than those in high school. They like that there is no bullying or fist fights. Our environment may be a place where for the first time in a long time they do not feel threatened. No dodge ball.

Although students did not specifically cite such policies as playing a role in their sense of belonging, I suspect that if a student were to feel threatened or if the institution did not take such policies seriously it would have surfaced in interview sessions.

Corporate Practices Constraining Sense of Belonging

Students identified a range of corporate practices that constrained their sense of belonging. Faculty and administrators' narratives corroborated the students' concerns in relation to particular corporate policies including the overnight access, course load reduction, and artwork display policies. Students also highlighted problematic practices relating to admissions and course scheduling. Finally, to my surprise, students expressed concerns about The College's accelerated program model.

As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, *Support from Academic Staff* and *Support from Service-Based Departments*, the overnight access policy was a source of frustration for student participants, particularly those who did not own a personal

computer or essential equipment to complete their program. There was a time when the College provided unrestricted 24/7 access to one major campus including open access to most learning spaces (i.e., classrooms, studios, etc). More recently, EAC migrated to a less open access policy involving an online access request portal, security check-ins, and far less access to learning spaces. Trevor, a game student, suspected that the policy was designed specifically to restrict access. In my opinion Trevor was correct. Executive members or local corporate-agents at The College designed the policy to discourage and reduce access overnight primarily as a revenue saving strategy (i.e., save energy, reduce theft, staffing costs). This strategy had been discussed in various manager meetings.

During our interviews, one administrator and several faculty members expressed frustration with the overnight access policy. When I asked Lampton, a media arts instructor, to comment on the services available to students he focused on the overnight access policy and called it “a bureaucratic hassle” for students. In reflecting upon his own experiences as a student at an animation college in Ontario he said “there were times that I needed to go to the school at three-o’clock in the morning and it is was not an issue.” William, a media arts instructor, likewise viewed the policy as being detrimental to students’ sense of belonging. He remarked:

When people can say that they stayed all night to work on this, they can get a real sense of belonging from that experience. Allowing that to happen, allowing them to get into a computer lab all night long and seeing what comes out of that helps them to build camaraderie.

William said that the school would be “under attack all of the time” if it would not open up computer labs overnight. Helena, a program director, indicated that students’ were particularly frustrated with the policy when it was initially rolled out.

During her second term interview Helena also expressed concern about The College’s reduced course load policy. When I asked Helena how her experience was going she remarked that “many students missed their first classes because of the reduced course load policy.” She said the new policy “made it cumbersome to assist those students who would have previously been approved, but now had to go through this administrative process.” She explained that under the new policy structure students needed to obtain signatures from their academic advisor, financial services

representative, their program director, and EAC's president or dean in order to obtain approval to study fewer than five classes per term. Oscar, a 3D modeling student, also expressed concern about The College's course reduction policy. During his second phase interview he expressed his frustration:

The school had me sign a waiver saying that I would not be able to study on a reduced course load or something like that. I have been trying so hard to make everything work, but I lose 3 to 4 hours a day driving in from a home. But, if I can't study on a reduced course load there is not much I can do. I do not even have a job like some of my friends. I'm worried about getting one because I just cannot see how I will be able to manage four classes, a job and this commute. One of my friends said that the school could allow me to study part-time because they offer my courses every term—that the policy is a money grab. I did not like that. If that is true so much for my belonging... you know what I mean?

What Oscar did not fully grasp was that that the reduced course load policy was implemented by external corporate-agents. No staff members on campus had any input in the design and implementation of that policy. It was my view that the reduced course load policy was mandated to increase students' average registered credits for the purpose of increasing short-term revenues.

Several student participants expressed an interest to see more student artwork displayed in public spaces on campus. In each interview Amanda, a game student, expressed that more student artwork would improve students' sense of belonging. Students said that displays and murals would provide "sources of inspiration" and raise "The College spirit." Unknown to the student participants was that local corporate-agents and one external corporate decision maker initiated an internal artwork display process, to manage the quality and appropriateness of artwork displays. As odd as this may seem, many faculty and administrators believed that they may get into trouble for assisting students with artwork displays. As a result, the frequency of artwork displays on campus suffered.

During each interview phase faculty and administrator participants were also remarkably consistent in expressing their desire to see more student artwork on campus. When I asked Helena if she had any recommendations for The College to help improve students' sense of belonging she explained that there was a need to speed up

processes associated with hanging students' artwork. Jana, a design instructor, explained that The College could look for more opportunities to acknowledge students' successes in the environment itself. She explained that she and her colleagues try to do everything they can to give the students room to express themselves; however, she mentioned "the actual college setting can be even more open to that creativity" with "less structured hall space" and by making the classrooms feel "less sterile." When I asked Lampton how students' represent their sense of belonging at EAC he remarked: "I don't see a lot of it. It would be nice to see a little more school spirit. Maybe even more of student work on the walls. The environment here is a little branded and clinical." Interestingly, at least one administrator who was not a part of academics felt the same way. Daniel, a non-academic administrative director, remarked:

I think that EAC could find more ways to increase the presentation and display of student projects. We need to go beyond displaying student work for standard events like open-houses, portfolio-shows and other related events.

As noted later in the *Economic Capital* section of this chapter, Lisa had some issues with the transparency of the financial services scholarship awards program. From her poem *The Admissions Representative* (p. 104) and based upon her narrative it was clear that she was confused about the lack of transparency in the scholarship program. Lisa speculated that the program was used to entice students and that there may be no actual criteria. It is difficult for me to comment on the nature of scholarship criteria given that I was not a staff member in that particular department; however, academics had limited input into The College's scholarship criteria. It was my understanding that those programs were managed by EAC's executive members.

In terms of corporate practices Nicole, a 3D modeling student, expressed a concern about The College's admissions practices. Some months after her withdrawal she suggested that the school should really tell students what they are getting themselves into. When I asked her what she meant she said:

Tell them to actually look at it. For me there was the idea of college, the idolization of it—how glamorous it was supposed to be and how everything is great. At the same time I did not take it in when they said "it is a full work load and you are going to have to be on it." I didn't really listen to that. I just heard all the good stuff. I heard "you

are going to be surrounded by people just like you and your going to grow and all this." I didn't hear any of the negative aspects, really.

I asked her what else The College could have done to help her with her decision she remarked:

I don't think they emphasized it [the rigor of the program] enough. Put it in big bold letters. I'm not sure how many students going into it would be like me, ignore it and think—I can do that. I wonder how many others look at the positives and think the negatives will just fall into place.

I think Nicole was fairly hard on herself. Based upon my own practice, I am not certain that the kind of reality check she wanted would necessarily have come from a product expert in admissions. I do believe that such information may come from the academic program she applied to. However, at EAC students do not enroll through their program departments. William said that the lack of a portfolio requirement "alleviates some kind of stress for them (incoming students). They know we have an open door policy." Perhaps this sort of stress would have been helpful for Nicole. Similarly, Lampton speculated that if The College were to add an art portfolio to the program entrance requirements it may help students feel a sense of "accomplishment and therefore belonging."

Building upon the theme of corporate practices that are constraining of students' sense of belonging, several student participants mentioned that they had scheduling issues. What they did not realize is that those particular issues were linked to corporate decisions. For example, during one of our interviews Rodrigo, a VFX student, mentioned that the classes were "a little crowded. It can be too much for the teacher to answer so many specific questions. I think it would be good if we could reduce the sizes of the classes." During his second interview, Oscar said that he was frustrated that a class with his favorite instructor had been "cut last minute." What Rodrigo and Oscar did not realize was that class-sizes or splits were linked to revenue and instructional costs, and therefore scrutinized heavily by corporate specialists. The decision to split a large class or retain a small class was generally not determined locally by academic agents. Although Oscar and Rodrigo did not explicitly link these observations to their sense of belonging, their observations highlight the potential for corporate business practices to

impact the experiences and satisfaction of students. I suspect that if Oscar and Rodrigo were aware of how educational scheduling was determined that it may be detrimental to their sense of belonging.

Administrators and faculty were also keenly aware of scheduling issues. For example, in our second term interview Helena said that “last minute changes in the course schedule were forced.” She explained that she had to cancel a lot of courses due to “small classes, student instructor ratios and financial considerations.” Helena expressed that when students have an expectation to be enrolled in a particular course and their schedule changes at the last minute they have to shift around other priorities in their life. She remarked that “those kinds of processes and decisions can negatively impact students’ perception of belonging.” At the classroom level William explained that large classes are challenging for part-time instructors who are only compensated for in-class instruction. He remarked:

After classes when there are four or five kids hanging around and they want to know more, pick your brain on a few things and have that moment with you alone—that is great. It does wear on you a little bit. I may have another class or I will need to have lunch. Large class sizes are a problem. I will tell you that for free [laughs]. You could stay an hour after class just trying to get around to everybody.

In terms of the educational model, several students also expressed concerns about The College’s accelerated learning paradigm. Aurelia for instance noticed that students had less time to engage in social events and clubs. From my interviews with Oscar and Lisa I developed a view that the accelerated model was particularly challenging for students with significant commute times. On numerous occasions they noted how difficult it was to manage their studies and other important priorities such as work. Oscar lamented that he did not have more time to engage socially and academically with his peers. He thought the model was not considerate of students who lived in areas without good transit options. This finding is consistent with the related literature from the field of retention (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Implications for Practice

As mentioned, during all three interview phases all participant groups were remarkably consistent in expressing their desire to see more student artwork on display

at EAC. However, in the analysis of data relating to EAC's corporate culture I did not include any relevant artifacts (e.g., *The Admissions Representative*, p. 103) for the reason that those artifacts related more directly to other key themes. As I reviewed the participants' narratives I was puzzled by the corporate stance on student displays; particularly given that student artworks may serve as a vehicle to reinforce self-concepts (see *Self-Concepts*) and enhance students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, artwork in the campus halls may act as a marketing tool for prospective students. I suggest that by empowering and encouraging faculty to showcase student artwork from their courses, The College can quite easily and with little additional resource investment promote a broader sense of belonging among students, faculty members and staff.

From the all participants' narratives, the corporate decision making structure at EAC seems to reduce the autonomy of local academic staff to consider and resolve budgetary problems. Based upon my own previous practice, I suggest that students' sense of belonging may be enhanced by empowering contextualized academic agents or program directors to resolve budgetary issues in ways that serve the greatest good for all stakeholders. By providing program directors with training appropriate to meet budgetary targets for their departments they may be able to plan their instructional schedules, reduce last-minute roster cuts and mitigate student concerns pro-actively.

Transparency of practices and policies was an issue for several students. For instance, Nicole felt as though the admissions process did not provide her with a realistic sense of what to expect in terms of her program's academic rigor. Furthermore, Lisa, Trevor, and Oscar expressed similar concerns about the transparency of the scholarship program, the overnight access and reduced course load policies respectively. I suggest that due to the higher risk value proposition of study at EAC (i.e., the accelerated learning paradigm, and high cost of tuition) non-traditional students need to be thoroughly advised of the major factors that may pose barriers to their success. In my view factors including but not limited to long commutes, the inability to work due to the full-time study policy, the need to purchase equipment due to resource access constraints, and the transparency of eligibility criteria for scholarships all need to be meaningfully communicated. Perhaps such information could be disseminated through a course structure such as a freshman seminar, which have been proven to enhance students' retention and belonging in the United States (Hoffman et al., 2002).

Theoretical Synthesis

Although my study does not establish an empirical relationship between business or corporate practices and students' sense of belonging, from the narratives of students, faculty, and administrators it was apparent that such practices had a direct and negative impact students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, students possessed a far greater level of awareness about the purpose and intent of corporate practices than I anticipated. These exploratory findings suggest that corporate culture may be an important factor to add to the list of institutional variables that relate to students' sense of belonging.

Furthermore, as the student participants' progressed in their program, their perceptions of corporate practices became more negative. This appears to be due at least in part to their increased awareness about the purpose of various corporate policies and practices. Perhaps Pat's (administrative director) first term narrative offers another clue as to these perceptual changes. To improve students' sense of belonging she suggested: "If we had more resources, I would like to allocate them to continuing students. We sometimes spend too much time thinking about the student coming in to the detriment of the continuing student." From this comment and the narratives of all participant groups, it appeared that the satisfaction of continuing students may require more consideration on the part of EAC. This finding is consistent with the literature in other sectors that points to the need for institutions to focus upon supporting students beyond the enrolment phase of their post-secondary experiences (DeShields et al., 2005; Yorke, 2004). In short, the accelerated learning paradigm, high cost of tuition, and full-time study policies at EAC may only exacerbate non-traditional students' complicated modes of study (Kember & Leung, 2004).

4.2. Economic Capital

In this section I outline the relationship between student participants' economic capital and their sense of belonging based primarily upon student participants' narratives and to a lesser extent the narratives of faculty and administrator participants. Drawing broadly upon the theory of structure and agency, by economic capital I mean student participants' ability to conceptualize and plan for the financial implications of their

educational program based upon experiential forms of knowledge (Giddens, 1984). However, this definition also includes students' actual material funds.

At the onset of my study I assumed that economic capital would be a major factor informing students' sense of belonging. However, during the study design phase I purposefully avoided building questions or a construct dedicated to this topic so as to avoid steering my participants' responses. I noticed that student participants were comfortable in most cases sharing their financial circumstances. These surfaced by a matter of course when they were asked open-ended questions about topics like their sense of belonging or their transition to The College. Additionally, at the end of students' primary interview I asked them to provide me with some basic demographic information. From this list of questions I was able to ascertain that all but one of the student participants were first generation students—meaning that their parents did not complete a post-secondary program. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, *Student Participants' Educational Financial Strategies* presents the complexity of their strategies for financing their education at EAC.

In the literature on belonging I located few studies that specifically explored the relationship between students' economic capital and their sense of belonging in post-secondary institutions. Hagerty et al. (2002) demonstrated that family financial problems as an adolescent may diminish students' adult sense of belonging; however, their study did not assess sense of belonging in relation to a specific academic community. A United Kingdom study by Reay et al. (2001) explored the relationship between students' working-class backgrounds, including economic resources like money, and post-secondary institution selection. Ostrove and Long (2007) found that college students' perceptions about their "ease of life" was a significant predictor of their sense of belonging (p. 371). At an affluent Ontario university Lehmann (2007) explored the relationship between students' social-class background and their decisions to persist in their studies. Similar studies have clarified that students who come from lower social-class backgrounds face significant belonging challenges regardless of the institutional context (Aries & Seider, 2005; Read et al., 2003). I argue that this track of research needs to extend into the for-profit private post-secondary sector where institutions target non-traditional learners and tuition costs are far higher than in similar public post-

secondary programs. During the data analysis phase of my study I paid particular mind to how the student participants' economic capital informed their sense of belonging.

Economic Capital and Participants' Sense of Belonging

Six of the student participants faced significant economic challenges at The College. Of these six, four or half of the participants—Trevor, Lisa, Nicole, and Oscar, withdrew from their program due at least in part to financial constraints or a combination of financial constraints and other factors. Of the two who persisted in their studies until the conclusion of my study, Amanda had the most challenging financial circumstances. During her interviews she described how at times she barely had enough money to buy groceries and how her friends would donate food to support her. I suspected that her frequent illnesses may have been due in part to poor nutrition or her inability to afford food. Similarly, at the start of his program Gord, a game student, literally lived on the street for a period of time. Despite such severe circumstances Amanda and Gord persisted to the conclusion of my study and developed a sense of belonging. I wanted to understand how this could be—how were some students able to persist and grow their sense of belonging despite lower levels of economic capital while others were not? In this section, I have accounted for these phenomena.

To begin with Nicole, had financial reservations about her educational choice right at the onset of her program. When I asked her during our first interview to tell me how the transition to College was going she remarked: "The financial aspect is a big worry for me. My family is not in the best financial situation. I was really pondering coming here because of the money." I wish I had asked Nicole why given her financial circumstances she would travel all the way from Manitoba to attend EAC. From my interviews with faculty and administrators I developed an impression that many students attending The College appear to lack a strong financial knowledge base. For instance, when I asked Sophie (an academic program coordinator) to comment on students' commitment to school she remarked:

Money is a big issue for them. I am consistently surprised how many students come to school with no money saved. If I was going to a school that cost forty thousand dollars I would work for a few years to bank some money. They often times do not.

Similarly, when I asked Lampton the same question he said:

We have students who have jobs and probably not by choice. They have to pay the bills. I have one student who has to make payments on a truck for work. It takes them away from the classroom. I observed it as a student myself, how those with jobs tended to not be as successful in the quality of their work. Their focus is being split.

When I asked William if he noticed a lot of attrition in his first term courses he said “no, my highest attrition tends to be in the second and third terms for financial reasons.” Furthermore, Audrey suggested that funding was the single biggest issue her students’ faced. From my interviews with faculty and administrator participants I realized that students’ economic capital levels were a vital factor in their sense of belonging, performance, and persistence at EAC. Their narratives were consistent with the student participants’ narratives.

When I analyzed Amanda’s narrative, it was difficult to pinpoint any one factor that may have offset her economic circumstances. I suspected that her sense of belonging may be attributed to the cumulative effect of many factors including her strong and inclusive self-concept (*Self-Concepts*), emotional support from her mother, peers, academic staff and faculty. I believe Gord developed a sense of belonging due to necessity—the need to be successful in order to better provide for his family and young children and the desire to avoid returning to a job that he did not like. In Oscar’s case, he was able to persist in his program until the conclusion of my study due to primarily to his parents’ financial support. I developed the impression that Oscar’s parents carried the financial burden by adjusting their spending habits and making financial sacrifices at home. Eventually, Oscar obtained a part-time job in his home community to help contribute to his educational costs. However, I suspected that this situation intensified his educational experience as he withdrew from his program sometime after the conclusion of my study. Unfortunately for Trevor, he did not have family support of a financial sort. He made the difficult decision to cease study and work to save for tuition and living expenses.

Focusing more intently on Lisa’s story provided me with some clues about how economic capital may relate to students’ sense of belonging and persistence at The College. I came to the realization that although Lisa lacked material funds, her ability to

discern the financial implications of her educational choice was quite robust. She wanted to obtain an education that would prepare her for employment in the entertainment arts sector. Lisa also wanted a reasonable study and work-life balance—a situation whereby it may be possible to study part-time and work part-time to offset her educational costs. Lisa did not want a situation whereby the cost of her educational program would be so great that she would run up an excessive amount of debt. During her first term Lisa realized that study at EAC was not aligning with her goals. During our second interview she reflected upon her wants and the reality of her situation. Lisa explained:

I do not feel I belong to The College because I left. I felt the school was giving me too much pressure because I will never be able to cover the tuition and living cost with student loan and my part time jobs. If I continue to stay there I could imagine myself begin to live a tough life owing the school tons of tuition and not able to complete my diploma and then I will be in a huge trouble.

Lisa's lack of material funds put pressure on her educational experience. From her perspective she needed to work and go to school simultaneously and she said that this may place her in "trouble." When Lisa tried to seek advice from EAC staff she felt incredibly frustrated. Lisa described it best:

I had to constantly work for two jobs if I want to continue to stay at The College, but then the teachers wanted you to spend a lot of time on the assignments and not to take any job. I was overworked, overstressed and over tired at EAC. When you had problems and talked to someone, most of them tried to protect themselves and the school, and they didn't think from the student's perspective. Every problem we had was our fault, we should have done this, done that. Then do this—do that. Whenever there was a problem, they made the problems appear like it was the student who caused it, but it was not. The world just points the fingers at the weakest because they don't know what was going on and are powerless. It was crazy and ridiculous.

Dissatisfied with her experience and the feeling that EAC was not for regular people with regular financial means, Lisa said that she enrolled at another competing private college that offered a similar program for significantly less cost. Lisa also submitted a poem to describe her sense of belonging. The poem was as a way to

describe her helplessness. I viewed Lisa's poem, *The Admissions Representative*, as a cry for support—a way to persuade The College to assist her or act on her behalf.

Participant Artifact Poem—The Admissions Representative

You gave me hope that there is up to twenty thousand dollars tuition for me to enter The College.

I worked hard night and day for school to get good grades and perfect attendance.

But in vain, I worked for an empty promise.

You did not define what that entrance scholarship was.

"First come First serve" is not the definition of a scholarship.

Scholarships are for good students.

Do you use any phrase you can to recruit more students?

Making lures for innocent young people and stripping away their money, hopes, and dreams.

Making students lose hopes or trust in the humanity,

Nevertheless, once they have lost hope, they will give up and quit.

Where is the money?

Where is twenty thousand dollars?

I hope it is not in the admissions representative's pocket.

Who has received entrance scholarship at EAC—high school students and not mature students?

If there is any student how come I am unaware?

\$20,000 x 23 = \$460,000, you can buy a condo, buy a car, buy land to grow some trees.

I hope the money is not in the admissions representative's pocket.

The admissions representative never answered my emails.

Is he afraid of me? That is their mystery.

Who has received scholarship? You must post their name.

No more lies, no more empty promises.

I am leaving, I am leaving, I am leaving for more affordable schooling and not lies.

Never forget the positive value, the cornerstone that builds a trustworthy society.

I could not believe that this could happen in Canada.²

Lisa's creative artifact expressed her perceptions about her rights as a student—the right to experience transparent business practices and to be a part of a business structure that is supportive of its base users or non-traditional students. The poem provided a perspective on Lisa's situation that I do not think I would have been able to glean from her interview narratives. Lisa was highly circumspect about the cost of tuition and the value proposition at EAC. She remarked: "you know the cost of this school is much higher than other schools. Another private school cost half of what this place costs." As a mature student and someone who had some post-secondary and professional experience, she possessed strong analytical skills and the ability to question what she was getting for her dollars.

It occurred to me that other students in my study did not necessarily possess Lisa's level of economic capital or at least her level of discernment where finances were concerned. For the most part, the student participants who wound up in financial troubles at The College were caught unaware. Some of them, like Oscar, described the very experience that Lisa was focused on avoiding. During our first term interview Oscar was certain that he fit into the institution. By the second term he had been a part of his program long enough to realize how difficult the learning proposition was for someone with a significant commute and limited financial resources. When I asked Oscar about his sense of belonging he said:

I think the cost is really high. It is tough on my parents. I can't work a whole lot because of the full-time study policy—I looked into that and was told I could not take a reduced course load or something. There was a lot of paperwork and meetings. It was a nightmare. The heavy homework load and the commute make it impossible to work anyway. My parents are kicking in more money than I expected to help me pay for school, and there is not a lot I can do about it if I want to study full-time and graduate within two years.

² Lisa (2011). Original poem obtained with the permission of the artist. This poem was not created for course work or specifically for this study. It was created by the participant for her own individual purpose, to highlight perceived injustices in terms of The College's sales and financial services practices.

By his third term Oscar's frustrations had only increased. During our interview I asked him if his perceptions of belonging had changed in any way. He remarked:

My family is amazing. They have changed their grocery and entertainment habits to help save money for the tuition. They do not want me to work and study. It is more difficult than we expected. There are no good transit options where I live and that makes my situation worse. I spend a lot of money and waste a lot of time each day commuting. Despite their [parents] support, I think I will still need to get a part-time job. It is an expensive experience.

Other students have more time to spend on campus and socialize. I miss out on learning with my peers. I have to do a lot on my own time when I leave campus. That makes it harder to fit in if you know what I mean. I wish I had known that it was a full-time program when I signed-up. If I get a job it will only get worse.

After considering the role of economic capital in students' sense of belonging I came to various tentative conclusions. Economic capital was a very important factor in students' sense of belonging at EAC. In Trevor's case, a lack of funding appears to have contributed to his withdrawal but not necessarily the absence of belonging. Trevor appeared to lack the knowledge to assess the value proposition and budget appropriately for educational costs. However, it may be that he was aware of the financial implications and accepted the risk based upon The College's reputation.

For instance, Trevor mentioned that one of the reasons he enrolled at EAC was due to The College's high ranking for in The Princeton Review for its game program. On the other hand, in Lisa's case the presence of economic knowledge and a lack of funding contributed to a complete break with The College and no sense of belonging at all. To make matters more confusing in Amanda's case it appears that a lack of economic capital may have somehow resulted in a sense of belonging. Perhaps for Amanda her sense of belonging grew from her strong self-concept and other critical factors such as her family, peers, and academic staff. Or, it may be that her being unable to fully discern the value proposition at EAC was an enabling factor. What is clear is that in order to more fully comprehend how economic capital impinges upon non-traditional students' sense of belonging additional research is warranted.

In summary, six out of eight student participants had economic challenges such as little or no financial support from their families, or a need to work and study

simultaneously. In many cases lower levels of economic capital contributed significantly to students' decisions to withdraw from EAC. However, in other cases student participants who faced challenging financial circumstances persisted and reported developing a sense of belonging to their academic community. Although lower levels of economic capital or material funds impeded and in some cases impaired student participants' sense of belonging, in other situations vital factors such as support from academic staff and peers or a strong self-concept superseded the import of economic capital. These findings bring to light various implications for practice at The College.

Implications for Practice

In my opinion, Lisa, Oscar's and Trevor's narratives accurately depicted the perceptions of many EAC students who have described the experience of being stretched between competing and equally necessary priorities such as work and school. I have frequently wondered what more The College may be able to do to make the financial commitment more tenable for students—to support their client base or non-traditional learners. My participants had many good suggestions.

One of the most common challenges EACs students' grapple with is finding the time to look for the right job. Although The College provided career services post-graduation, staffing for part-time employment assistance was intermittent, and there was no formalized on-campus work program. Given the accelerated educational model and the full-time study policy at EAC, students need to use their time efficiently. More specifically, they need to eliminate as much time loss as possible due to commuting. In my practice I have noticed that at times students would settle for jobs that were a great distance from their housing and The College. This was problematic for most students who studied on a full-time course load. Amanda suggested that what would be helpful would be a program to provide more opportunities for students to work on or near The College campus. Her suggestion is grounded theoretically—in their study on retention and the first year university experience Madgett and Belanger (2008) found that students should avoid higher interest loans (i.e., bank or credit) and should compensate by working more on a part-time basis.

Another way The College could ease the pressure in terms of the study and work-life balance would be simply to dispense with the reduced course load policy

altogether. In an eight student sample it is impossible to draw empirical conclusions; however, given the frustrations Lisa and Oscar expressed in their narratives this approach may potentially improve student satisfaction, belonging, and reduce attrition. I suggest that by allowing students to select a study load or pace that is suitable to their needs that EAC may better acknowledge its students' needs and the intensity of study at The College. Furthermore, programs and policy structures aimed at retaining students may be a better overall financial strategy for EAC.

Finally, building upon the theme of transparency from Chapter 4—*Corporate Culture*, I suggest that EAC's students would benefit tremendously from having access to all scholarship programs and eligibility criteria. I believe that such transparency is crucially important given The College's high cost of tuition, relative to similar public sector programs, and non-traditional learner base. Furthermore, based upon how unaware some of the student participants' appeared to be about the financial implications of their program choice, I suggest it may be beneficial for The College to look at the programs, resources, and advising mechanisms that support students' financial planning pre-enrollment and the development of plans to help students afford study and living expenses beyond their first term.

Theoretical Synthesis

Given the small sample size and the absence of an economic capital instrument it was not possible to make general claims about the student participants' economic capital levels. However, their narratives suggest that there is a need to further consider economic capital as playing an important role in how students experience college life and form dispositions to develop or not develop a sense of belonging. My study takes a first step towards understanding the social-psychological dynamics linking economic capital and students' sense of belonging in the for-profit Canadian post-secondary context. The findings provide insights into the role that economic capital played for student participants' who persisted to the conclusion of this study, as well as several who actually left The College. In some related research, it has not been possible to make such connections in terms of students who have left their programs (Ostrove & Long, 2007).

In other studies, researchers have explained students' belonging and persistence in post-secondary schools through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's habitus concept (i.e., Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2004; Read et al., 2003). Utilizing a similar structure and agency framework (Chapter 2 Definitions—*Structure and Agency*) I found that it was not entirely clear how students' forms of inherited economic knowledge related to their sense of belonging at EAC. It was much easier to determine for instance who possessed the ability to effectively assess value propositions or to budget responsibly for their educational experience as opposed to understanding where that knowledge originated from.

Many researchers have demonstrated that, regardless of institution type, developing a sense of belonging is more complex for who come from lower social-class backgrounds such as working-class (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lehmann, 2007; Ostrove, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Read et al., 2003). Furthermore, there is at least some evidence that suggests being a first generation student may be negatively associated with belonging at the post-secondary level (Lehmann, 2007; Longden, 2004). With respect to this literature my study has both affirming and contradictory findings.

From the experiences of Trevor, Amanda, Lisa and Nicole it appears that there are at least two important components to consider in terms of the relationship between economic capital and students' sense of belonging at EAC. In material terms, a lack of funds may ultimately determine a students' need to withdraw from their program. Withdrawal in this sense does not necessarily mean that a student does not possess a sense of belonging to their academic community, as was the case of Trevor. Furthermore, in knowledge based terms, substantial economic capital or the ability to scrutinize value propositions appears to have been a major factor both Lisa and Nicole's withdrawal decisions and complete lack of belonging. With respect to Amanda, she lacked economic capital in terms of material funds and she was also a first generation student. The literature would suggest that such factors may make it difficult to develop a sense of belonging; however, she persisted against those odds. This leaves an important question for future research to consider—what specific kinds of economic knowledge engender students' sense of belonging in the for-profit Canadian sector? It may be useful to explore the relationship between students' economic capital or their capacity to assess value propositions, and their sense of belonging in other for-profit

post-secondary institutions where higher tuitions may pose a risk to students who possess lower levels of economic capital.

4.3. Academic and Artistic Capital

In my review of the literature I did not find any research that specifically explored the relationship between students' sense of belonging and their academic and artistic capital in the for-profit Canadian post-secondary context. Given the rapid growth of for-profit schools in British Columbia, in particular institutions with entertainment arts programming, I aimed to contribute to belonging research in this specific context. From a theoretical perspective, I found it useful to consider the research that has explored the relationship between academic and cultural discourses and students' sense of belonging in Canada (Codjoe, 2005) and other systems (Campbell & Li, 2008; Read et al., 2003). I also explored theory on art and media arts education (e.g., Chalmers, 1981; Boellstorff, 2006).

The College does not track students' previous educational attainment; however, I suspect the student participants' attainment levels were slightly higher than the general student population at EAC. Although only Rodrigo had completed an undergraduate degree, to my surprise five of the participants had previously taken some post-secondary level course work. Half of the student participants had formal training in disciplines that were closely related to their program at EAC, including traditional arts, film, and information technology. Based on my practice at The College, I had formed a general assumption that those students who possessed prior knowledge in related disciplines were generally able to draw upon those forms of academic and artistic knowledge in their program experience to enhance their academic outcomes and sense of belonging.

This simplistic view did not bear out in my study. Two of the four participants who withdrew from their programs, Nicole and Lisa, had fine or traditional arts training at reputable public post-secondary universities in Vancouver. Trevor who completed a post-secondary certificate in information technology, a program that provided him with advanced computer literacy skills, withdrew from his program sometime after the conclusion of our interviews. Two students, Amanda and Gord, who had only high

school or GED equivalency completed all three interview and experienced a sense of belonging.

Although academic and artistic capital was an important factor in students' sense of belonging, it appears that simply having prior knowledge was not enough for some students to develop a sense of belonging to their academic community. From the student participants' narratives several patterns emerged that helped me to more fully understand the dynamics between students' sense of belonging and their academic and artistic capital. These included: a) the compatibility between students' particular forms of prior knowledge (e.g., the specific kind of traditional art training) and those engrained in the artistic sub-culture; b) the compatibility between cultural forms of knowledge and the academic sub-culture; and c) students' knowledge gaps. Where relevant and appropriate I have also drawn upon the narratives of the faculty and administrator participants' to provide a more complete interpretation of students' experiences

Forms of Prior Knowledge

From the students' perspectives, forms of prior knowledge ranged significantly from simply the knowledge of life experience on the one hand to post-secondary education on the other. In this section, I outline how specific forms of prior knowledge enabled or constrained students' sense of belonging to The College. Such findings may be invaluable for EAC's administrators, educators, and service departments who may seek to better prepare incoming students with understandings about specific forms of knowledge that may enhance their experiences and potential for developing a sense of belonging.

To begin, Gord simply suggested that having the advantage of additional life experience has provided him with the focus necessary to succeed in his program. When I asked him what he notices about students who fit into school he remarked:

They don't goof off as much. There is high school and there is college. High school behavior does not belong in college and college behavior does not belong in high school. High school was all about students getting together and having a good time and college is very serious. That is how I feel. My approach here is to use my work experience and apply it to college. That is my advantage—my work ethic.

I suspect that Gord's no-nonsense ideas about the college experience may be directly attributed to the fact that he had been employed professionally in construction for a decade. He was confident that he would be able to leverage his employment experience and work ethic to be successful in his program. Furthermore, a lot was hinging on Gord's success. At the time of the study, his two young children and wife were living far away in Calgary. They sacrificed a great deal for Gord to attend EAC. In this sense, I agree that Gord's life and work experiences provided him with a particular knowledge—an outlook that he drew upon to focus his energy in the academic community, as opposed to a particular form of artistic or academic knowledge. Gord's connection between his academic work ethic and belonging appears to be consistent with what several faculty and administrator participants suggested in their narratives.

During our second term interview I asked Ernie, a full-time animation instructor, to describe how students' develop a sense of belonging he remarked:

The older they are... if they have had actual jobs then they tend to value their time in the class more. They tend to understand how to time manage. The ones that have never had a job and mom and dad are spoon feeding them or however you want to phrase it, they tend to have a harder time grasping what is expected in their day-to-day lives and in the classroom. It will take longer to develop a sense of belonging.

I asked Daniel (non-academic administrative director) the same question. He said:

If you don't have that work ethic coming in here or really false expectations and you are still sort of thinking that it is high school and you are just there for the social component then you are not going to fit in.

Similarly, Lampton (media arts instructor) said:

Some of them do not demonstrate a work ethic initially. That will catch up with them eventually, but are they passionate for it? You bet. There is that love of it, but I think they need to discover within themselves the commitment, the work ethic to be able to demonstrate their sense of belonging.

In this sense, there appears to be a shared perception amongst instructors that a strong academic work ethic and previous professional experience are forms of knowledge that

may be positively connected to belonging. This finding may also demonstrate that instructors place value upon particular forms of cultural capital and may raise questions about the what it means for students' sense of belonging when there is a disconnect between instructors' expectations and the actual cultural capital that students bring to their program.

Like Gord, Oscar also did not have previous post-secondary experience like many of the other student participants. However, he did have some experiences taking community-based art classes when he was 13 or 14 years old. He drew animals and "abstract stuff, like vases, and flowers." After a year he moved on from those kinds of applications, but continued to "doodle" from time to time. Oscar told me that sometimes his doodles turned out really well and he thought that he should work on building those skills in college. Oscar had the benefit of having had his artwork critiqued previously in the art class he took. When I asked Oscar to tell me about his transition to EAC he said:

It is all right. In my courses I know some things—in others I do not know anything. I'm surprised that my earlier art training has been helpful. In our drawing class I was working on this design problem and I knew right away how to solve it because I had done something like that before. It was easy.

As Oscar progressed through his studies, his previous training at the community-level appeared to provide him with a set of fundamental creative approaches—he did not feel out of place in artistic terms. Perhaps Oscar had just the right amount of art training to fit into the artistic sub-culture of the academic community. In this sense his training was not so extensive that there would be the potential to have developed rigid approaches that may need to be adjusted in order to fit in.

During my interview with Aurelia, it became apparent that her confidence in the academic community stemmed in part from the academic and artistic capital she had acquired in high school. Her experiences appear to have cultivated a willingness to explore new media and to continually practice. For instance, Aurelia had a life changing experience on a school band tour in Germany as well as significant leadership opportunities. She also had an influential music teacher who she said "made it fun to be in class. He opened up the course and allowed students to be more creative and to push their creativity." I believe these experiences were supportive of Aurelia's creative

growth and may account for her interest to explore digital technologies that relate to those used in her program and corresponding industry. For instance, on her own time she practiced digital sketching on a free program called CyPaint. Aurelia was already forming industry-like discernments about software applications. She claimed CyPaint was “more user-friendly than Photoshop.”

I observed that Aurelia also drew frequently in a sketchbook that she carried with her at EAC. During our interviews she explained that she used sketchbooks to record her ideas and creative notes, a practice she learned in high school. Aurelia said that she reviews her sketchbooks periodically—they were a source of creative inspiration for future work. As a former entertainment arts industry professional I have noticed that these sorts of reflective conceptual practices are common amongst good artists. Aurelia also had previous experience studying at the post-secondary college level in a non-arts-based program, which may have contributed to her academic knowledge-base. I suggest that these experiences contributed to specific forms of knowledge that made it easier for Aurelia to develop a sense of belonging to her academic community at The College.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, *Participants—Students’ Biographical Descriptions*, Lisa had the perceived advantage of having studied in contemporary arts at a local university. Furthermore, she took one course prior to full-time enrolment at The College to get a sense of what the school was all about. She was very happy with the project she produced in her first course. When describing her creative background Lisa remarked:

I did a contemporary arts program at university, a minor, and an extended minor in philosophy. I did draw—pretty much sketching, drawing, and painting. I did a little bit of Photoshop. I did sculpture and I worked as a sculptor. My father helped me find a job. He is a sculptor. My brother works in video games. I knew a lot of contemporary theories, because that is what I went to the university for. I learned a lot of contemporary social theories in relation to contemporary art. But that is probably it. The technical skills, I don’t have those. But now that I am here I think this will give me something that will help with that.

Although not unheard of, this sort of experience level was not the norm given The College’s broad-access mission. Based on my practice and training in the fine arts, I

could see Lisa's artistic potential from her creative artifact submission (Figure 8, p. 155). I suspected that her training was more in-depth than many of her peers.

In Chapter 5, *Support from Academic Staff*, I focus more deeply upon a particular classroom experience that Lisa said negatively impacted her sense of belonging. This particular story also has bearing upon this chapter section. When I reviewed Lisa's narrative, she recalled an experience whereby her instructor critiqued her artwork in front of her peers in a Fundamental Drawing class. I wondered if by "not helping anybody", her instructor meant that her particular art style and approach was not helpful in The College or EAI contexts. I suspected this upon the basis that in the field of animation there are professional animation principles that may not be congruous with traditional or fine-art based approaches to drawing the human figure from life.

As Lisa's Fundamental Drawing instructor was also a part of my study, I drew upon his response to the following question to illuminate Lisa's experience in her instructors' class: In your assignments how do you allow for non-standard or less formal approaches to art? Most instructors indicated that they made such accommodations; however, Lisa's instructor said:

There is not a lot of space for less formal approaches. We are teaching them a process to be able to do something later on. It is usually the ones who can draw or like to draw a lot that we have the most difficulty retraining or training. We have to help them break bad habits and develop good habits so that they can excel

Furthermore, I also asked another media arts instructor who taught similar courses if rules or expectations in their classes played a role in students' sense of belonging. William remarked: "I think that we definitely insist in process and giving them (EAC students) our process. Learning how to learn is the biggest thing that they can take away from school." I interpreted William's comment to be indicative of discipline related rules. This finding is consistent with my study's structure and agency framework—in this case I argue that discipline-related structures may explain the actions of Lisa's teacher.

Cultural Forms of Knowledge

Rodrigo was the only student who completed a post-secondary degree program in a field related to his program choice. At various times during our interviews, Rodrigo

remarked how this previous experience was applicable to his program. For instance, during our second term interview Rodrigo mentioned that he was taking an introductory Editing course. Given his background in editing, he anticipated that he would “feel comfortable” and “enjoy it.” Rodrigo remarked:

I think I am going to catch up pretty easy. I found some of the work that the students were doing in that course and I believe that I can do that. It is like riding a bike. When you have not done the bike for years and years you can just go back. I have seen the editing that some upper-level students have done and I can tell you that what took them three hours to edit will take me 45 minutes.

Rodrigo also took previous courses in art history, design, and colour theory. These experiences were tremendously beneficial to Rodrigo and generally supported his sense of belonging to The College’s artistic sub-culture. However, the modes of learning and teaching were different in Rodrigo’s undergraduate program. These cultural differences necessitated that Rodrigo adjust to the dominant modes of learning at The College.

Rodrigo expressed that “coming from another culture was a challenging adjustment. “The education is different than back home. In my home country (Latin America), learning tended to focus more on knowledge than practice or application and the intensity of study was also different.” When I asked Rodrigo about how it was different making art at The College he remarked:

It depends upon the school and the teachers as well. It depends upon how teachers tell you to do things. In my home country the terms were five and a half to six months and the semesters allowed for four and a half months of real work. Here the terms are shorter and more intensive. There it was more specific and rich to tell you why you learn what you learn, and here it is more about understanding concepts and their place in the field and then moving on. For some people it may be good to have a stronger background in the field before coming here.

Rodrigo said he developed a strong sense of belonging to his academic community and did very well in his program; as a result, I believe his ideas about cultural discontinuities are important to consider in the process of belonging.

Knowledge Gaps

From the faculty and administrator participants' narratives I gathered that there were some key areas whereby students' typically lacked knowledge. Sophie, who taught first-term courses, provided a good summary of these.

We are not the most academically rigorous program EAC students are ever going to face. There is not a lot of writing or research necessary to get through this program. Whenever there is the students tend to be awful at it. They are not prepared for even a tiny amount of research. If they want get a demo reel asset from a historical context they default to medieval. If they say the word medieval one more time I am going to die. The only reason they know about the medieval period is World of Warcraft. I'm not joking; they have little real historical knowledge. Sometimes we address students' developmental needs with disability accommodations, tutoring, and writing workshops.

One thing that is an issue is computer literacy. Often times there are a really wide range of needs in that particular area. Some mature students, and surprisingly some of our younger students also struggle with basic computer literacy. We tend to think that because they are Googling or Facebooking, that they know how to work a computer. File management is a foreign concept to many students... or they do save files, but they do it incredibly poorly.

For the most part, the narratives of faculty members and administrators suggested that students who seek help and resources tend to adapt and develop a sense of belonging.

From the students' narratives, I noticed a pattern whereby if a student had a knowledge gap in a core subject area it generally corresponded to a diminished sense of belonging. This was true even in cases whereby the student had substantial prior knowledge in other important subject areas. For example, Trevor was the only student who completed an applied post-secondary certificate in information technology. Trevor remarked "the Photoshop and technology stuff is a breeze." He also enjoyed playing with 3D visualization applications on his own time. Trevor practiced 3DS (3D Studio Max) and Blender, digital software applications that are very similar to Maya—The College's primary software for producing entertainment arts assets. Trevor said that all of this experience was generally supportive of his academic progress and sense of belonging to the College.

However, when he was younger Trevor was discouraged from developing his creative talents through traditional art media such as drawing and painting. I suggest that these painful experiences may have contributed to a particular gap in terms of Trevor's knowledge of art and design principles. Perhaps these experiences negatively impacted Trevor's academic progress in courses like Fundamental Drawing and Colour Theory. When discussing his Fundamental Drawing course, Trevor remarked:

I sit down for life drawing and it is all kind of Greek to me. So I have sketched and doodled, but never in a structured way. Just kind of in like, I have got the pen and oh, that turned out rather well. Other times it doesn't even look like a stick drawing. I'm not sure if I fit in there yet.

As mentioned, Trevor failed both his Life Drawing and Colour Theory courses in term one. Although he did not specifically connect his performance in Life Drawing and Colour Theory to a knowledge gap, he did recall memories of repression and abuse in relation to attempts to make art as a child. Trevor also acknowledged a strong need for more practice in Life Drawing in order to meet course expectations.

I asked Amanda if she liked her courses in term one and she expressed that she was enjoying them; however, they were also challenging because as a mature student she was not used to being in an academic setting. Amanda expressed that in 3D Concepts, a computer-based course, a number of students had prior experience with computers and were progressing more rapidly. Furthermore, she had very little knowledge or practice with traditional arts and drawing. She described how these knowledge gaps related to her performance and perceptions of belonging:

Well in those classes where I'm with students who are outperforming me I feel stupid and think I shouldn't be here. I feel lost in 3D Concepts. Normally, I get help from the students next to me, but because they are progressing well, I feel as though I should not interrupt them. I can't draw at all either and I feel lost in Drawing and Perspective class.

In this regard, Amanda's perceptions were also shared by Helena, a program director. When I asked Helena how students' develop a sense of belonging she remarked:

If they are not doing as well as other students there can be a perception that they may not be as good, and may not be able to be successful. Therefore, they will think that they may not be able to get a job and then question the point of continuing their studies.

Nicole experienced similar feelings due to a lack of knowledge about the 3D software application Maya. Interestingly, during her third interview Sophie said of students and Maya that “it tends to kick their butts. It is a way more complex and picky application than any of our students have ever been exposed to.” During our third interview and after Nicole had withdrawn from her program I asked her to look back upon her experience and recall any key events or turning points that may have led to her decision to withdraw. She recalled a feeling that she had in her Basic 3D Concepts course. Nicole said:

That project... all I can remember is that it was in Maya and I did not want to have anything to do with the 3D. I wanted to be drawing and I did not want to deal with those programs. I had not really done anything with 3D before, so I was not sure what really to expect. Then I got into it and I really, really did not get along with that program at all.

I asked Nicole if she had an open mind about Maya when she began the program. She went on to explain that she did. About halfway through the course she started to fall behind, she did not understand what how to operate the software and this made her frustrated. Then, I asked Nicole if her frustration had anything to do with her level of experience using computers or 3D software applications. She remarked:

Yes, I would say that was definitely a big factor. I didn't know—a lot of the other students seemed to know at least basically where most things were and I did not know how to get around the program all that well.

For Nicole, Amanda and other participants, the experience of not possessing a form of knowledge or enough knowledge to perform as well as their peers in the classroom context had a significant impact upon their perceptions of belonging to their academic community.

Implications for Practice

As I analyzed the narratives of all participant groups, I considered various possible implications for practice in relation to students' academic and artistic capital. In terms of forms of knowledge, simply possessing prior knowledge in related fields did not uniformly correspond to positive academic experiences, outcomes, or the development of a sense of belonging. It appears from my study that specific forms of knowledge may be more supportive of students' sense of belonging than others. The College may benefit from future research aimed at understanding for instance the relationship between substantial professional experience or work-ethic and students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, given that the only two students with post-secondary level fine arts training dropped out of their program, it may be beneficial for The College to explore links between particular forms of related experience (e.g., fine arts training) and belonging. Such research may be to inform programs aimed at further demystifying the academic and artistic experience at EAC, to assist students with enrolment decisions, advanced preparation as well as knowledge of the resources students may access to improve their skills while enrolled.

Based upon Rodrigo's experiences, EAC may also benefit from programs aimed at increasing faculty members' knowledge of cultural modes of learning. Such programs may also include practical approaches for the classroom aimed at helping students from non-mainstream cultural backgrounds adapt more easily to The College's modes of teaching and learning. Finally, The College may benefit from further exploration of the most common forms of knowledge gaps that new students encounter in their first year of study. It may be for instance that deficits in computer literacy and basic drawing skills occur frequently among new students. Programs aimed at addressing such deficits may help instill confidence in new students and grow their sense of belonging.

Theoretical Synthesis

The literature demonstrates that dominant academic discourses have the power to shape and constrain which students belong to an educational institution (Codjoe, 2005; Read et al., 2003). When writing of art education in public schools, Chalmers (1981) asserted that institutions "refuse to make use of the individual's private experience" and that in extreme circumstances "the student is forced to choose between

their own relation to reality of the one demanded by the institution" (p. 8). From Lisa's narrative, I believe that she may have been forced to make an early withdrawal decision based upon the incongruity of her particular artistic knowledge. From this perspective my findings are consistent with literature on dominant academic discourses. Furthermore, the experiences of Rodrigo are generally consistent with the literature linking cultural forms of academic knowledge and belonging (Campbell & Li, 2008).

4.4. Self-Concepts

In the literature on belonging at the post-secondary level, there are few studies that assess the role of social experiences that have occurred outside of the academic community, past or present, in relation to students' sense of belonging in post-secondary contexts. Of the studies that exist, factors such as students' work, family, religious, and external social commitments (Kember & Leung, 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) have been assessed in relation to their belonging. However, these studies did not specifically address how students inherited values or how sources of motivation from other contexts may relate to their sense of belonging in college.

Fewer studies connect students' early life experiences such as family support with adult sense of belonging. One example by Hagerty et al. (2002) established that for community college students adult sense of belonging was significantly correlated with perceived caring by both parents. A few other researchers have employed Bourdieu's theory of the habitus to qualitatively explore connections between students' social-class experiences and their sense of belonging (Read et al., 2003), as well as their decisions to persist (Lehmann, 2007) in post-secondary programs. Inspired by these ideas, I was interested to understand how students' previous experiences in family or other social structures may relate to sense of belonging at EAC.

Based upon my analysis of all student participants' narratives and creative artifacts, the theme of self-concepts emerged as being a key factor in student participants' sense of belonging. By self-concepts, I mean focused social schemas representing students' most critical value orientations and sources of motivation.

Student participants who had self-concepts that were supportive of their sense of belonging consistently reported having positive relationships with their parents.

According to my structure and agency framework (Giddens, 1981, 1984; Sewell, 1992), I have suggested that instructors may be powerfully motivated to shape and select who belongs to EAC by acting upon structural or in this case discipline related knowledge. Furthermore, I have outlined the types of family experiences which most significantly contributed to students participants' self-concepts. Where applicable, I have also drawn upon student participants' creative artifacts to add another narrative dimension to students' ideas of self. These artifacts, including a digital artwork from Nicole and a poem from Trevor, were not generated as a part of course work in their program. They were personal artworks created outside of EAC. The participants decided to submit these particular artworks at my request to best represent their sense of belonging.

Furthermore, where appropriate I have also drawn upon the narratives of faculty and administrator participants to further explicate the role of self-concepts in students' sense of belonging at EAC. I have organized the following section under two main headings: a) *Self-Concepts Supportive of a Sense of Belonging*; and b) *Tentative Self-Concepts*. In Chapter 5, *Students' Representations of Self-Concepts*, I also discuss in-depth the relationship between students' representations of self-concepts through their course or artwork, and how those representations relate to their sense of belonging.

Self-Concepts Supportive of a Sense of Belonging

When I asked Ernie to share his perceptions about students who have parental support for their studies he said: "I think students that have had support at home with their studies to do a little bit better than those who do not have support." This notion was consistent with the student participants' narratives. As I reviewed these I noticed that those who had supportive family structures or at least one parent who was supportive of their creative interests tended to develop a sense of belonging at EAC. Furthermore, from the students who developed a sense of belonging, all possessed holistic rather than individualistic self-concepts. By holistic I mean that these student participants viewed their educational goals as being connected to larger totalities such

as supporting dependants or more civically-minded interests like contributing to a stronger academic community at EAC.

To illustrate these findings I will begin with Rodrigo's narrative. Rodrigo said that he had a very supportive family structure—one that was nurturing of his interpersonal skills and creative pursuits. Rodrigo mentioned for instance that his parents would help him out with his education if he ever needed. When I asked Rodrigo about what it was like trying to make friends in College, he remarked:

It is o.k. you know. I have never been a person who was judgmental about others. I always give people opportunities to know me and to know them, because you never know when you are going to need help from somebody else. It is always good to be a good person with everybody even if they give you a funny look or something like that.

As I read into the subtext of his comment I asked him how he learned to be that way. He remarked "since I was a kid it was not really hard to make friends or get along with people. I guess I learned that from my family." Due presumably to Rodrigo's upbringing he had the outlook that it would not be difficult to make friends at The College.

I believe that, for Rodrigo, inherited social schemas of a positive and healthy sort contributed to a self-concept that was supportive of his sense of belonging at EAC. His particular self-concept made it easier for him to interact with his peers in the academic community and perform academically. As I got to know Rodrigo better, I developed admiration for his inclusive outlook on the college experience. He demonstrated this both in his recommendations to The College and also through his actions as a student. For instance, Rodrigo recommended that The College should create more opportunities for group work to expose students to a range of different perspectives, and to enhance students' social skills and projects. When discussing the value of groups Rodrigo remarked:

My old literature teacher used to tell me "I will give you this book, but each of you is going to have a different interpretation of the story and everyone's voice is important." The more that people are involved in projects together the better the project will be. In industry that is why they have the dailies (group screenings of works in progress). One person is not looking at your work, lots of people are, and that is how you get multiple perspectives—that is how you grow.

In term three I asked Rodrigo if he could provide a creative artifact to best describe his sense of belonging. His choice, a filming project that he initiated with his classmates, demonstrated his strong interpersonal skills and interest in others. At that point in time and based upon Rodrigo's background in film making, he was the only student in his cohort who had the technical skills necessary to sign-out filming equipment from EAC's equipment room. He signed out gear to allow his peers to partake in a filming experience that they would have otherwise not have been able to do. Rodrigo shared his extensive background knowledge of filmmaking and access to equipment with peers for the greater good—for the benefit of his peers. I have kept in touch with Rodrigo and I am aware that since the conclusion of the study he has graduated and has put together a very successful demo reel to show to industry for employment. I attributed Rodrigo's ability to develop a sense of belonging in part to his particular self-concept or background knowledge, which enabled him to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with his peers and faculty members.

Despite significant financial and health challenges and to a lesser extent gender issues in her program, Amanda was able to grow her sense of belonging to her academic community and persist in her studies. I suspect she was able to do this due to a tremendously strong and inclusive self-concept. For instance, a big part of Amanda's motivation for pursuing an education in Game Design was linked to her personal views about gender roles, female empowerment and her strong desire to set an example for other female gamers. Amanda remarked:

There are a lot of girls that are coming out in games, but, not so many that are coming out and creating games. There are a lot of female players coming out all over the place. Everyone is allowed to love games. That is one of the reasons that I want to get into the games industry. I want to become a big name—one of those people that helps the cause. You do not really see women as the big names. It is always guys who are the geniuses of the industry. I want to be that. Then people can look at me and they can think "oh wow, she is one of my favorite game designers", and then little girls will feel more like "oh, it is not just a guy's club anymore." As soon as we have one woman who is perceived to be a leader in the gaming community, then, it will be a lot easier.

Other key factors for Amanda included support from peers, academic staff, and faculty members. Based upon our interviews I also suspected that Amanda's mother

was one of, if not the most, significant factors in her sense of belonging. From Amanda's narrative I could tell her mother was a key source of creative inspiration for her. Amanda remarked:

When I was younger I used to draw and paint all the time. Since I was little my mom always encouraged that kind of stuff. We used to make candles and other random crafts. I'm sad that I didn't continue it but I got into video games instead. I like playing video games in which I craft the stories. My mom is very supportive of everything I do. She even plays video games. I bought her a DSI for her birthday and gave her my old Xbox.

I noticed that Amanda reached out to her mother at some of the most challenging moments during her study, such as when she was violently ill in housing. Although Amanda's mother was not able to assist her in financial terms she was a source of emotional support. Furthermore, I suspected that given her mother's financial vulnerability was both a source of stress and motivation. In this sense Amanda's educational goal was not just an individual goal.

Like Amanda and Rodrigo, Aurelia also had strong parental support, an inclusive self-concept, and she also developed a strong sense of belonging to EAC's academic community. During our discussions about art, Aurelia explained said that her interest in games was her mother's fault:

I knew that I wanted to work in some sort of field like the arts. You can actually blame my mother because she got me my first video game system when I was 7 years old. She was able to beat most of my games when I was not around. When my mom left the college (her mother's place of work) due to her illness we still had fun playing the games together and my obsession with video games grew from there.

Her mother's passing served as an even greater call to action for Aurelia in terms of her life goals—this event profoundly shaped her self-concept. Initially Aurelia went through a period of self-imposed isolation, which ultimately caused her to want to integrate more with those around her and extract more value from her life. Her aim at The College was no different. Aurelia said "I want to get involved in everything that I can to raise the school spirit as it were and help others avoid loneliness." She aimed to be supportive of a larger whole. During our interviews she also conveyed stories whereby she helped her

peers by providing emotional support. I also observed these behaviors on campus. I attributed Aurelia's focus and ability to grow her sense of belonging at The College to those formative and nurturing experiences Aurelia had growing up at home and also due to the loss of her mother.

When I think of the term focus I think of Gord. He also developed a sense of belonging to The College and was doing well at the conclusion of this project. His focus was truly on one thing—getting a job in the field so that he could better provide for his family and children. Gord was the only student in the program who had children and I believe this factor provided him with incredible resolve and determination throughout his study. For instance, when I asked Gord about his transition to The College he said:

It is extremely difficult. I left behind my wife, two kids, one that is 4 months old. Before you are an adult and don't have kids you are young and not so smart. Then when you have kids you realize that you are a whole new person and you turn into something bigger I think—something bigger than yourself. I have obligations outside of school that are bigger than me. I have a family that I need to be able to provide for. I need to school them, my children. My kids need clothes, food, a house, entertainment, and my family needs a car and gas... there are so many things that need to be taken care of.

If I were asked to speculate on Gord's likelihood of success based on first impressions I would have expected him to withdraw from his program during the first week of school. During our interview he explained that he had a very challenging transition to The College:

I had to move 12,000kms away from home. I had to leave my family, and just a whole bunch of things. When I came out here I did not have money for a place to live and I was living on the streets for the first month and a half I think it was.

When I first met Gord I believe he asked me if he could sleep at The College. Unfortunately, I did not get to know a great deal about Gord's parents, except that they were supportive of his family during this period of educational retraining at The College. I believe that for Gord the desire to provide a better life for his family was a significant factor that contributed positively to his sense of belonging.

Tentative Self-Concepts and Lack of Belonging

Although not unique to students in the for-profit college sector, many of the student participants in my study did not possess self-concepts that were rooted in nourishing family experiences or which were deriving from multiple sources of motivation. I have termed such self-concepts as being tentative, and see them as being linked to a lack of belonging. Students who possessed tentative self-concepts struggled or simply did not develop a sense of belonging at EAC. Of the students who had tentative self-concepts, Trevor, suffered from a physically abusive relationship with his father. Nicole and Lisa had concerns about their ability to make friends. Several student participants also doubted their creative abilities. One striking similarity amongst student participants who had tentative self-concepts was how individually orientated their motivations for study were. In this section I have first outlined faculty participants' perspectives about the vital link between parental support and students' sense of belonging. Second, I have illustrated through the student participants' narratives, self-concepts that were constraining of students' sense of belonging

From their narratives, and as one would expect, faculty did not seem to be keenly attuned to the intimate details of individual students' family support structures at EAC. Nevertheless, collectively their narratives demonstrated considerable knowledge about the types of family support issues EAC's students' commonly encounter. For example, during our term one interview I asked Sophie to comment upon students' commitment to school. She remarked:

I think we are competing against a lot of other stuff in their lives. I do not wish to blame their parents, but, students' parents have a weird habit of divorcing the second their kids graduate from high school. Or they get sick or they need the kid back home to work in the family business. There are often family dramas which pop up.

Similarly, when I asked Malorie to comment upon how students' develop a sense of belonging to EAC's academic community she said:

I believe that I was blessed to have the encouragement of my parents and a social framework where learning was not a luxury but expected. I hear so many stories about students that cannot find their way that I feel sorry for them. From my experiences with students at The

College, I believe that we are fulfilling a need and a niche in society that desperately needs to be filled.

When I asked Sean the same question he synthesized the dynamics of family socialization in relation to students' self-concepts and sense of belonging.

Belonging is being a part of a sort of group instinct. By human nature in order to survive as a species we look for others to help us for protection, for sustenance, for nurturing, whatever. Obviously it starts with the family. What we learn (in the family) is socialization or how to deal with other people. First of all, I believe in innate desire on our part to belong on some level with the group and that experience needs to have a positive feeling for us to be fully integrated into society. If we do not have that, or if we have a nagging experience, particularly in childhood that will prevent us from being able to really have those dynamics when we get older and I think that is significant in terms of lot of our students. What I see certainly in terms of game students is students spending a lot of time not socializing. They don't have that same socialization.

These and other comments solidified my own practice-based view that many of EAC's students have not necessarily had the experience of growing up in supportive family social structures. This view was consistent with several of the student participants' narratives.

To begin, Trevor's self-concept was inextricably linked to an abusive father-son relationship. Due to this, Trevor was not able to explore aspects of art as fully as he would have liked as a child. For example, Trevor found his uncle's cartoon books in a closet and he explained that he had to read them in secret so as not to aggravate his father. He summarized the dynamics at home as follows:

Nobody encouraged me to make art. If anything it was the exact opposite. Drafting class in high school was the most art that I was allowed. My dad never saw value in art. He never saw money or a future in art. For him it was computers and drafting. CAD (Computer Aided Design) was a big thing for him, he wanted me to get into CAD big time. Later, I started to realize that was not what I wanted, it was what he wanted.

Trevor's said that his relationship with his father had set him on a path to develop skills and knowledge in the area of computing. From their narratives, the other student participants appeared to have had more experience with art fundamentals than Trevor,

particularly in the area of drawing. Consequently, Trevor was successful in his technology-based courses, he struggled with some of the fundamental art courses and failed two of these in term one.

Trevor elected to symbolize his sense of belonging by submitting a poem that he created many years ago. He explained that his poetry was always about him. For Trevor, his poetry provided him with a way to re-conceptualize his identity following traumatic experiences at home. In *The Sound of the Cry* (below) Trevor said he was writing about his desire to break-free of constraints and explore his latent creative potential.

Participant Artifact Poem—The Sound of the Cry

The sound of cry
The sound of cry
Someone help me cry for if I don't I will try and then I lose myself
You see the diamond on the shelf to be
Whispered to me dreams of purity of futures bright and gleam but the
pressure in eternity
Exceeded the dominion
Exceeded the dominion
Exceeded the test of time
Exceeded the fear and the minions
At the end the dream dies every time
Wanting the distance closed
Sweat blood to become
More than the lump of coal
But the diamond from the dirty road
Rocked away across the distance
The treasure is shown and passed me by again
The heart and the sound we own
Inside me beats forever
The sound of joy inside
Caged by life's hatred becomes the sound of cry
Someone help me cry for if I don't I will die
Because the joy inside needs to be free with a lie
Someone help me cry before the pain consumes the sound of cry inside
and becomes the outside
Sigh³

³ Trevor (2007). Original poem obtained with the permission of the artist. This personal poem was created as a self-reflective exercise—an interpretation of the artist's life and latent creative potential. This poem was not a part of Trevor's course work at EAC.

Trevor explained to me that when he was younger he always wanted to draw, but he was never allowed. He said "if my dad caught me he would walk up behind me, smack me in the back of my head and take away my pens and break them." Trevor wrote *The Sound of the Cry* to envision a new self-concept. He explained:

It reminded me of the diamond in the ruff kind of thing. You know—Always having a talent but never letting it grow—inside it makes you cry kind of thing. That is what that poem was and I was reading (your question) and it was like that (poem) reminds of this right now. Except now I am not restrained. I'm trying to do something that I am going to enjoy. Being an IT guy was always kind of beat into me. Literally it was, when I was between 7 and the end of high school.

I never expected that the request for creative artifacts would yield such deeply personal data. It was clear that my study provided Trevor with a forum to express his story and to assist in reconciling issues of the past. Trevor said that his experiences at home were "the driving force" behind his motivation for study at EAC. From his narrative and creative artifact I concurred, Trevor's relationship with his father contributed perhaps more strongly to his self-concept than any other factor.

During our interviews, Trevor did not mention any other sources of motivation for study at EAC other than his repressed childhood dream of art making. He was not particularly interested a broader college experience or making friends. During our interviews Trevor sometimes referred to social interactions with his peers as though they were economic exchanges. For example, Trevor described a few scenarios where he provided peers with some computing tips. In return he said that he was simply satisfied if others were friendly to him—that was all he needed. In this sense Trevor's self-concept was singularly orientated towards the goal of identify re-formulation. I wondered if such approaches to social interactions were related to his abusive relationship with his father, his tentative self-concept and therefore his sense of belonging at EAC. Corresponding to the literature (Hagerty et al., 2002), I suggest that the particular types of experiences Trevor encountered in his family structure were not necessarily supportive of an inclusive self-concept or his sense of belonging at EAC.

Nicole indicated that she did not feel a sense of belonging in our term one interview, that she was still trying to find her place. I asked her if she had any ideas about how that might occur. Without hesitation she said "friendships right off the top of

my head." She explained that it had been difficult to make friends at EAC; however, she also shared that it was difficult in other contexts. She said "I feel pretty lonely. I miss my friends and I have not really met anyone yet so that one is more difficult." I was glad that she was a part of the study because from that perspective at least Nicole had someone to talk to. When I asked Nicole if it was easy to develop her creative talents she explained:

No. I never really felt creative. I had uh, my old, my friends also happen to be artists and I think that they were better than me. I was subjected to jealousy and I thought I was rather slow compared to them so I would say it was harder for me to develop and I am still behind them. They are years beyond me. I'm always hard on myself about not practicing enough.

I had the distinct impression from all interviews with Nicole that her self-concept, key value orientations, and motivations for attending EAC were only tentatively formulated. By tentative, I mean that she did not discuss with me any strong motivations for study (e.g., getting a job in the EAI). For instance, she indicated that she was "trying something new" and that attending college is something one "logically does after high school." The sources of motivation Nicole shared were not as tangible as most of the other student participants. Nicole expressed that some of her family members did not see the value in art, or believe that she could earn a living coming out of her program. I asked Nicole if this made her feel unsure about her choice, to which she remarked: "yes, I suppose. It would be nice if they believed in me." Looking back on her experience, Nicole seemed to think that if she had simply had a stronger sense of self-determination, of focus, that she may have been willing to do what it took to belong.

After her withdrawal from the program and at my request Nicole submitted a creative artifact to best symbolize her sense of belonging to her academic community at The College, or in this case, her lack of belonging. Nicole created this artwork for a non-EAC related project; however, she thought it addressed the question. From her submission I was again struck by how students were able to channel powerful messages through their creative artworks. The first image in *The Idea of Belonging* (Figure 5, below) represents the time when Nicole first came into the school. She recalled her mind set as being excited. She said "I want to make this experience work." In the next two images Nicole's experience fell apart. When I asked Nicole about the box breaking

down, she expressed that it was really not external factors. Nicole remarked: “I would say it was mostly internal. It was more the negative thoughts—like I am really not sure now that I am here, that this is right. I should have put more thought into coming.”

Nicole said that The College experience made her feel “unremarkable.” At EAC she did not feel like an artist who stood out amongst peers. By the end of her first term she doubted if she was good enough to get anywhere in this field or to be hired out of group of peers. One positive aspect of the interview process is that our discussions provided Nicole with a forum to de-construct her experiences and to consider precisely what went wrong.



Figure 5. The Idea of Belonging

Note. Nicole (2011). Copy of original digital image artwork obtained with the permission of the artist. This artwork was produced outside of The College context, approximately 3 months after the students' withdrawal.

Like Nicole, I believe Oscar's self-concept was also somewhat tentative. He knew that he wanted to work in the field. Beyond that individual goal, Oscar did not describe to me other foreseeable benefits in terms of what obtaining his diploma might mean to him. If I were asked to describe Oscar's self-concept it would be a challenging task due to his age and relatively limited life experience. Admittedly, he did not know much about the college. He remarked "I want to do 3D and all that. I don't really know much about the college, I just know this is what I want to do."

During our interviews I learned that Oscar's parents were supportive of his educational goal to the extent that he lived at home rent-free, drove the family car to school, and received additional financial support. As Oscar progressed through the program it became apparent that the substantial financial and educational commitments required were a bit of a shock to him and his family. He failed some courses, was setback in his study and ultimately dropped out of the program some months after the conclusion of my study. In the absence of a strong self-concept, I believe Oscar's struggled to develop a sense of belonging.

Like Nicole, the process of fitting in socially on campus was worrisome for Lisa. She described her self-concept as being "always an individual and isolated." Lisa said that whenever she felt nervous she lost her concentration and that was an issue for her in terms of her ability to perform in certain types of courses. She explained:

Whenever I feel nervous and I get, I feel disturbed, then I lose my concentration at work and that can be kind of an issue in the lab. So, and then I put on my earphones and I feel that I'm ignoring all my classmates and then I feel nervous as well in a different way. That is a different kind of pressure. I start to think a lot and feel a lot of pressure—just pressure. You are not talking to your classmates or making relationships, but in the meantime you want to focus upon your work. You always feel that people are competing against you. You feel that, but I try not to make other people feel like that because, I don't know—that may be not comfortable for them or for me.

During our interviews Lisa's concerns about making friends resonated strongly with me. When I asked her what the college experience meant to her the theme of isolation

emerged once more: “it is me more like me isolating myself, just trying to get what I need to learn and hopefully I will get a job out there. Maybe I need to be more social, make more friends.” Ultimately, Lisa withdrew from her program. I suggest that her tentative and individualistic self-concept may have contributed to her inability to develop a sense of belonging at EAC.

Implications for Practice

The significance of my study’s findings in relation to students self-concepts points to a need for further study to empirically confirm a relationship between students’ key value orientations, motivations and their sense of belonging at EAC. If a strong relationship between tentative self-concepts and students’ inability to develop a sense of belonging exists, such a finding would have important implications for admissions advising practices, student resources and teaching strategies. In terms of admissions advising practices it may be possible to identify students who have a lower probability of belonging through pre-college surveys (Hoffman et al., 2002), and thus help them with enrolment decisions as well as resource referrals. Such research may also have implications for wellness programs at The College. Finally, if an empirical connection between tentative self-concepts and belonging were established, it may be fruitful to pilot a program aimed at fostering a sense of sense of belonging through supportive learning structures such as learning communities (i.e., Hoffman et al., 2002; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008).

Theoretical Synthesis

One remarkable finding among those student participants who developed a sense of belonging to their academic community was that they, Amanda, Aurelia, Gord and Rodrigo, all possessed inclusive rather than individualistic self-concepts or key value orientations and multiple motivations for studying at EAC. Although additional research is needed to determine the usefulness of a self-concept structure, my study’s findings to be consistent with literature that links belonging to factors such as students’ academic motivation, self-efficacy (Freeman et al., 2007), goal commitment and sense of confidence (Hoffman et al., 2002). With the exception of Oscar, those student participants who appear to have had supportive family structures, or support from at

least one parent, possessed strong self-concepts and also tended to develop positive interpersonal relationships with their peers, faculty, and other agents at The College.

Additionally, those students whose parents nourished their creative pursuits also experienced academic benefits in their programs. These exploratory findings are theoretically consistent with the literature linking parental support with adult sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 2002). Furthermore, those student participants who possessed tentative self-concepts struggled to develop positive interpersonal relationship with their peers, faculty and other agents at The College. These findings suggest that key value orientations and sources of motivation such as family support may also be useful constructs for assessing students' sense of belonging in the for-profit post-secondary sector.

4.5. Part 1: Conclusions

In Chapter four, I presented four macro themes including: *Corporate Culture, Economic Capital, Academic and Artistic Capital and Self-Concepts*, to explore the multi-contextual nature of students' sense of belonging and identify critical factors. The themes relate primarily to factors that were external to institutional context; but, which nevertheless impacted student-agents' experiences and belonging within my study's primary social structure, the academic community. To explicate these themes I presented selected data from all participant groups' narratives as well a creative artifacts submitted by Nicole, Trevor, and Lisa.

The data provided by my participants were entirely in response to my interview questions—I asked participants about students' sense of belonging and their experiences in The College's academic community. In contrast, students' artifact submissions were not created as a part of course work at EAC. Moreover, data cannot be said to represent students' in situ experiences or experiences in their natural on and off campus settings. Although conducted on campus, these were closed-door semi-structured interviews. I analyzed three distinct groups of interviews and creative artifact submissions during three phases of the student participants' first year of study.

From the four themes, I have derived many complex interpretations, processes and factors involved in students' development of a sense of belonging. Chapter 6, *Synthesis of Macro Themes*, provides a more in-depth summary of the role of macro factors in relation to student participant's sense of belonging including a synopsis of supportive and unsupportive factors, as well as considerations for future research.

5. Results Part 2: Micro Factors

In this chapter, I present four themes to address the relationship between micro-level factors or the interaction between student participants and various other campus-level agents and students' sense of belonging. These include: a) *Support from Academic Staff*, b) *Student Participants' Demonstration of Self-Concepts*, c) *Support from Service-Based Departments*, d) *Peer Support*. For each theme presented I have again emphasized the stories, voices, and experiences of student participants. Where relevant, I have also augmented student participants' narratives with their creative artifacts, as well as the narrative data of faculty members and administrators to provide more holistic interpretations and insights into their experiences.

To broaden the theory, I have placed particular emphasis upon how each theme relates to the literature on belonging as well as my study's key conceptual frameworks. To address my research questions, at the end of each chapter section I have summarized the main theoretical findings in tandem with recommendations for The College. I have also provided a more complete synthesis of the major theoretical findings and implications in Chapter 6, *Synthesis of Micro Themes*. The data presented in this chapter was collected at EAC during closed door semi-structured private interviews. Therefore, data cannot be inferred to represent students' *in situ* experiences or experiences in more natural on and off campus settings such as the classroom or housing

5.1. Support from Academic Staff

The literature on belonging has revealed that factors such as instructors' demonstration of caring and encouraging behaviors are supportive of students' sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008); however, it also demonstrates that instructors have the power to dictate who belongs

through dominant academic discourses (Read et al., 2003) and exclusionary curriculum (Codjoe, 2005). Given EAC's broad-access mission and the goal of providing learning opportunities to many students who may be excluded from other post-secondary institutions on the basis of lower academic qualifications, I was very interested to understand the role that EAC's faculty members and academic administrators played in supporting the educational proposition implicit in The College's mission. I wanted to know how these agents, who had considerable interaction with the student participants', may enable or constrain their sense of belonging at EAC.

From my experience at The College, I held the general belief that academic staff members (faculty, program directors and coordinators) would be highly responsive to the service needs of my study's non-traditional student participants. Furthermore, based on The College's student centered teaching model and broad-access mission, I suspected that student participants' interactions with faculty members would be generally supportive of their sense of belonging. During in-depth interviews the student participants were able to articulate detailed information about the nature and quality of their relationships with their academic staff members. As expected, these agents had a very substantial impact upon students' sense of belonging. In particular, I believe students' relationships with their faculty members may have been the single most influential factor that informed their sense of belonging. Student participants' program administrators were also found to be supportive of their sense of belonging.

Support from Academic Staff

Based upon the analysis of the student participants' data in this section I have outlined the types of social interactions with EAC's academic staff, including faculty members and administrators, which they identified as being most enabling or constraining of their sense of belonging. The student participants indicated that faculty who practiced student centered instructional strategies and who also constructively acknowledged student participants' academic efforts had a positive impact upon their sense of belonging. Furthermore, student participants also expressed that administrators who were "caring", "approachable", "understanding" of their needs, and who provided high service standards, were supportive of their sense of belonging.

Students' Perceptions of Faculty and Administrators

During their first term of study most student participants described positive perceptions about The College's academic staff members—particularly their faculty members. Students' expressed that their faculty and program administrators had high service standards and interacted with them in ways that may not be typical of other institutions. To open each first term interview with the student participants, I asked an ice-breaker question: how is your experience going at The College? In term one; all students' responses were remarkably consistent and positive in relation to their experiences with faculty members. Student participants said their teachers were "pretty helpful", "chilled—real easy to connect with", "awesome", "very open, very kind and considerate of students' needs", and "more on the same level as the students." I have drawn upon Amanda's narrative to provide a representative sample of student participants' perceptions about their academic staff. I asked her what it was like trying to communicate with her faculty and administrators at The College. She remarked:

Awkward because I am not used to this kind of openness or friendliness. I did go to college once to do some upgrading and I found it difficult to communicate with the faculty because I felt they looked down upon me. Here it is different. A lot of the faculty and staff are open and willing to communicate. I'm happy to talk with faculty on a more casual level. Being sick actually helped me get over a lot of the stresses about faculty because they were so accommodating and helpful. My program administrator helped me quite a bit as well.

With a few notable exceptions (see *Absence of Learning-focused Approaches*), these initial observations about faculty and academic staff remained consistent throughout student participants' experiences in their programs. The views of student participants' were also consistent with faculty and administrator participants' accounts of their interactions with students at EAC. For example, faculty and administrators used the phrases "it is important to advocate on their behalf", "acknowledge their creative and social contributions", and "intervening when necessary can make the difference for them" when discussing how their roles allowed them to help students' develop a sense of belonging at EAC.

As the student participants progressed in their programs they encountered new instructors. With few exceptions, they generally developed stronger relationships with

the faculty members whom they had multiple courses with over time. This finding is consistent with the literature on belonging at the post-secondary level that suggests that students have “reduced perceptions of marginality” when they have the same instructor in multiple courses (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 236). Some of the student participants were explicit about the value that they placed on their relationships with faculty members that they knew well. For example, in our second term interview I asked Gord if there were any changes in his sense of belonging since our first term interview. He remarked:

Now that I know my instructors better, it is much easier. I feel really comfortable in my classes. If I have a problem in one class and I cannot get the answer, I can just ask the teacher that I know in my next class. They know me now and they care about my success.

I then asked Gord what role his instructors played in his sense of belonging. He said:

If you have a question and they tell you the answer or help you figure it out then you know you belong. A sense of belonging does not really have to be peer friendships. It can just be about my being here to learn and the teacher being here to teach. If the teachers do not feel like teaching me then that means I do not belong.

Each term that I interviewed Gord he was consistent in emphasizing one critical factor in his sense of belonging—his interactions and relationships with faculty members. During our second term interview he told me a specific story about how praise from his instructor made him feel:

At the final of one class I was kind of struggling. Then I started getting it and the teacher walked up and looked over my back and said “Gord, I didn’t know you knew that.” I handed in the assignment and he said “you wowed me Gord. I’m impressed and I do not get impressed easily.” I walked out of there feeling pretty good. He made me feel as though I belonged.

For Gord, performing well in his courses, receiving acknowledgement and meeting his instructor’s expectations were of utmost importance to his sense of belonging. These exploratory findings are also consistent with the literature linking students’ sense of belonging to pedagogical caring at the post-secondary level (Freeman et al., 2007).

Student Centered Teaching and Service Standards

As I reviewed the data in relation to the theme of support from academic staff, I noticed a sub-theme—students' perceptions of belonging were inextricably linked to their instructors' practice of student centered teaching as well as their perceptions about the level of service they received from academic staff. Student centered teaching and service standards appeared to be important factors in students' formulation of a sense of belonging, particularly for those participants who were vulnerable in their new environment.

For example, in her first term interview Amanda explained that she had missed a fair amount of course work due to illness. Initially, she said this caused her to fall below her own performance expectations, and she felt that other students in her classes were outperforming her. She said that this situation made her feel as though she should not be in her program. Given her absences, Amanda's instructors spent extra one-on-one time with her to help her catch up. Amanda was reassured by her instructor's kind remarks. For example, her Life Drawing instructor told her "don't worry; we will make an artist out of you yet." Because Amanda was able to provide appropriate medical documentation, her program administrator was able to grant her extensions on assignments and projects. This level of support demonstrated to Amanda that her instructors' and administrators understood her needs. She said:

I think I would have lost all hope this term if it were not for the faculty and my program administrator. I was so completely stressed out. I thought I was going to owe the school a bunch of money and have to re-take my courses, but everyone pulled together to help me. I did not expect that level of service.

I viewed Amanda's experiences to be an indication that her instructors supported The College's student centered model, and that both her instructors and program administrator provided high service standards.

Amanda's experiences were consistent with many of the stories that faculty and administrator participants shared in relation to EAC students who were academically and or socially at-risk. Sophie, an academic program coordinator, shared an example that was representative of the kinds of service that other administrators and faculty provide. I

asked Sophie how her role allowed her to help students develop a sense of belonging and she said:

I had a new student who was struggling in Basic 3D Concepts. I heard from his father [in another province] before I heard from him. So I looked the student up in the schedule and tracked the student down. We discussed the problems that he was having in the class. One of his issues was that he was spending lots of time in the Open Lab; but, he wasn't finishing his homework. He wasn't asking anybody any questions. He was surrounded by all of these Modellers in his program who were way more experienced than him, but he just did not feel comfortable asking anyone for help.

So, I took him down to the library to get some resources and on my way I bumped into a couple of the students who were in their second year and I was like "Ryan this is so and so. They know modeling and they are pretty good at it. You will want to talk to them. Have you ever seen them in the Open Lab?" He said he had and I said those students "would you be comfortable if Ryan asks you a question" and they were like "fine, yes, definitely." Later, I bumped into his instructor and I mentioned that he may need a bit of extra attention and support in the class. His instructor said that he would spend some additional time with Ryan outside of class. There are fewer opportunities as a manager to make those kinds of connections than as a teacher, but I think we are still pretty effective. That is how we help with their belonging.

Many of the student participants conveyed similar stories about their service experiences with administrators and faculty at EAC.

Student participants' narratives also illustrated how student centered instructional approaches were beneficial to their progress and sense of belonging. For example, Amanda was very surprised by how easy it was to pick up on computer programming in her scripting course. She attributed her success to her instructor's unique delivery approaches.

She involved everyone in the learning process by asking questions during her lectures and getting us into group discussions. We got to share our ideas with each other. This was really useful because I noticed how other students were having the same challenges I was having—we learned from each other. First, she showed us how to do it, we talked about it, and then we did an exercise together. Then we did the exercise on our own to reinforce the concepts. Her approaches helped us to pick up on it [coding] and determine where things go. If she explained it to me the way some other students have, I would have been lost.

Initially Amanda was very concerned about learning how to code, but he said that her instructor made the students “feel like they belonged in class.” I interpreted Amanda’s comments to mean that his instructor practiced student centered teaching strategies.

These examples of support through service provision and student centered strategies helped student participants feel comfortable and establish a sense of belonging to their academic community at EAC. In the literature, there is little research linking service quality standards to students’ sense of belonging (DeSheilds et al., 2005). Therefore the connection between student participants’ perceptions of high service standards and their sense of belonging was an important exploratory finding. There is however some research at the post-secondary level that demonstrates that teaching strategies that emphasize student participation, interaction and effective class organization are supportive of students’ sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008). In this sense, my study’s findings are consistent with the literature linking belonging to student centered teaching approaches.

Absence of Student Centered Teaching Approaches

I noticed that the opposite was also true—those students who had experiences with faculty members who did not practice student centered teaching strategies reported having a diminished sense of belonging. Aurelia had such an experience in Life Drawing. The instructional approaches she described in her instructor’s course did not sound congruent with the College’s student centered approaches. Aurelia indicated that her instructor had high expectations but did not provide the support that she had become accustomed to in other classes. I inquired about her instructor’s course goals and she explained that the instructor wanted students to “learn how to learn on their own.” Aurelia said:

We are missing the walk arounds (one-on-one critiques) and the pointing out of students’ mistakes and how to repair and fix the mistakes. We are lucky if he answers our questions [laughs]—it is an uncomfortable environment. He made us feel as though he does not want us to be there because he was not really there to help us.

Aurelia’s interpretation of her faculty member’s practice was more akin to adult learning models such as andragogy (Knowles, 1980), whereby the teacher is viewed more as a

facilitator and the student is to be self-directed and autonomous in their learning. By way of comparison, Aurelia commented about another art teacher who was more focused upon his students:

I know he cares because he voluntarily comes around, catches mistakes and helps you fix them. It makes all of the difference to me—I learn much better in his class. If you are not getting positive or constructive feedback from the person who is teaching you, you cannot possibly achieve what they have asked for.

Aurelia said “knowing that your instructor cares about you is pretty important thing for belonging.” In this sense her feelings about belonging and interactions with faculty were quite similar to Gord’s.

Lisa’s story related perhaps the most dramatic example of how non-student centered approaches can negatively impact a students’ sense of belonging. At the end of her first term, she decided to withdraw from her program. During our second term interview, I asked Lisa what the turning point was for her—what caused her to leave the program. She remarked:

My teacher publicly criticized my work in front of the whole class and said that my drawing “was not helping anybody.” I felt hurt and embarrassed. I stood up and left the class. I was disappointed seeing my works tossed on the floor after we handed them in. I got kind of upset that I spent 30 hours on 40 drawings on one single assignment and then after I handed them in they just got tossed on the floor. Then I was told that I did wrong on my drawings because the teacher did not really take the time to make sure that we understood what he taught.

Lisa said that she did not feel a sense of belonging to EAC based upon this experience and others. Ironically, Lisa was one of only two students who had university level training in the fine arts. I was surprised to discover that previous training in the fine arts may somehow be a barrier to belonging in Lisa’s entertainment arts program. I assumed that any prior knowledge in fine arts or related disciplines would be positively associated with belonging. In Chapter 4—*Academic and Artistic Capital* section and in Chapter 5—*Student Participants’ Representations of Self-Concepts*, I have outlined one possible interpretation of Lisa’s interaction with her instructor, which may explain the impact upon

her sense of belonging from the literature dominant academic discourses (Read et al., 2003).

Another common student centered curricular strategy at The College was the use of relevant curricular content. When I was at EAC this strategy was used to promote students' engagement in their course work by linking curriculum to occupational knowledge, skills and abilities—to teach why curriculum matters in relation to students' future careers. For several students, a lack of content relevancy became a source of frustration that ultimately diminished their sense of belonging. For example, when discussing his Fundamental Art course Oscar remarked:

Non-core curriculum can be a real sore spot for students who are spending so much money for their education. Although the colour theory principles are relevant for texturing in 3D, I learned the colour wheel in high school and I don't think mixing colour on paper is anything like digital colour—so why waste my money and time when I could be learning more about software programs?

Oscar also expressed similar concerns about his Life Drawing course. He wondered why an animation instructor who had not worked in the game or film industry was teaching 3D Modeling students about the idea of animation force, a perceptible line of action running through a live model. Because of the instructor's background and lack of specific expertise in the field of 3D Modeling, he did not feel as though he was obtaining knowledge and skills that were directly applicable to his possible future occupation. Oscar explained:

When you take a program like this you expect that your teachers are going to be from the industry that you want to work in. I feel like my program is cutting corners. I am a part of this thing now, good or bad. It kind of cheapens how I feel about experience. When my friends or someone who may hire me asks what school I went to I am not sure if I will want to boast about coming here. I may not have come here had I known about some of these things.

Oscar's negative perceptions about irrelevant curriculum impacted his perceptions of program quality. I suspect that these concerns also had a negative impact on his sense of belonging. In the literature on belonging at the post-secondary level, I did not find any studies that have explored curriculum relevancy or the relevancy of instructors' knowledge as variables in students' sense of belonging. Based upon these exploratory

findings, curriculum relevancy may be a useful variable to explore in relation to students' sense of belonging particularly for students who study in the for-profit private-post-secondary or other contexts where high value propositions increase students' scrutiny of the product.

Implications for Practice

At the onset of my study I believed that my convictions about The College's student centered teaching model and high service standards would be affirmed by the data. To a certain extent this assumption was correct. According to student participants' narratives, academic staff members were found generally to be supportive of their sense of belonging. However, I also learned about other critical factors, such as student participants' perceptions about the absence of student centered approaches and irrelevant curriculum, which were in some cases unsupportive of student participants' sense of belonging. This finding has implications for practice at The College including faculty onboarding, appointment and development programs.

To a certain extent my study's findings also validate the cohort model as being an effective structure for facilitating relationships between students and faculty who encounter each other in multiple courses throughout students' programs. It may be worthwhile to more formally assess the effectiveness of this model for developing faculty and peer relationships and students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, the College may also benefit from other program course structures that the literature demonstrates are supportive of students' sense of belonging, such as learning community courses (Hoffman et al., 2002; Schlossberg, 1989). EAC may also benefit from a review of course appointment practices where curriculum relevancy is concerned. It may be important to consider for instance the currency of instructor's industry experience in relation to the courses offered.

Theoretical Synthesis

From the student participants' narratives it was clear that faculty member's practice of student centered teaching approaches and high service standards were supportive of their sense of belonging. This finding is consistent the literature linking pedagogical caring to students' sense of belonging in other contexts (Freeman et al.,

2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). However, the inverse was also true. Two student participants, Lisa and Aurelia, reported a particular learning situation whereby their instructors did not practice student centered approaches in one of their courses. These experiences diminished their sense of belonging. This finding demonstrates that at EAC, as in other contexts, instructors have the power to dictate who belongs through dominant academic discourses (Read et al., 2003).

Another interesting finding was that some of the student participants tended to develop a greater sense of belonging due to relationships that they developed with their instructors over multiple course experiences. This finding was also consistent with the literature on belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002). Although not explicitly defined by the student participants, their narrative responses tentatively point to curriculum relevancy as a potential variable in their negotiation of a sense of belonging at EAC. I have not found any belonging literature that explores this possible variable; however, it seems like a plausible factor, particularly in contexts where high cost propositions increase students' scrutiny of the educational product.

5.2. Student Participants' Representations of Self-Concepts

In the literature on belonging, few studies have assessed the relationship between students' representations of art in post-secondary programs and their sense of belonging. Of the existing studies, Kotosaki and Hallam's (2007) work on university music students, found a strong relationship between the social act of music making and students' sense of belonging. However, their study occurred in another post-secondary system and did not deal specifically with visual or entertainment arts. Therefore, I was very interested to explore possible connections between student participants' artistic representations and their self-concepts, and how such representations may relate to their sense of belonging in their academic community at EAC. As noted in Chapter 4—*Academic and Artistic Capital* and corresponding to the literature on dominant academic discourses (e.g., Codjoe, 2005; Read et al., 2003), at EAC faculty members have the power to shape and to constrain the ways that students belong. Therefore, I also aimed to understand the various ways student participants' elected to represent themselves through artwork, and learn to what degree these representations have the potential to be

validated through interactions with their peers, faculty and other key stakeholders at The College.

In general terms, assignment frameworks that provided student participants with creative latitude and drew on their self-concepts were enabling their sense of belonging. Assignments that were open enough to provide for self-expression gave the student participants not only an academic forum to express themselves, but also a social forum. In some cases students elected to tell stories through their artwork that conveyed personal experiences, political points of view, sources of inspiration, or simply stories about friends and family. Students said that their artworks provided them with an opportunity to share their “feelings”, “values and ideas”, “who they are”, “fears, likes and dislikes”, “personal stories” and “their knowledge, experiences and talent.” In this sense, through their artworks student participants’ put aspects of their self-concepts in front of their peers and faculty to engage in deeper and more holistic social experiences in their courses. From the student participants’ narratives I have learned that representing aspects of one’s self can also result in a diminished sense of belonging.

In this section, I have also organized a selection of the student participants’ artworks to best demonstrate these findings following the heading, *Art and Self-Concept Representations*. These artworks were not produced specifically for my study; however, they were submitted in response to the following question: “Would you be willing to share a creative artifact to best describe your sense of belonging to your academic community at EAC?” In my analysis of student participants’ artifacts, I have attempted to interpret to what degree their artwork and self-concept representations contributed to or diminished their sense of belonging. At the end of this section, I have summarized the implications for practice and theory based on my findings from this study.

Synthesis of Art and Self-Concept Representations

A. During his first term, I asked Rodrigo if he would be willing to submit a creative artifact to best symbolize his sense of belonging. He submitted an artwork he called *Owl* from his Fundamental Art class (see Figure 6 below). In this particular assignment Rodrigo had to re-represent the owl using hand-drawn patterns to describe tonal ranges within his design. Because the assignment framework was wide open except for the technical criteria, Rodrigo said that he put “a lot of himself” into this particular project.

He explained that the owl was from a picture that he took while he was hiking with a good friend from the city Rodrigo stayed when he first came to Canada. Since moving close to The College, he said he really missed his friend. His artwork therefore served both academic and social functions for Rodrigo. He explained that his teacher really liked it and she hung it up in the hallway for everyone in The College to see. I asked Rodrigo how that acknowledgement made him feel to which he remarked:

I feel like I am doing the right thing now. The input from my teacher tells me to keep going. If I didn't feel like that I would probably not feel a sense of belonging, I would probably drop out.



Figure 6. Owl

Note. Rodrigo (2011). Copy of original pen and ink artwork (on paper) obtained with the permission of the artist. This artwork was created for a term one Fundamental Art course.

Rodrigo's creative artifact demonstrates the multi-faceted ways in which student participants' artworks can serve multiple functions—both academic and social. Due to

open nature of the assignment, The *Owl* project provided Rodrigo with an opportunity to symbolize fond memories of friendship and ideas about his social community. In this sense the *Owl* represents a friend Rodrigo values—the art has become a source of motivation in this sense, a representation of Rodrigo's self. This assignment also provided Rodrigo with an opportunity to practice fundamental design principles and receive academic praise from his teacher.

B. When I asked Amanda the same question, she submitted a course assignment from her writing class about women in gaming. The experience of submitting and being marked on this paper validated her self-concept on several levels, including her knowledge about gaming, her ability to write at a college-level and finally her strong interest in promoting women in games. Amanda described the feeling that she had when she received an A- on this paper:

Writing the paper felt very good. It felt amazing. It was something that I was so interested in. I think it was actually the writing of the paper and knowing that he enjoyed it that made me feel the best. It is hard to explain. I did no research in writing it. I pulled on all of my own knowledge. To hear that he thought I did a really great job—it validated everything that I have been focused upon. It validated the knowledge that I was building and it told me that my efforts were worth something. It made me feel as though all of the years that I have been a gamer were worthwhile. Having the guys' respect was worth something.

My instructor made me feel as though I belong here because he gave me the A-. It was kind of like the beginning, which is why I was thinking that I would give that assignment, because it was the one that made me feel as though I really should be here.

To hear Amanda say that what she valued most was that her teacher enjoyed reading something that she created from her heart illustrates the strong connection between self-concepts and belonging, and the power of acknowledging students' self-concepts to engender both.

C. For Aurelia, producing art for her course work was a way to express her own personal creative interests, to connect with her peers and to promote her sense of belonging to her academic community. At my request, she submitted an illustration assignment she called *Dragon* (see Figure 7, below) from her Fundamental Art course to best describe her sense of belonging to her academic community. When talking about

her illustration, she explained that this particular project provided her with an opportunity to interpret the style of a professional artist that she admired. In terms of approaches Aurelia remarked that there were “a lot of different patterns. In one part there might just be simple lines and in other parts there are little circles densely going around.” She said that her design approaches actually served as a means to promote communication among her peers who had to get up and look closely at her work. Aurelia remarked:

It was an enjoyable thing to do because it got people to really look at the little circles here and the dense patterns. I took a look at my classmates work as well. When we all get to do that you feel as though everyone understands each other’s art. I think it helped everyone feel as though they were a part of a community.

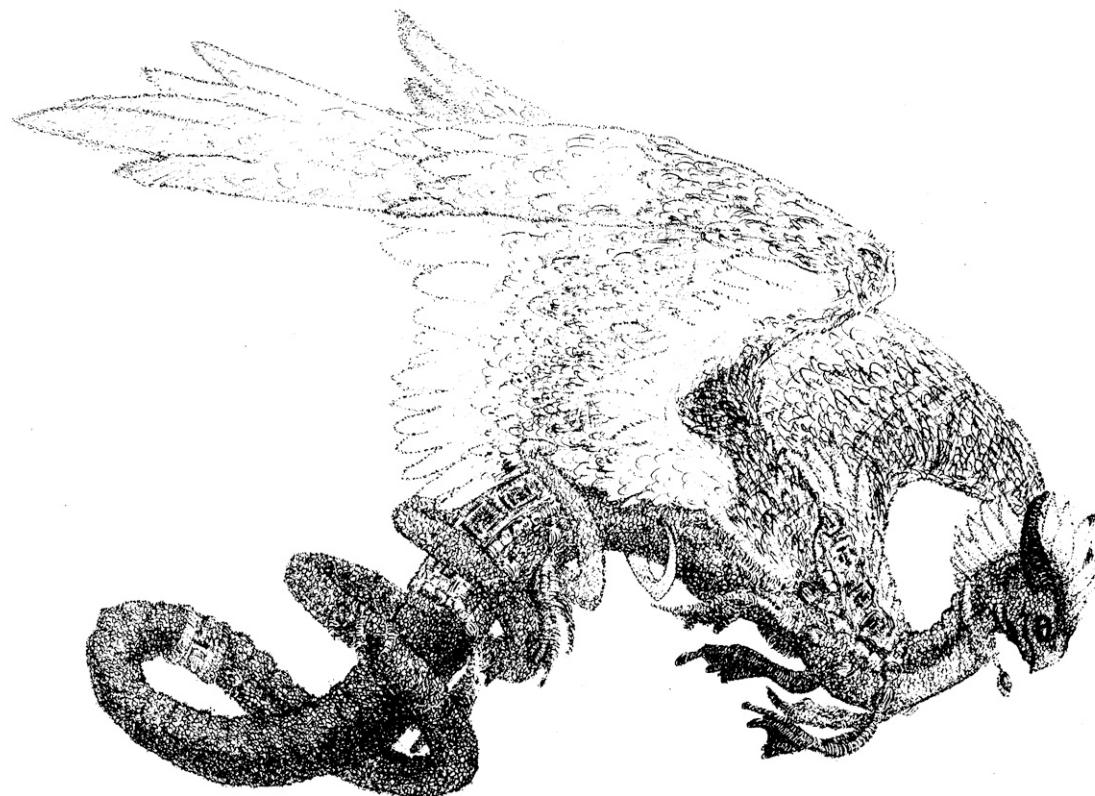


Figure 7. Dragon

Note. Aurelia (2011). Copy of original pencil artwork (on paper) obtained with the permission of the artist. This artwork was created for a term one Fundamental Art course.

When Aurelia described the classroom critique process I had a sense that there may be a strong relationship between the process of sharing one’s artwork in a group context

and student participants' sense of belonging. For example, when describing the critique process Aurelia used the phrases "we came together", "sharing ideas and supporting each other really helps to connect the group", "we learn best together", and "my peers input really got me excited about what I was doing in the course." From these comments, I gathered that classroom critiques or the opportunity for students to comment upon each other's projects must have had a powerful impact upon Aurelia's sense of belonging and self-concept. Such a possibility is consistent with the literature linking art production as a social-act to students' sense of belonging (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007).

During their term one interviews, I asked faculty participants to what extent they allowed space in their assignments for the assessment of students' less formal skills/abilities or non-standard creative approaches. With only two exceptions, faculty participants described a variety of ways in which their course assessments allowed students' the freedom to "express themselves", "share their own personal voices", and "arrive at solutions in different ways." Instructors who provided for the acknowledgement of non-standard creative approaches described the importance of multi-faceted assessments or assessment in which students are provided opportunities to practice design principles and also communicate their ideas, values, and experiences. For example, in his response to my question, Ernie said: "as a school we can let them be a little more latitude with some of the projects as long as it incorporates the standards of what is expected for their discipline." Malorie remarked "in my assessment I attempt to balance technical criteria with opportunities for individuation." Similarly, Jana said "I gear my whole entire course to the student, to the individual." I suspected that emphasis on promoting students' individual expression by faculty at EAC may support the students' sense of belonging. This idea is discussed in more depth in the *Peer Support* section of this chapter.

After leaving her program Lisa also submitted creative artifacts (Figure 8) to symbolize her belonging at EAC. In the narrative Lisa provided approximately six months after her withdrawal she said "the experience of art making was what gave me a sense of belonging while attending The College." In addition, Lisa said that figurative artwork was important to her because through those observational exercises she said she was able to obtain "many perspectives on life and people." As mentioned, Lisa had

attained a minor in contemporary arts from a major public post-secondary university in BC. She had already invested significantly in a creative life-path. For these reasons when her teacher said to her that she was “not helping anyone” with her art assignment in front of her classmates it was a tremendous blow to Lisa’s self-concept. Although Lisa implicated financial issues in her withdrawal decision, on numerous occasions she also said that the experience of being “humiliated” in her teacher’s Fundamental Drawing course was a key factor in her decision to leave EAC.



Figure 8. Lisa's Figurative Drawings

Note. Lisa (2011). Copy of original pencil artwork (on paper) obtained with the permission of the artist. This artwork was created for a term one Fundamental Art course.

Although many of the student participants affirmed the benefits of submitting artwork with self-representations, the feedback that Lisa received in response to her artwork on the other hand demonstrates how showing the self through art can be a risky proposition in a formalized educational setting.

Based upon the student participants' narratives, I propose that there is a positive relationship between course assessments that allow for the assessment of non-standard or less formal assignment criteria in addition to more formal or technical criteria, and students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, based upon the narrative descriptions of Rodrigo, Amanda, and Aurelia, I further suggest that the representations of students' self-concepts through their artwork or receiving self-concept validation from peers and instructors may be positively associated with their sense of belonging. Based upon Lisa's narrative, I suspect that if a students' self-concept is somehow rejected or diminished through the presentation of artwork, such an experience may be a barrier to their belonging.

Implications for Practice

I would propose, based on the findings from this study that The College may benefit from faculty development initiatives aimed at supporting multi-faceted assessments and assignments that allow for the acknowledgement of non-standard or less formal approaches to art-making, particularly in the entry-level term of EAC's programs. Such programs may assist students who are transitioning between artistic styles (e.g., cultural, educational, etc). Furthermore, programs aimed at developing faculty member's proficiency and skill-level at facilitating group reviews of student artwork may prove useful for supporting students' sense of belonging. For instance, if faculty members were more aware of how to best frame developmental feedback in situations whereby students' artwork is not meeting the assignment criteria, this may reduce instances where students' feel a diminished sense of belonging based on their corrective or formative feedback. Finally, if developmental programs raise faculty awareness of the connections between students' representations of self, their artwork and their sense of belonging, this may have the potential to have positive implications for students sense of belonging at EAC.

Theoretical Synthesis

It has been theorized that the “only justification for art education in schools should be that art is a part of culture” (Chalmers, 1981). In the case of EAC, my study emphasizes some important questions that future research may consider, such as whose culture and what types of artifacts need to be produced in order for students to belong. From the faculty participants’ narratives, most noted that they had multi-faceted assessments and shared a feeling about the importance of providing opportunities for students to express their experiences, ideas, and voices in the educational environment. However, from Lisa’s narrative, as well as the narrative descriptions of two faculty members, it was clear that in some cases students are required to produce very specific types of artifacts in order to belong. Therefore, my study on non-traditional students is consistent with the literature that links dominant academic discourses and students’ sense of belonging (Codjoe, 2005; Read et al., 2003). Furthermore, my study on non-traditional students’ builds on the literature linking students’ representations of art in post-secondary programs and their sense of belonging.

5.3. Support from Service-Based Departments

In my review of the literature, few studies explored the relationship between students’ sense of belonging and student affairs or the specific service departments within educational institutions. One notable exception was Kinser’s (2006b) study that reviewed the student affairs practices at 17 for-profit institutions in the United States. Kinser’s (2006b) study produced a set of principles aimed at establishing a framework for understanding student affairs in the for-profit sector. Many of these principles are applicable to EAC. For example, Kinser (2006b) said that “student affairs is a core institutional function directed toward serving and supporting students as customers” (p. 270). Kinser (2006b) also said that “for-profit student affairs understands the personal and academic issues faced by a non-traditional student body, and it designs services with that population in mind” (p.271). Other studies in the United States suggest that students who have attended for-profit institutions experienced superior student services (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2005), which are more applicable to their career interests (Kelly, 2001). On the other hand, Thompson’s (2003) study at a public British Columbia

community based developmental studies program, found that the services offered on to non-traditional students were inadequate given their intensified *Modes of Study*. Given these findings and the apparent lack of literature in this regard, I was curious to know to what extent EAC's service departments may mitigate student participants' intense interaction between study and other life commitments (see Chapter 1—*Introduction*, and in Chapter 3—*Participants* for more information on student participants' *Modes of Study*).

At the time of this study, retention and sense of belonging programs were supported through academics and student affairs and more precisely through a series of structure initiatives. The primary activities included many that would typically be found at other institutions (e.g., welcome week, orientation, student success seminars, persistence committee). Less conventional activities included continuing student review—week-to-week tracking and intervention planning for at risk students, student-advisor one-on-one meetings in term 1, and poor attendance interventions. Amanda's narrative in particular highlights the positive impact of such tailored service-based approaches that may not be typical of larger public institutions. However, such findings are captured in *Support from Academic Staff*. This section deals primarily with the relationship between non-academic services and students' sense of belonging.

I did not specifically develop a construct to assess a possible relationship between student services and student participants' sense of belonging; however, I did ask all participant groups about their perceptions of the services that are available to students. As with academic staff and faculty and based on the literature, I expected that The College's student service departments and personnel would contribute positively to students' sense of belonging and that this would manifest in the student participants' narrative responses. However, what I found from the student participants' narratives was that although some service departments were viewed as being supportive of their sense of belonging, such as library, student affairs, and disabilities services, others appeared to pose barriers including housing, financial services, and technology resources. It is important to note here that I have only reported upon services whereby a clear pattern emerged from the student participants' narratives. It may be that there were other services that students found to be enabling and/or constraining of their sense of belonging that were not captured in the data sources.

Several student participants initially expressed concerns about Financial Services including difficulties accessing staff, as well as issues with the services offered. Those concerns intensified term-to-term or for as long as the student participants remained enrolled. As seen with corporate practices, student participants' perceptions about housing services and campus resource services shifted from positive to negative as they progressed term-to-term in their programs. One notable exception reported in this study was Library Services, which were viewed positively by student participants in each interview phase; however, Library Services were not specifically implicated in student participants' sense of belonging. In the following section I have highlighted the particular experiences which were most relevant to students' sense of belonging. At the end of this section, the implications for practice and theory have been outlined.

It is important to note that faculty and administrator participants' narratives reflected positively upon student services. However, in my opinion their knowledge of the services offered were more extensive in some areas such as wellness, disabilities and library services, than others including housing and financial services.

Housing Services

Aurelia and Amanda were rather optimistic about their initial experiences in The College's off-campus housing program. However, by their second term, both students had rather serious concerns about housing staff and services. For example, Aurelia asserted that some of the housing staff abused their powers. She shared a story about a time when she was helping the housing staff setup new apartments for new students. One of the staffers said to another "let's take this new couch down to my apartment and then I will put my old one up in this apartment." At first, Aurelia thought they were being sarcastic. When the staffers went through with it she was "flabbergasted." Aurelia remarked "this situation really affected my sense of belonging because I thought so far that a lot of the people in housing, particularly the staff would be honest".

Aurelia provided other examples to outline how challenging the living and service situation was in housing. For example, she said that it was like an "Easter egg hunt" trying to find housing staff. Aurelia indicated that the housing resource centre was often closed when housing staff were supposed to be there and there was rarely notification of closures. Another time Aurelia had volunteered to assist the housing staff by offering to

pick-up new EAC students who had just arrived in Vancouver. The new students were waiting at a hotel downtown to catch a ride to housing. Unfortunately, they did not give Aurelia the proper pick-up time. She recalled that this was an uncomfortable situation:

I was more embarrassed than anything else, because I had to go and pick them up. I had no part in the miscommunication. It made me feel really unprofessional. That represents a lack of responsibility on their part—an unwillingness to do their job.

She recalled that these incidents made her feel awful and speculated about how they must impact other students' sense of belonging.

If students feel panicked in housing then they are going to feel panicked on campus and it will negatively affect their belonging. They will feel like they do not really belong. Once people see what I see, they will question their belonging. They will feel threatened. For instance if you share an apartment with a housing staff member, they may take a double bedroom for themselves, and then it is like where do you go? This situation is starting to affect the new students. One example—there was a staff member in a nice big apartment and two new students moved in. There was enough room for four students, but the staff member had a lot of the furniture and resources from the common area and the other bedroom, such as a bookshelf, a desk, the wireless adapter from Shaw was in there, and it was the housing staff member's bedroom. I was just-wow. I was just floored.

Amanda likewise conveyed dissatisfaction with housing staff. She remarked "they are really bad at their jobs" and "several times they have let me down." On one occasion Amanda was quite ill and felt that she had to go to the hospital due to pain. She remarked: "I called a housing staff member and they hung up on me. So, I called again because it was in the middle of the night. The second time they would just not pick up." Amanda was lying on the floor for a number of hours and she called her mom for emotional support. Eventually the pain passed. Amanda recalled being very frustrated with the housing staff member because he said it was not his fault. Amanda said:

What if I was outside the building without a key overnight? What if I was a foreign student and could not communicate well in English. I was like—really? That experience did not make me feel as though I belong.

Amanda explained that the woman in charge of the off campus housing gets “weird” about the problems students point out. Apparently she got mad at one student for raising an issue to the Director of Student Services, her manager. Amanda said “I feel like this is some kind of dirty operation here—like I can’t blow the whistle or I will get in trouble.” Based upon her negative experiences, Amanda did not feel as though housing was a fit for her and she was planning to move out at the conclusion of the study.

Financial Services

If I had to select one service department that most profoundly affected students’ sense of belonging it would be Academics. However, the Financial Services department would be a close second. The College’s Financial Services department markets the provision of one-on-one planning services for all new students so that they are able to budget their tuition not just for term one, but for their entire program. However, this was not the experience of Lisa, Amanda, and Nicole. From the start of their programs they all experienced confusion and frustration with the financial services offered at EAC.

When Amanda started the program nobody in financial services helped her understand how little her loan disbursements would cover in terms of her tuition and living expenses. In the absence of a basic budget Amanda selected housing through The College’s program that was not affordable for her. As a result, she said that she was frequently unable to afford groceries and this contributed to health problems during her study. Although Amanda did not explicitly link her experiences with Financial Services to her sense of belonging, I developed an impression that the nature of her discussions with Financial Services staff were not of a sort that was meaningful in terms of fulfilling The College’s provision of one-on-one budget planning. Amanda seemed caught unaware by the financial ramifications of her program choice.

Nicole visited with Financial Services when she began her program, but was left with more questions about how to handle her financial situation than answers. Near the start of her first term, she expressed that it had been difficult to access her Financial Services representative. Nicole said:

I was initially very worried about money coming here. But, after talking to Financial Services they made it sound good [laughs]. I'm not so sure any more. I have not been able to get a hold of my financial representative and I still do not know how I am going to pay for everything. Meanwhile, I am getting billing emails from the Financial Services department. I think I have left a dozen messages. At least I'm living with a friend of the family—there at least I am saving some money.

After Nicole left the program I asked her if she had any recommendations for The College to improve students' sense of belonging. She explained:

The College should not make the financial part sound so easy. It was like pushy sales—they made it sound like all I had to pay for was the tuition, but, they did not help me understand all of the other costs. I don't have a lot of experience budgeting or anything like that. Nobody in my family does either—they have their own financial issues. I have never owned a car or a home. How is it fair to be told by someone in a position of trust that everything will be o.k. when it was actually unrealistic? I wish I had known the full-cost going in. I never would have started. At least I left before I wasted more money [laughs].

Despite numerous attempts to obtain crucial information about The College's Scholarship Program and eligibility criteria, Lisa was unable to get the answers she needed from her financial planner or any other staff member. She wondered if they knew how to answer her questions or if they were just too busy to help. This experience only made Lisa feel more isolated given that her financial planner was one of the few people Lisa knew on campus. Over time Lisa came to the conclusion that there was a lack of transparency about the Financial Services Scholarship Program. This experience prompted her to write a poem that is presented in entirety in Chapter 4 (p. 104), *Economic Capital*. In her poem Lisa said of the Financial Services "no more lies, no more empty promise, I am leaving for a more affordable schooling and not lies.". Lisa's said that her experiences with Financial Services staff and other staff "were a challenge" to her sense of belonging.

The inability to access appropriate resources and interface with Financial Services in more meaningful ways had a profound impact upon these three students. I speculate that for Nicole and Lisa their decisions to withdraw from EAC were at least partly due to their experiences with financial services.

Technology Resources

At the time of this study one of the promises that The College made to prospective students was that they would not need to own any special equipment, computers or software in order to successfully complete any program at EAC. Despite this selling feature, several students expressed concerns about limited access to key resources. For example, Aurelia explained that the Open Lab is “too small” and did not have enough computers considering the size of The College’s student body. She remarked “it is impossible to find a computer in the Open Labs. It is very difficult to find a computer lab that is free for a couple of hours when you are on campus.” Trevor likewise explained that given the “cramming” in the Open Lab, it gets “pretty funky.” He remarked:

Smell wise it is gross. I have been in there a few times and I have actually felt sick after a few hours. When there are people in there and there are mid-terms of finals and folks are doing their assignments all night... they don't shower. I can taste it!

Aurelia also explained that there was a shortage of program specific software applications. For example, she expressed “there is a lack of computers that have Z-Brush on them.” Z-Brush is an application used specifically by students in the 3D Modeling and VFX programs to generate virtual models. Aurelia explained that one of her friends who was in their final term of study failed to graduate because of this particular issue. She explained that he attempted to use several Open Lab computers as well as other computers from other classrooms to render (intensive computational process that produces a sequence of images) his demo reel; however, given the shortage of computers other students would interrupt his renders and take over the machines. Trevor likewise viewed rendering as a problem. He expressed surprise that The College did not have a dedicated render farm. In the EAI, visual effects and animation studios do have dedicated render farms. In The College such a system would use non-classroom based computers that would be allocated purely to render students’ projects. I explained to Trevor that The College did have a type of render farm; however, he corrected me. The College “has simply a queue manager” Trevor explained:

It runs some software to manage all of the machines that are not doing anything. The problem with that approach is that most computers are used. I meant like a couple of servers on a rack where you can submit the render job.

I found it interesting that for some reason the student participants did not directly link these resource issues with the staff or personnel in the Technology Resources department. I had the general impression that they connected such resource issues more directly with their idea of The College's governance structure. For instance in making a recommendation for The College to improve students' sense of belonging, Trevor said in his last interview: "the higher ups should invest more in upper level students instead of attracting new students to the school. I think my tuition goes into the cars that the admissions staff members drive." This finding is also consistent with the literature that emphasizes institutions' focus upon resource allocations for enrolling as opposed to continuing students (DeShields et al., 2005; Yorke, 2004). I asked him if he intended to voice his concerns about these issues to which he said "I have invested too much already—I think most students who have been here for a year are unlikely to raise a fuss. What are they going to do, leave now?"

To a certain extent Trevor's assumption that students are less likely to drop out after a year was both theoretically and practically grounded. When I was working at EAC, students were far less likely to withdraw after their first year of study and the vast majority of withdrawals occurred during the first two terms of study. Furthermore, retention literature demonstrates that the likelihood of drop-out diminishes over time (Tinto, 2006). Given Trevor's narrative contributions in relation to resource allocations, it may be that although constraining, Campus Resource issues were not as significant as other factors in students' sense of belonging. Alternatively, it is also possible that Technology Resources were negatively associated with student participants' sense of belonging. Whichever the case, Campus Resource issues might also be an important variable to explore in future research on students' sense of belonging at EAC.

Implications for Practice

EAC may benefit by conducting additional research to explore the link between service departments and students' sense of belonging. It may be important to introduce additional client-feedback loops to assess the effectiveness of the services offered. It

seems unnecessary and detrimental to good business that student services would in any way impede students' sense of belonging to their academic community. From the student participants' narratives, I found that the services they perceived not to support their expectations of what was promised had the most negative impact upon their sense of belonging. Given this, there may be a need for EAC to review service programs in order to assess how adequately they scaffold The College's core educational mission, retention, and belonging programs.

Theoretical Synthesis

In my review of the literature I found few studies that explored the relationship between students' sense of belonging and specific service departments within for-profit and public post-secondary Canadian institutions. The lack of focus in this relationship may be due to level of priority researchers have assigned to other critical variables in students' sense of belonging such as the classroom interactions faculty and their peers. Based on the literature (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2005; Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006b) one would typically expect service departments to remove barriers to students' sense of belonging. However, student participants at EAC drew negative associations between service-related experiences and their sense of belonging. This finding provides an important and contrary viewpoint on the role of student services in the for-profit sector.

5.4. Peer-Support

Corresponding to the literature on retention and belonging, friendships and interpersonal relationships proved to be an important factor in student participants' sense of belonging to The College. Although motivations for seeking friendships varied and the desire for positive peer relationships was stronger in some students than others, I generally found that the student participants wanted positive interpersonal relationships with their peers. This desire on their part was consistent with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) hypothesis. Those student participants who were able to garner a supportive peer network in their academic community developed a sense of belonging and persisted in their studies, a finding that is consistent with the literature (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Marshall et al., 2013; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008).

Conversely, those students who expressed concerns about forming interpersonal relationships with their peers at EAC, or in other contexts, all withdrew from EAC. Two student participants, Nicole and Lisa, withdrew at the conclusion of term one. Trevor withdrew after the conclusion of the study.

From the student participants' narratives, in this section I have identified a variety of links between peer-support and their sense of belonging. The following factors were instrumental in determining participants' abilities to develop and maintain peer-support in their academic community: a) academic performance; b) gender, age and cultural dynamics; and c) The College's educational mandate. Participants' social schemas and levels of parental support were also related to peer-support; however, these two factors warranted their own distinct section, Chapter 4—*Self-Concepts*. At the end of this section I have summarized the implications of my findings for theory and practice at EAC. Chapter 6 includes a synthesis of findings in relation to all major themes.

Academic Performance

As I listened to student participants who spoke about seeing their peers leave their programs it became clear to me that academic performance was a vital component for determining the kinds and levels of peer-support they may be able to garner. I do not think the student participants necessarily meant to be callous in their observations about withdrawal; however, the departure of those who were not performing well did serve as a signal to those who had persisted in their studies that they belonged. For example, Gord said that the “thinning of the herd” was a good thing from his perspective. He also said “it makes me feel like I am actually doing something that I have the aptitude to be successful at—that I am going places”. Furthermore, Aurelia explained that it is easier to make friends once those who are less serious have left. She remarked:

I feel like I have made headway fitting in a little bit more with my classmates and all that stuff. It is when people start to get used to each other and you find that common ground. I have to say, slowly the idiots have been weeded out—the ones that did not come here to learn and who thought it was going to be easy art school. They ended up quitting the course, switching courses or majors and all that stuff. Once you get rid of those ones—the group of people who remain want to be here. Then you can find that common ground.

From these and other discussions I had the impression that at times it was frustrating for those who were serious about their goals and capable performance-wise to study alongside those who were not as serious or capable.

I became curious to understand how the process of developing peer relationships might occur. During an interview with Trevor I gained some insight into this topic. He told a story about a student who did not finish their homework for class. As he recalled this event I realized that the act of not submitting homework was a form of social cue for other students. The student he spoke of was a partner in a class group project. He explained that every group was advised to select one group member's homework assignment to put up on the board. Trevor explained:

The second she (the teacher) said go to it he flipped his stuff up-side-down and left the room. Then he came back we realized why he flipped his stuff up-side-down. He was not finished. He was literally colouring in his work at that moment. I don't know, the rest of the group seemed to notice and I noticed their body language. It was not spoken but everybody seemed to want to stay away from him. The three of us (in Trevor's group), myself included, all of the sudden we are sitting like this—learning away from him, and it is almost like he has a disease or smells. The other guys are doing the same thing and I noticed that. Then I looked at myself and said yeah, I'm doing the same thing. We don't want to get his energy. So there are those patterns of people and how people react to people around them based upon their performance in class.

Similarly, in her second term interview Aurelia noted that some students may be ruled out of certain social groups due to their academic performance. Aurelia expressed some concern and for her peers who were downloading online multiplayer games and playing in class, as well as immediately following class. She said "they are getting themselves into a bit of trouble when they choose to do that in the classroom, particularly considering that they look so distant. Playing in class is not a good strategy in this condensed program". From Trevor and Aurelia's narratives I developed a general impression that it may be difficult for students who are on the academic fringes to develop supportive relationships with students who performed well academically. This finding is consistent with another one quantitative study that demonstrated a strong correlation between peer acceptance and college students' sense of belonging

(Freeman et al., 2007); as well as one other qualitative study at the post-secondary level (Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008).

Previously in this chapter, *Art and Self-Concept Representations*, I discussed the relationship between students' artworks, self-concepts, and the validation of self-concepts by their instructors. In this section, I present another aspect of artwork representations which relates specifically to academic performance and peer-based support in the academic community. For instance, in our term three interview, I asked Rodrigo why he was feeling more comfortable in the academic community. He remarked:

The biggest factors are interaction. I have been interacting with some of the other students and their course projects. I have challenges and for some people it is easier for them to do the things that I struggle with and vice versa. When you have that level of checking and helping it makes you fit in more. You know? You can talk to people and you notice that people trust in you. That is when you really start to fit in—with trust. It makes you feel like you belong in that place.

At my request in Aurelia's second term she submitted a creative artifact to best describe her sense of belonging to her academic community. During our interview, I noticed Aurelia's excitement when she recalled an in-class critique of her assignment that she called *Liana and The Cake* (Figure 9, below). Liana, an alien character, is a recurring motif that was dear to Aurelia. She brings Liana to life whenever the assignment parameters are broad enough to permit her to do so. I used this example to show the link between academic performance and peer-support because this particular artwork and the manner in which Aurelia presented it produced a very positive reaction amongst her peers. Aurelia remarked:

One class member just said wow over it. It was an enjoyable thing. We were all having a giggle over it. They were kind of baffled at first about what she [Liana] was. I would always preface by saying you can take from her what you will. She is really not something that exists that you can possibly describe. She is just a little alien that you cannot possibly understand. So, it was an enjoyable thing in and of itself. People got a lot out of the tripping and all that and then they noticed the cat and I didn't think they would right away. I guess it was because of the high contrast with the eyes and the paws and all that. I got good feedback and laughs from all of my classmates. A lot of my classmates had more simplistic artworks. Other ones were

complex ones like this—we all were just going on each other, like “oh god, you should expand it further” and we just had a lot of fun.

From Aurelia’s description of the critique, I gathered that her academic performance and the manner in which she was able to communicate personal stories to her peers, must have played a significant role in determining the types of peer-support she attracted and cultivated in her academic community. My interpretation of Aurelia’s artwork is that it demonstrates some strong illustrative qualities. Above all and for a first term design exercise, it appeared to me as though Aurelia invested a significant amount of time in this particular assignment; likely more time than most of her peers. If correct, I suspect that the additional effort impressed her peers and helped her to garner acceptance on an academic level. Furthermore, the humorous nature of the story she told through the project likely helped Aurelia gain acceptance on a more social level.

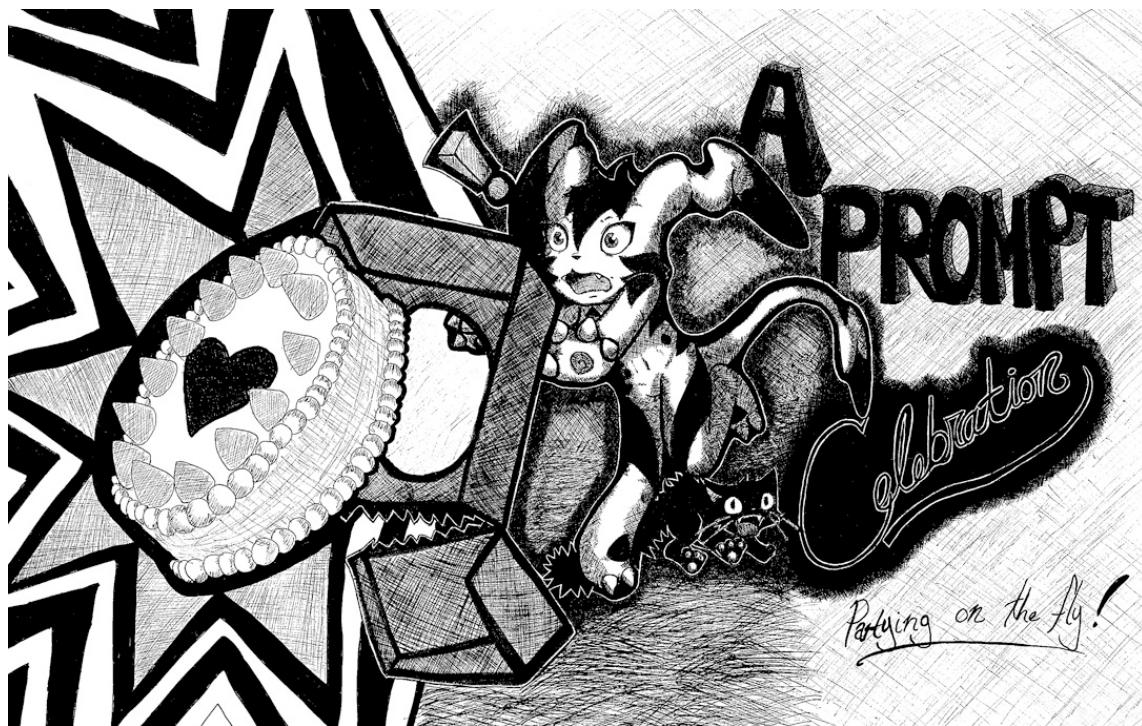


Figure 9. Liana and The Cake

Note. Aurelia (2011). Copy of original pen and ink artwork (on paper) obtained with the permission of the artist. This artwork was created for a term one art fundamentals course.

The Educational Mandate and Peer-based Learning

In the literature on belonging there is evidence that indicates that students who are a part of a peer community develop a sense of belonging more easily than those who are not (Kember et al., 2001); however, I was unable to locate any studies that explored the relationship between students' sense of belonging and the experience of being a part of an educational community that attracts students who have the perception that they are outsiders—students who have struggled to fit into previous educational and social contexts. Therefore, I was very interested to know to what extent The College's emphasis on entertainment arts programming may facilitate supportive peer communities, and what role this may play in student participants' sense of belonging.

From all participants' narratives, I found that The College's educational mandate had many advantages for students in terms of peer support. Student participants indicated that due to the focus upon entertainment arts programming, The College brings together many students who share remarkably similar interests, which makes it easier for students to discuss common interests. For example, during her first term interview Aurelia said "It is quite easy to make friends in the classroom because a lot of the students share the same interests and end up finding common ground on whatever the topic it is, and it just flows". Building upon this theme, one of the creative artifacts that Amanda submitted to express her sense of belonging was the phenomenon of Bronies. Bronies are adult fans of the animated television show *My Little Pony*. When I asked Amanda why she chose this artifact she remarked:

Well, the one thing that actually got me the friend that I have now is a little odd—The *My Little Pony* television series. I started watching that because our Storyboarding instructor showed me one of the animatics in class. He worked on the show. I decided I would give it a try because I had heard about the internet sensation of Bronies. I was really curious and then I became a Brony. I found a bunch of people at the school who are Bronies, and from there it is expanded. I know people out of school now. I have friends everywhere that are Bronies—all across the world too.

I asked Amanda if other people in class or off-campus housing were Bronies. Amanda said "lots of people. I have found at least one Brony in every class."

Additionally, many of the students who attended The College carried the identity of being outsiders. This stemmed in some cases from their creative or non-mainstream interests to those who were ill-supported by peer communities in high school or possibly their family communities at home. For students who viewed themselves as outsiders, The College represented a type of environment where they may for the first time in their lives be respected amongst like-minded peers. Amanda's narrative best illustrated this theme.

The college experience is something that I have always wanted to do. College has always been really important because I did not graduate from high school. I hated watching movies with college kids because I never thought I would experience that. I never thought I could be something more. Uh, I was always a bit of an outsider from everything so when I didn't graduate I was even more of an outsider. Even in dating I felt like an outsider. People treat me differently because of that. It is something that is really hard to deal with because there are lots of different things about me. I feel as though people look at me as though I am alien, an insect. In school they always tell you that if you don't graduate and go to school you will not get anywhere.

I never really belonged before; it is kind of an odd thing to think about. I think if you belong you do not feel awkward. I have always felt awkward, but when I came here I felt as though this is a place that I can belong. Where I come from people think you are weird or wasting your time for being into video games.

The idea of forming a sense of belonging as a group of outsiders was also a view shared by faculty and administrator participants. When speaking about EAC students, many faculty and administrator participants referred to them as "geeks", "social outcasts", "outsiders", or "nerds." For instance, when I asked Audrey to tell me her understanding of the concept of belonging she said "many students felt that they didn't fit into the norm of previous educational or work experiences, and have built their current sense of self on being an outsider." Similarly, when I asked Sophie, an academic program coordinator, what she thought the college experience meant to EAC students, she remarked:

I think they look forward to being around people who think like them, who get them. It is a bit of a nerd party, our program. I have heard it over the years from a lot of students that they were the only person like themselves at their high school. Whether or not it is true, they perceive it. Now they are in a room full of 25 students who all think

Star Wars is the best movie ever made, or who think playing video games is way better than going fishing or hunting or something like that. I think the students want to be around people like them. That is what it comes down to.

For Amanda this idea or the hope of fitting into an educational context for the first time played out in reality—she did encounter a community of like-minded individuals. She made lots of friends and those relationships were of a sort and type whereby they grew her confidence and helped her to perform well in her program. For instance, Amanda told several stories whereby friends in housing bought her groceries or dinner when she could not afford to do so. For Amanda, support from her peers and academic staff appeared to be enough to help her overcome what may pose for other students significant belonging barriers including low economic capital, poor health, and being in the minority in terms of gender.

It was interesting to have found that student participants did not describe any structured engagement programs offered by EAC that may bring together students with similar interests. Generally, they referred to the macro program offerings, or the overall structure of the programming mandate as being enabling of their sense of belonging by bringing together students with shared interests and similar identity formulations under the banner of entertainment arts. In earlier research, it has been found that sense of belonging was related to having a peer cohort. For instance, Kember et al. (2001) found that it was more difficult for graduate students who primarily interact with their supervisors to develop a sense of belonging than it was for undergraduates who had a peer cohort. Furthermore, Hoffman et al. (2002) found that structured learning communities or the provision of home teachers and more consistent cohorts was enabling of students' sense of belonging. In this sense, my study extends the limited research in this area to include such topics as how programming mandates may attract students' who share common interests and similar self-conceptions.

Gender

The literature on sense of belonging explores peer acceptance from multiple perspectives including race (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), social-class (Lehmann, 2007) and team dynamics (Sedgwick & Yonge). However, in my review of the literature I did not find any studies that specifically explored the relationship between belonging in female

students who enroll in male dominated programs. Considering that research forms of underrepresentation still exist for female students in specific programs (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), I was very interested to understand the relationship between gender dynamics and belonging in The College's EAPs which are male dominated.

For Amanda, it was very important that she be accepted by men in her program, Game Design, which predominantly attracts male students. Although by the end of our interviews, Amanda had garnered the respect of her male peers, from our discussions I gathered that this was not an altogether easy process. Amanda explained the evolution of her acceptance as a woman in the Game Design program:

The guys, they do not treat me like I know nothing anymore. So, I guess that is a huge step. They treat me as though I belong here now. I guess it is like being accepted instead of feeling on the outside like I did last term. Even last term, sometimes I would get that whole "she is a girl—she does not know that much". I started turning heads when I got better grades. That is when they started to realize "oh, wow, she does know, and she really is into games". This really happened when I would talk about games like Mass Effect or Assassins Creed or other really popular games that I have played a lot. I could tell them about inside tips or how to get through a mission and then the guys were kind of amazed that I knew these things. Maybe they are starting to think that they should not treat me like I do not know anything.

Although Amanda was the only woman in the study who voiced gender-based concerns in relation to peer-support, she was also the only female enrolled specifically in the Game Design program. In my practice, I have observed that the Game Design program tends to enrol even more male students than the other EAPs. For this reason and given the small size of the participant group, I thought it was important to highlight gender as a possible factor linked to peer-support and students' sense of belonging.

Age

Few studies in the literature have specifically explored the relationship between belonging and age, or more specifically the relationship between belonging and being a mature student relative to a majority of traditional-aged (19-24) college students. One of these, Macfadgen's (2007) study on mature students' at a university-college found that age-related differences were a significant factor in mature students' sense of belonging.

Macfadgen found that mature students felt “shunned in group-work situations” or may experience social disconnections when taking courses with younger students whom they are unable to relate to (p. 102). Given that most institutions are targeting enrolment growth from non-traditional learners and that mature students are a big part of that picture age is an important dynamic for stakeholders to be aware of in the sense of belonging puzzle. Furthermore, given that several of my non-traditional student participants were of mature status and most of their peers were of traditional college going age, I was curious to understand how age-related factors may relate to their sense of belonging at EAC.

Several students in my study expressed worries about their age relative to the younger student population at The College. When I asked Gord, who was 30 years old, if he belonged at The College he said:

I do feel like I belong a little bit, but not as much as the next person would because I am a mature student and nobody really wants to hang out with a 30 year old who has grey hair on the sides of his head. It is a barrier.

Similarly, when I asked Rodrigo (31) to explain what the concept of belonging meant to him he remarked:

It is a way to be a part of something right and to be accepted and accept other people. It is a little bit hard because of the cultural differences, the age differences, as well as the way people conceptualize things.

However, the most tangible example of the connection between age-related differences and the student participants’ sense of belonging was provided by Trevor who was 40 years of age. Trevor explained to me one scenario whereby he felt as though he was being subtly excluded from group-work on the basis of his age. He remarked:

Some students tend to keep their distance from me because of my age. Students in the Video Production course at first invited me to take part in their group so that I could catch up on the work that I missed from the first week, and then it was clear that they did not want me. One girl in the group posted on Facebook that the group needed to meet up to do the homework, so I wrote back, “I need to meet with you, when you are meeting?” She wrote back “Tuesday”. I wrote “when Tuesday? I have a class at 6:30pm and I need to plan

this". Then nothing—the first response was like a minute response. So, I thought maybe they went to bed and will get back to me tomorrow, but no. She is in my Animation class and she and one other guy who are in the group were both in the Animation class. They just seemed to avoid that particular question throughout the class. I asked them in class and asked "when are you guys doing this." It just so happened that after talking to the teacher and finding out what the assignment was, I went to reserve the equipment so that I could do it all myself, that I ran into them. They were trying to book the equipment as well, so, I just tagged along. I really felt more like they put up with me than included me in the group project.

Gord said that this experience was frustrating and diminished his sense of belonging. Regardless of whether or not age was the reason for Trevor's exclusion, it was the reason in his mind.

Several faculty and administrator participants also drew links between age-related dynamics and students' sense of belonging at EAC. For example, when I asked Jana how students represent their sense of belonging at EAC, she speculated that one of her students had been excluded by their peers due to age-related differences. Furthermore, when I asked Sophie the same question she explained:

Sometimes the students find a sense of belonging based upon age. The slightly older students like the guys in their twenties—they tend not to hang out with the 18 and 19 year old guys as much. Maturity level is another one. That is sometimes tied to age, but not always.

Therefore, across three participant groups age-related differences emerged as a factor in mature students' sense of belonging at EAC. This finding corresponded with the limited pool of research on age-related differences on students' sense of belonging and extends the literature to the private for-profit post-secondary sector. Further research will be needed to validate this finding.

Cultural Dynamics

In the literature, many studies have explored the connections between cultural dynamics and students' sense of belonging (e.g., Campbell & Li, 2008; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b). Researchers have found that cultural dynamics play an important role in students' sense of belonging in both academic and social terms. Although the student participant group did not technically have any international

students (Table 2, p. 62), when I asked them about their ethnicities their responses collectively represented a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. For example, students characterized their ethnicities as “Mexican”, “British”, “Canadian”, “half Portuguese and Irish-Scottish”, and “Polish”. Given these diverse representations, I was interested to understand how not being a part of the Canadian cultural majority may relate to student-participants’ perceptions of belonging and if other peer interactions may play a role in their sense of belonging at EAC.

In their narratives, faculty and administrator participants at EAC highlighted few examples linking cultural dynamics to students’ sense of belonging. Nevertheless, in their narratives Rodrigo and Lisa highlighted a link between their sense of belonging and cultural dynamics—more specifically, the feelings of cultural isolation in the academic community. I recalled from our first interview that although Rodrigo was very optimistic about his program choice he had experienced feelings of loneliness. He missed his family and friends back home. During our term two interview I asked Rodrigo again to tell me about his sense of belonging to which he remarked that he had found “a group of Mexicans” who he was hanging out with. Rodrigo was also connecting more with students in his program. He said “it is really nice; I am starting to feel more of a sense of belonging—more stable now. I feel happy with it”. For Rodrigo, having new friends both in the program and in cultural terms enhanced his sense of belonging. Similarly, when I asked Lisa what The College experience meant to her during our first interview she remarked:

I talked to my aunt because she had a really great college experience in Taiwan. That is where I was originally from. That is the same people you know. Yeah. But, I’m here and it’s kind of like different, so, I just don’t get the same type of college experience from her. She was in her own community with her own ethnicity. She had a great college experience and I had a great elementary experience, but since I moved here it is different. Maybe if I was born here I would have had a much more rich college experience. Maybe I would feel the sense of belonging with my peers if I were born here.

Building on the academic relationship established between culture and student participants’ sense of belonging in Chapter 4, *Academic and Artistic Capital—Cultural Forms of Knowledge*, Rodrigo and Lisa’s narratives provide an important social linkage between student participants’ culture and their sense of belonging at EAC. For Rodrigo,

being able to relate to individuals from his own culture mitigated feelings of cultural isolation. For Lisa, the inverse was also true. Not having peers whom she could relate to culturally only amplified her feelings of isolation and diminished her sense of belonging. The findings are consistent with the literature on cultural dynamics and students' sense of belonging in other systems, and extends the literature to the for-profit Canadian post-secondary context. Further research will be needed to validate these findings at EAC.

In this multi-faceted discussion including such diverse factors as gender, age, and culture it is interesting to note that although social-class may be tied to students' levels of economic capital it appears to have had little bearing upon students' ability to develop peer-to-peer relationships in their academic community. I attributed the absence of discussion about social-class culture to be an indicator of relatively homogenous class-backgrounds in terms of the general student population at EAC. In this sense I suggest that class-cultural tensions may not be a prevalent at The College due to the broad-access mission.

Implications for Practice

Given the small student participant sample size, additional research will be necessary to validate the findings in relation to peer support. Nevertheless, based upon the findings as well as the perspectives of all participant groups, I have considered many possible implications for practice at EAC with regard to Chapter 5, *Peer-Support*. First, to help mitigate issues in courses where students demonstrate a wide range of academic and artistic literacy levels, EAC may benefit from instructional and curricular development strategies aimed at relatively harmonizing those levels. Such strategies may include tutoring or remedial programs for students who possess less experience in academic or artistic terms. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to consider instructional development strategies aimed at ensuring that the majority of students have a reasonable opportunity to achieve the desired course learning outcomes, but which also provide opportunities for more advanced students to engage in meaningful academic activities such as advanced assignments or peer mentoring. Such efforts may reduce scenarios whereby students are ruled out of social groups purely on the basis of lower academic performance.

Although all participants groups generally confirmed a positive relationship between EAC's educational mandate and students' sense of belonging, it was interesting to note that student participants did not describe any structured engagement programs offered by EAC that may bring together students with similar interests. As seen in other systems (Hoffman et al., 2002), such programs may further enhance students' sense of belonging beyond the inherent benefits of EAC's educational mandate. Programs may be as simple as facilitating small-scale clubs, committees, or student mixers whereby students may develop a sense of belonging through shared interests. Alternatively, EAC may seek to explore structural-curricular opportunities to further enhance students' sense of belonging by incorporating more opportunities for group activities and team-based learning in their classes.

Finally, it may be important for The College to consider how to address the relationship between gender, cultural, and age-related dynamics and students' sense of belonging. It may be beneficial to consider opportunities to raise awareness of such dynamics through orientation programs and/or instructor led classroom discussions. Furthermore, it may prove beneficial to facilitate clubs or societies on the basis of gender, culture and age—therefore connecting students with other students whom they can relate to and develop peer support groups. My findings revealed that discontinuities between age, gender, and culture can be particularly challenging for students during their transition to EAC or in their first term. Programs aimed at mitigating such discontinuities should therefore aim to help alleviate such tensions early in students' educational experiences.

Theoretical Synthesis

As per the literature on retention and belonging peer-support proved to be an important factor in my non-traditional student participants' sense of belonging to their academic community at EAC (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008). My study has also supported the literature that implicates cultural dynamics (Campbell & Li, 2008; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b) as well as age (MacFadgen, 2007) as being an important factors in students' sense of belonging. For most student participants the desire to seek positive interpersonal relationships with other students was strong (Baumeister & Leary's, 1995) Those

students who were able to garner a supportive peer network in their academic community developed a sense of belonging and persisted in their studies. Those student participants who did not belong to a peer group struggled to belong (Kember et al., 2001). Peer support was also a factor in terms of cultural and age-related dynamics. Two of the student participants who were from non-mainstream cultural backgrounds experienced feelings of cultural isolation. These feelings diminished their sense of belonging. Furthermore, three of the four students who were of mature status, expressed concerns about their sense of belonging at EAC based upon age-related factors.

In terms of new findings, my study extends the literature on peer-support in several ways. It has revealed important factors with require further exploration such as how programming mandates relate to students sense of belonging. My study also implicates a relationship between gender dynamics and students' sense of belonging in male dominated programs. Furthermore, it appears that class-culture was not a significant factor at EAC. This finding may have implications for research that links class-culture and sense of belonging to specific post-secondary institutional contexts. It may be that there is a negative association between class-culture and the belonging of working class students who study at affluent institutions and a positive association for working-class students who study at broad access institutions like EAC. Further research will be needed to validate these possibilities.

5.5. Part 2: Conclusions

In chapter five I presented data from all participant groups' narratives as well as creative artifacts to explore four major themes that relate primarily to the various forms of campus-level interaction and support the student participants experienced during their first year of study. From the four themes discussed in this chapter, I have illustrated many complex interpretations, processes, and factors involved in student participants' development of a sense of belonging. My study also implicates many new factors that may be important to consider in relation to non-traditional students' sense of belonging, particularly for researchers in the for-profit sector. Chapter 6, *Synthesis of Micro Themes*, more completely summarizes the role of micro factors in relation to student

participants' sense of belonging—supportive and unsupportive factors, as well as considerations for future research.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter I begin by presenting my concluding thoughts about how my study's conceptual approaches and research design enabled me to answer the research questions. The following synthesis sections, *Synthesis of Macro (and Micro) Themes*, fully address research questions one and two—these sections account for how students developed a sense of belonging to their academic community, and describe the factors that enabled and constrained their belongingness. I have ended this chapter with a discussion of the study limitations, as well as the implications of the findings for theory, policy and practice.

6.1. Concluding Reflections

The theoretical frameworks for my overall study were centered on two key concepts: sense of belonging, (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and structure and agency (Giddens, 1981, 1984; Sewell, 1992). I employed these conceptual frameworks (Figure 3, p. 44) as I analyzed non-traditional students' sense of belonging to their academic community at EAC. Based on these frameworks I made the assumption that student participants' sense of belonging may be explicated in two ways as follows. First, I expected that student-agents' sense of belonging would be informed primarily by their behaviors in their academic community. Their behaviors were explicable through their multi-faceted and multi-contextual knowledge—including knowledge drawn from contexts that were external to EAC such as family, social, academic, artistic, economic, generational, and ethno-cultural contexts. Second, I assumed that institutional-agents interactions with student participants would be primarily informed by knowledge derived from their own individual background contexts as well those of The College's academic community. In this sense, I expected that institutional agents' behaviors may be explicable at least in part by the durable patterns and conventions established in EAC's academic, service, and corporate sub-cultures.

Following Baumeister & Leary (1995), I posited that the student participants had a basic and fundamental desire to feel as though they were valued, accepted, and respected members of EAC's academic community over time and space. Although a few student participants expressed concerns about how to form positive interpersonal relationships with their peers and EAC staff, they unanimously expressed an interest to become valued members of EAC's academic community, thus confirming this assumption.

To broaden the belonging proposition and following Giddens (1981, 1984), I conceived of students' sense of belonging as occurring within a wider view of the institutional context or in overlapping sub-cultural structures. In this sense I acknowledged the duality of structure—a view of structure as "both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems" (Giddens, 1981, p. 27). Furthermore, following Sewell's (1992) theory of structure and agency I expected that all agents may be "capable of applying a wide range of different and even incompatible schemas" to their cultural experiences in EAC's academic community (p. 17). I suspected that application of compatible or incompatible schemas would have implications in terms of student participants' sense of belonging.

When analysing student participants' data, I focused on their schemas—the origins of their knowledge and I paid close attention to how their knowledge representations related to their sense of belonging in EAC's academic community. This approach yielded important factor relationships (Chapter 4, *Results Part I*) and demonstrated linkages between student participants' sense of belonging and exogenous factors including academic, artistic, and economic capital as well as students' self-concepts. Such factors were inextricably tied to student participants' inherited forms of knowledge and their experiences in sub-cultural contexts such as their families or high schools. The student participants' narratives revealed high degrees of awareness about how compatible their knowledge representations may be with those expected in their academic community.

On a more personal/professional level, this study taught me some incredibly important lessons. It taught me the importance of questioning the level of alignment between institutional systems and institutional mandates/missions. It also taught me that

students do in their own way form assumptions about the intent and purpose of governance decisions. In many cases students' assumptions were accurate. For me this study also raises enormous questions about the relationship between belonging and student-agency in proprietary for-profit institutions. I wonder for instance if agency may be more difficult for students to exercise due to the intensity of the modes of study in such environments and the particular forms of capital that non-traditional students bring to the institution.

In Chapter 5, *Results Part 2*, I explained a broad range of factors in relation to student participants' sense of belonging that focused on interaction and support in EAC's academic community. These factors fell under the themes of academic, service, and peer-based support, as well as students' artwork representations in their courses. To a great extent these findings implicated the role of all participant groups' agencies, and the enabling and constraining parameters of sub-cultural structures in student participants' negotiation of a sense of belonging at EAC.

The following sections provide a more nuanced synthesis of the role of macro and micro-level themes in relation to non-traditional students' sense of belonging, as well as describing the implications for future research on belongingness in related contexts.

6.2. Synthesis of Macro Themes

In response to my research questions, I have organized the major theoretical findings from Chapter 4—*Results Part 1* under the following three headings: a) *Factors Supportive of Students' Sense of Belonging*, b) *Factors Unsupportive of Students' Sense of Belonging*, and c) *Considerations for Future Research*.

Consistent with emergent literature (e.g., Andres et al., 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lehmann, 2007; Read et al., 2003) my study's structure and agency frameworks (Figure 3, p. 43) were useful devices for illustrating multiple connections between students' sense of belonging and exogenous factors including students' experientially inherited forms of knowledge, as well as the decision making authority of external corporate-agents. Furthermore, through analysis of all participants' narratives, I identified particular knowledge forms that were enabling as well as constraining of

students' sense of belonging. In this sense, my study further validates reconceptualizations of the student-institution fit in belonging research and the need for further exploration of macro factors. It may be that macro factors are particularly important to consider in the for-profit post-secondary sector where students *Modes of Study* or interaction between study and life outside of school are typically more intense. Below is a synthesis of the major theoretical findings in relation to macro themes.

Factors Supportive of Students' Sense of Belonging

- For most student participants the dominant academic discourse at EAC was found to be embracing of their academic and artistic literacy levels and supportive of their sense of belonging.
- Student participants who developed a sense of belonging to their academic community all possessed holistic rather than individualistic self-concepts or key value orientations and motivations for studying at EAC. This finding is consistent with literature that links belonging to factors such as students' academic motivation, self-efficacy (Freeman et al., 2007), goal commitment and sense of confidence (Hoffman et al., 2002).
- Supportive family structures tended to correspond with student participants' ability to develop positive interpersonal relationships with their peers, faculty and other agents at The College. These exploratory findings are theoretically consistent with the literature linking parental support with adult sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 2002).

Factors Unsupportive of Students' Sense of Belonging

- Student participants' demonstrated awareness about the purpose and value of corporate business practices. As they progressed in their programs several student participants' narratives described corporate business practices that were unsupportive of the sense of belonging. These exploratory findings are consistent with the literature that emphasizes how institutions' tend to focus resources upon enrolling rather than retaining students in other systems (DeShields et al., 2005; Yorke, 2004). Furthermore, these findings provide a starting place for researchers who are assessing the sense of belonging of students in for-profit stockholder-driven institutions.
- The accelerated learning paradigm, high cost of tuition, and full-time study policies at EAC were found to be unsupportive of student participants' sense of belonging and had the effect of intensifying their *Modes of Study* beyond a level that has already been established in the literature in other post-secondary contexts (e.g., Kember & Leung, 2004).
- Corresponding with the literature on social-class background and sense of belonging (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lehmann, 2007; Ostrove, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Read et al., 2003; Walpole, 2003) economic capital played a major if not predictable role in student participants' sense of belonging at EAC. Economic capital, or a lack of material funds, was found to be unsupportive of

students' sense of belonging. However, it proved to be more difficult to assess the implications for student participants' sense of belonging in relation to another form of economic capital—their ability to assess value propositions and budget for the financial reality of study at EAC.

- For at least one student The College's dominant academic discourse was found to be constraining of their sense of belonging. This finding is consistent with the literature that demonstrates that dominant academic discourses have the power to shape and constrain which students belong to an educational institution (Campbell & Li, 2008; Chalmers, 1981; Read et al., 2003).
- My study's findings suggest that cultural forms of academic knowledge that are incongruent with the dominant academic discourse at EAC may be constraining of students' sense of belonging. In this sense, my study's findings appear to be consistent with the literature linking cultural forms of academic knowledge and belonging (Campbell & Li, 2008).
- All four students who had individualistic self-concepts struggled to belong to their academic community and withdrew from their program either during or after the conclusion of my study.
- Students whose narratives indicated that they had experienced unsupportive family structures tended to struggle to develop a sense of belonging to their academic community. Although only two students specifically described unsupportive family structures, those two students withdrew from study at EAC.

Considerations for Future Research

- In the literature I did not find any studies that specifically explored students' sense of belonging in relation to corporate business practices found in stockholder-driven institutions. However, my findings are inconsistent with the research relating to the students' non-academic service experiences in for-profit colleges (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2005; Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006b).
- My study's exploratory findings suggest that it may be important to study the impact of corporate business practices on students' sense of belonging, particularly in the for-profit private sector.
- Few studies have explored the important link between intensified *Modes of Study* and sense of belonging (Kember et al., 2001; Kember & Leung, 2004). My study's findings demonstrate that *Modes of Study* may be even more intense in the for-profit sector than in related public post-secondary programs. Given these findings, intensified *Modes of Study* may be a critical factor to assess in relation to student participants' sense of belonging, particularly in related contexts
- Further research will be needed in order to more fully assess how students' economic capital levels—their ability to assess value propositions and budget for the financial reality of study, relates to their sense of belonging. It may be that the absence of economic capital in this sense contributes to the sense of belonging of non-traditional students in the for-profit private-post-secondary context where higher value propositions may be less appealing to the economically inclined.

- Although some research exists that links students' sense of belonging to factors such as academic motivation, self-efficacy, goal commitment and sense of confidence (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002), additional study is needed to substantiate the theoretical validity of a self-concept structure, as well as the relationship between student participants' sense of belonging and the possession of holistic value orientations and sources of motivation.
- The role of family support has not been extensively studied in relation to students' sense of belonging. My study's findings suggest that family support may also be a useful construct for assessing students' sense of belonging in the for-profit post-secondary sector.

I anticipated that by introducing multiple participant groups I may garner consistent as well as inconsistent data and perspectives on students' sense of belonging. Within each theme in this chapter, I compared the student participants' narratives with those of faculty and administrators, and I found that their interpretations about students' sense of belonging were remarkably similar. I believe that this consistency affirmed the legitimacy of the student participants' perspectives.

I also suspected that from term-to-term, participants may contradict their own narrative positions or simply evolve their perceptions about the process of belonging. This was certainly the case with respect to student participants' perceptions about corporate practices, which shifted dramatically from positive at the start of, term one, to in some cases very negative just a few months later. Although not the emphasis of this project, to a lesser extent the same can be said about faculty and administrator participants' perceptions of corporate practices during the same time period. The findings would have looked starkly different had the study framework not been longitudinal.

6.3. Synthesis of Micro Themes

In Chapter 5, Results Part 2, I presented data from all participant groups' narratives as well as creative artifacts data to explore four major themes that relate primarily to the various forms of campus-level interaction and support the student participants experienced during their first year of study. In this section I have organized the major theoretical findings from Chapter 5 under the following three headings: a) *Factors Supportive of Students' Sense of Belonging*, b) *Factors Unsupportive of*

Students' Sense of Belonging, and c) *Considerations for Future Research*. To illustrate how these factors enabled or constrained student participants' sense of belonging, this section summarizes their interactions with various agents on campus including their peers, academic and service-based staff.

With a few exceptions, my study's findings were generally consistent with emergent literature on sense of belonging that deals specifically with support and interaction in post-secondary institutions (e.g., Campbell & Li, 2008; Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; MacFadgen, 2007; Read et al., 2003; Thompson, 2003; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008). However, my study did implicate many new factors that may be important to consider in relation to non-traditional students' sense of belonging. My study's findings raise new questions for researchers in the for-profit sector.

Factors Supportive of Student Participants' Sense of Belonging

- Faculty members' practice of student centered teaching approaches and the demonstration of high service standards by academic staff were supportive of student participants' sense of belonging. These findings are consistent the literature linking pedagogical caring (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002) and to students' sense of belonging.
- Student participants tended to develop a greater sense of belonging due to relationships that they developed with their instructors over multiple course experiences. This finding was consistent with the literature on belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002).
- Faculty members' use of multi-faceted assessments was found to be supportive of students' sense of belonging.
- Faculty members' facilitation of assignments and constructive group critiques, whereby student participants were provided with opportunities to express their experiences, ideas, and voices, were found to be supportive of their sense of belonging. These findings are consistent with research that has linked belonging to art production (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007).
- Student participants who were able to garner a supportive peer network in their academic community developed a sense of belonging to their academic community. This finding is consistent with the extant literature that has identified peer-support as being a vital factor in students' sense of belonging (e.g. Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; MacFadgen, 2007; Sedgwick & Yonge, 2008).
- The institutions' educational mandate was found to be supportive of students' sense of belonging. By bringing together students who share remarkably

similar interests, the narratives of all participants suggested that it was easier for students at EAC to develop friendships with their peers.

Factors Unsupportive of Student Participants' Sense of Belonging

- The absence of student centered teaching approaches and high service standards posed barriers to student participants' sense of belonging.
- The narratives of one student, Lisa, and two faculty members suggest that the inability on the part of students to conform to specific art production standards may result in a diminished sense of belonging. Therefore, my study is consistent with the literature that links dominant academic discourses and students' sense of belonging (Codjoe, 2005; Read et al., 2003).
- Support services that did not align with student participants' expectations were found to be unsupportive of their sense of belonging. This finding is inconsistent with the limited amount of research relating to students' non-academic service experiences in for-profit colleges (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2005; Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006b).
- Those student participants who struggled to develop supportive relationships with their peers did not experience having a sense of belonging to their academic community at EAC. These findings extend the literature linking belonging to important factors such as cultural (Campbell & Li, 2008; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2008a, 2008b) as well as age-related dynamics (MacFadgen, 2007).

Considerations for Future Research

- The findings suggest that pedagogical caring is beneficial in research implicating belonging in post-secondary education.
- In retention literature, researchers (DeShields et al., 2005) have explored the relationship between institutional service-standards and students' sense of belonging; however, this relationship has not been explored in belonging literature. Therefore, my study's findings suggest that service standards may also be an important factor to consider in future belonging research.
- The findings suggest that students' perceptions of curriculum relevancy may be an important factor to consider in future research on students' sense of belonging. In my review of the literature, I did not find any studies that explored this possible variable; however, it may be a plausible factor, particularly in contexts where high cost propositions increase students' scrutiny of the educational product.
- Although my study's findings are consistent with the literature that has linked students' sense of belonging to pedagogical caring, it further suggests that specific instructional strategies including multi-faceted assessments, constructive group critiques, and the provision of opportunities for students to express their experiences, ideas, and voices may be important factors to consider in students' sense of belonging in related contexts.

- My study on non-traditional students extends the literature that links students' representations of art to their sense of belonging (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007) to include visual entertainment art forms in arts-related institutions.
- Few studies have explored the relationship between students' sense of belonging and non-academic service departments within educational institutions (Brigham, 2012; Thompson, 2003). Given the explicit links student participants drew between service-related experiences and their sense of belonging, non-academic services may be an important factor to consider in related studies.
- In terms of peer support, my study's findings indicate that gender, a factor that I did not find to be the focus of any belonging research, may be an important factor to consider in male dominated programs.
- My study has revealed that programming mandates may be an important factor to consider in future research on students' sense of belonging in related contexts.
- It appears that class-culture was not a significant factor at EAC. This finding was not consistent with other research on students' sense of belonging (Lehmann, 2007) that explored the sense of belonging of working-class students at an affluent university. Further research will be needed to validate the role of class-culture in broad-access for-profit institutions.

As found with macro-level factors, within each theme in this chapter I compared the student participants' narratives with those of faculty and administrators. As found in Chapter 4, *Results Part I*, with few exceptions, all groups' interpretations about the factors involved in students' sense of belonging were remarkably similar. It is, however, important to restate that when discussing EAC's support services, the faculty and administrator participants whom I interviewed were generally positive and non-detailed about the various services offered to EAC's students. I had the distinct impression that this may be due in some cases to limited knowledge about the various programs offered to EAC's students. Therefore, with the exception of non-academic student services, I believe that the consistency in factorial interpretations affirmed the legitimacy of the student participants' perspectives.

I also suspected that from term-to-term, participants may contradict their own narrative positions or simply evolve their perceptions about the process of belonging. As found in Chapter 4, *Results Part I*, this was certainly the case with respect to most of the themes discussed in this chapter. For example, participants' perceptions about non-academic student services all tended to shift from positive at the onset of study to progressively negative as students advanced into their programs or withdrew from The

College. Although overall students' perceptions about academic and peer-support remained positive, there were some exceptions. In this sense, I was fortunate to select a longitudinal study framework. I would have overlooked many important factors and developments in students' experiences had I elected to have collected data in one timeframe.

6.4. Limitations

For researchers in the field, I have summarized a number of limitations and cautionary advices in this section, and I have also provided suggestions for future inquiry. The limitations relate closely to my primary research question and the necessity of gaining deep understandings of the multi-faceted character of The College's academic community and agents in order to recognize the variables and processes at play in students' formulation of a sense of belonging. In reflecting upon what occurred at a structural level, I have organized significant limitations into themes as follows: a) researcher bias and interviewing, b) sampling, and c) transferability.

The first limitation, which can simultaneously be viewed as an advantage, is the fact that I was an insider who possessed in-depth emic knowledge of The College's student, faculty, and corporate cultures through administrative practice and teaching. As well, given my background in accreditation and new program development, I was conversant with the for-profit post-secondary business model. Furthermore, I was a former student in a similar program and a former VFX professional in the EAI. All of this experience is certainly what motivated this research project. I think I began with some cursory study of retention research. As I became more familiar with the factors associated with students' decisions to stay or leave college, I thought to myself "little is known about how students' fit into EAC". From my practice and background I suspected

that this process might be much different or perhaps more amplified for non-traditional students in the for-profit context. Thus, I had my own biases to contend with.

For the non-insider in ethnographic research, the aim is typically to become immersed in the culture in order to more fully understand and therefore convey the story of the culture. I argue that to an extent the reverse is also true for the ethnographic researcher. As I saw it, I needed to sufficiently curb my assumptions so that they did not singularly direct the focus of data interpretation; however, I fully recognize that this may be impossible. Given my interpretive bias, I attended to this issue through the reflexive nature of the study design, triangulation strategies, member checks including the co-construction of interviews, and having outsider input at several stages.

As a true insider however, and as someone who possessed hidden knowledge about factors that may play a significant role in non-traditional students' negotiation of a sense of belonging, I struggled with the idea of suppressing my interpretive role as well as the benefits that may be derived from leveraging my background and experience to bring together a micro-macro account of non-traditional students' experiences. For instance, my perspective may be crucial for addressing institutional factors associated with students' sense of belonging, or assisting with transfer judgements—providing sufficient emphasis and direction for other researchers to take action in this space. Thus, I elected a form of educational criticism. However, I did not become conversant with *agnostic interview alternatives* or contemporary strategies for enhancing narrative co-construction until after the data collection phase of my research (Kvale, 2006). Many of these strategies may have been useful for more fully addressing interview power dynamics and the potential to use the interview as an instrumental dialogue.

In relation to the small participant sample, the findings are in general limited to the scope of EAC. Although I was not looking to achieve inferential validity from my participant data set, I was seeking meaningful data. Given the exploratory focus of my study, the need to acquire thick descriptions and considering my available resources, it did not make sense to have more than 21 participants. In retrospect, I feel 21 participants was an ambitious goal considering the interview phases and heavy lifting in terms of transcriptions. In the sample I aimed for a measure of balance to triangulate perspectives between students, faculty, and administrators. I attended to standards of

quality by applying naturalistic strategies (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Seale, 1999). Although I generally aimed for balance in demographics represented, in terms of faculty and administrators, I was also looking for participants who had frequent interactions with the student participant group and who possessed tangible or observational experience with non-traditional students' sense of belonging. Certainly, it would have been interesting and potentially valuable to have had more participants.

In terms of assessing the quality of the findings, I am conscious of the differences between the study population and the general demographics captured by the Noel Levitz Survey Results (see Table 2, p. 62). For instance, my study had a smaller ratio of male participants (50%) than The College's survey (57%) suggests and more female participants. My study had fewer traditional-aged college students (50%) than the survey (68%) and far more students in the 25-35 age range (37.5%) than the survey (18%). These differences can likely be explained by the small student sample size of eight. However, the most glaring difference between the student sample and Noel Levitz Survey relates to disabilities.

Thirty-seven percent of the student participants in my study reported having had a disability that they were coping with or which was a non-factor in their study. This was a dramatically high ratio compared to the number of Noel Levitz Survey respondents who reported having a disability (4%). There are a number of possible reasons for this discrepancy. To begin, there is no obligation for students attending The College to declare that they have a disability. In my practice with students who possess a disability, I have observed that they typically have no interest in making their disability a public matter. In the vast majority of situations they wish to keep their disability private. Even students who study on a disability accommodation often do not exercise their accommodation unless absolutely necessary to do so. Most wish to cope without peer scrutiny or without perpetuating the idea that they are somehow getting different treatment than their peers. Another aspect of disabilities is diagnosis. Although I am no means an expert in this area, I have worked with literally dozens and dozens of students whom I suspect have had learning disabilities and whom have lacked the economic and cultural capital to obtain proper diagnosis and support for their conditions. So, it is entirely possible that the ratio of students at The College who possess a disability is much higher than what is reported on institutional surveys. Similarly, it is much more

likely that a student would report such a matter to someone that they trust through the process of an in-depth interview. It is possible that in terms of disability, such students viewed the study as though it were a form of activism or as a means to enhance their sense of belonging by sharing their voice and stories.

Although I am not suggesting that the ratio of students with a disability at The College is 50%, I am suggesting that it is much higher than the 4% tabulated in the Noel Levitz Survey. My suggestion is consistent with The College's mission to serve non-traditional students. It is also consistent with what I know from practice. I know for instance that many students with disabilities attended The College because they were not able to attend other institutions, or had poor experiences at other institutions. I am also aware that The College's disabilities coordinator worked with a substantial body of students who were diagnosed with a disability and who had official accommodations. In casual discussions with this person, they speculated that the number of actual students with disabilities was much higher than the body of students accessing their services.

My study was also limited to the focus of the research questions and therefore The College context. It may have been very interesting and potentially illuminating to conduct a study on non-traditional students' sense of belonging in a cross-section of for-profit as well as public post-secondary institutions in British Columbia or possibly across Canada to see how the process of developing a sense of belonging differs or is similar across a range of institutional settings. In particular, it would be interesting to know if factors generally associated with for-profit private institutions (e.g., focus on career training, accelerated learning paradigms, increased tuition, etc) impact students differently than those typically associated with public post-secondary institutions (e.g., knowledge acquisition as preparation for one's role in the economy and in society). I have also considered how the findings may differ significantly between for-profit and private non-for-profit institutions, of which there are few in Canada. My hope is that some of the linkages between non-traditional students' sense of belonging and factors associated with EAC may provide starting points for future research involving for-profit institutions. Additionally, the scope of the primary research question has narrowed the focus of the research to students' experiences in their first year of study. As I carried out the in-depth interviews, I realized that it may be interesting and relevant to conduct a study on the sense of belonging of faculty, or perhaps extend my study to students in

their second year of their program. In terms of faculty, it would be interesting to learn how their sense of belonging may relate to student participants, for example.

In the design of the interview guides and in my questioning approaches, I had no desire to skirt the relationship between social media and students' sense of belonging. Many of the research questions were broad enough to have captured possible links. However, with the exception of Aurelia, this did not occur. It may be that I needed to provide a more robust definition of what constitutes The College's academic community (e.g., overlapping sub-cultures including social media cultures) or specifically ask questions geared towards social media in order to have prompted students. I elected to keep the questions intentionally open-ended to allow students the opportunity to identify the major factors involved in their sense of belonging. It may be that for new students in their first year of study, social media communities are situated externally or are comprised of agents who are not directly connected to The College. Perhaps over time social media plays a bigger role in students' sense of belonging as students become connected in electronic forums (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc). In my experience with The College, social media was an underutilized instructional and institutional resource. It may be that The College has played a role in minimizing the use of social media in the academic community. Whatever the case, it is surprising that social media was not a bigger factor. I encourage other researchers to investigate this finding in related contexts to gain a greater understanding of the role of social media in relation to students' sense of belonging.

Another limitation of the study relates to the approaches for gathering creative artifacts from participants. My requests for these were voluntary and open-ended in terms of the forms of acceptable submissions. Although most participants were really enthusiastic about this idea, I suspect that some could have used more direction and specific instructions in terms of when and how to submit artifacts. The submissions I received were incredibly useful for providing an alternative lens through which to view the process of belonging. However, given the collection approach, submissions were inconsistent. Some participants submitted more than their fair share of artifacts. Other submitted sporadically or not at all.

Although I never intended to make my study results generalizable, I did apply various standards of quality as well as provided detailed descriptions (e.g., personal narrative, background information on EAC, my study participants, the entertainment arts sector, and EAPs to assist with transfer judgements. It is possible that these descriptions may not be sufficient to assess transferability. Given the range and multiple layers of factors that I have highlighted as relating to students' sense of belonging, I suggest that future researchers consider the benefits associated with data triangulation (i.e., multiple data forms, multiple participant groups, and successive interviews), and I recommend these approaches for exploratory work on students' sense of belonging in related contexts. Further exploratory research is needed to tease out significant factors as they relate to non-traditional students in a range of institution types and program areas. Such efforts may provide a baseline upon which more standardized, objective instruments can be developed to assess students' sense of belonging in a more systematic way.

I encourage institutional leaders in the Canadian for-profit private sector to support research on students' sense of belonging, related topic areas and simply support any form of academic research. The further inclusion of for-profit post-secondary institutions in discussions of this sort may have many benefits for this sector and for Canada's post-secondary system. First, research of this sort will help the for-profit sector identify the most pressing issues relating to student performance and retention. Second, it will help raise awareness of practices occurring in this sector and the quality of educational opportunities available for students. In time, as agents within public post-secondary institutions become more aware of the private sector, they may in turn be more open to joint partnerships and articulations, which can only benefit the entire system and future students. Third, future research in the for-profit sector may alleviate misconceptions about the sector, elevate the sector's status as a whole, or at least help others understand differences between institutions. If for-profit private institutions are to remain an integral part of BC's post-secondary system, then research in this area may go a long way towards improving transparency and addressing the generally poor reputation of for-profit institutions. The status-quo is not desirable for any stakeholders.

6.5. Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice

In terms of the implications for theory, my study on non-traditional students' at EAC revealed many important new and consistent findings with the extant literature on belonging and proprietary education. First, my findings were not consistent with research relating to the non-academic service experiences of non-traditional students in for-profit colleges (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2005; Kelly, 2001; Kinser, 2006b). Similarly, my findings suggest that corporate business practices may be an important variable to consider in future research on belonging in for-profit institutions. Future research may reveal that students' sense of belonging and satisfaction with their educational experiences in for-profit institutions are not always positively associated with corporate or service-orientated practices.

My study's findings suggest that *Modes of Study* may be even more intense in the for-profit sector than in related public post-secondary programs. Given these findings, intensified *Modes of Study* may be a critical factor to assess in relation to student participants' sense of belonging in future research. The results of my study were inconsistent with the literature on belonging in relation to students' socio-economic status. Further research will confirm how students' economic capital levels—their ability to assess value propositions and budget for the financial reality of study – relates to their sense of belonging in for-profit institutions. It may be that the absence of economic capital in this sense contributes to the sense of belonging of non-traditional students in this sector. Higher value propositions may be negatively associated with the economically savvy student. My study's findings were generally consistent with the literature linking students' sense of belonging to positive academic outcomes, supportive faculty, and peer relationships; however, more inquiry is needed to substantiate the relationship between the theory of a self-concept and students' sense of belonging.

Students' sense of belonging has rarely been studied in relation to family support at the post-secondary level (Hagerty et al., 2002; Kember & Leung, 2004; Kember et al., 2001). It seems reasonable to assume that supportive family structures may be even more vital for students in the for-profit sector where intensified *modes of study* are prevalent. Although the results of my study suggest that belonging and family support are positively related, additional research is needed to confirm this finding. The results

of my study suggested that there is a link between students' representations of art and their sense of belonging. Although this has been found in at least one other study (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007), further study is needed in artistic educational environments to confirm this finding. Another important issue that my study has raised is the relationship between belonging and gender, or being a female student in a male dominated program. Of slightly less relevance, the results suggest that irrelevant curriculum may be an important factor to consider in future research on students' sense of belonging. This seems plausible in contexts where high cost propositions increase students' scrutiny of the educational product.

In terms of the implications for educational policy, many of the students at EAC experienced a diminished sense of belonging when a gap existed between their expectations for their educational experience at EAC and their actual experience. Again and again students relayed stories that identified a diminished sense of belonging in relation to various non-academic services. Such services appeared to be misaligned with EAC's broad-access mission and the high cost value proposition. This finding is important for educational policy in proprietary education in two ways. First, such knowledge is important for institutional leaders who may benefit from a close inspection of their core mission, whom they serve, their institution's value proposition, and how all of these features are conveyed to students and the public. It stands to reason that belongingness may be infinitely better served for students whose expectations for their experience are better aligned with the actual experience. For an institution with a high cost value proposition (e.g., high tuition relative to comparable programs) it seems logical to consider opportunities to support students' with finance-friendly policies and programs. In the case of EAC this would mean the provision of part-time studies to allow students to work in the field, accessible and transparent financial services, and housing programs that are affordable.

Second, from a quality assessment perspective, it may be important for regulatory bodies to assess the integrity of institutions' value propositions with these ideas in mind (i.e., services match the mission). If regulatory bodies are to play a role in educating for-profit institutions about best practices and helping for-profits develop sustainable operational models, this idea may be of central importance.

As a result of this research, I have considered many potential practice-based solutions for enhancing students' sense of belonging in for-profit institutions or related broad-access settings that enroll substantial populations of non-traditional learners. Furthermore, these suggestions may also be applicable in institutions and programs dealing specifically with entertainment arts programming. Foremost, it appears that faculty who use multi-faceted assessments, constructive group critiques, and who provide opportunities for students to express their experiences, ideas, and voices facilitated students' sense of belonging. Therefore, instructional development programs should take these strategies into consideration. Similarly, programs aimed at empowering faculty and students' to showcase their artwork on campus in hallway and gallery displays may have positive implications for the sense of belonging of students, faculty members and staff.

Furthermore, to help mitigate issues in courses where students demonstrate a wide range of academic and artistic literacy levels, instructional and curricular development strategies should be aimed at relatively harmonizing those levels. Such strategies may include tutoring or remedial programs for students who possess less experience. In principle, programs should be aimed at ensuring that the majority of students have a reasonable opportunity to achieve desired course learning outcomes, and simultaneously provide opportunities for more advanced students to engage in meaningful academic activities such as advanced assignments or peer mentoring. Such efforts may reduce scenarios whereby students are ruled out of social groups on the basis of lower academic performance.

The results of my study left questions remaining in terms of how students' accumulated academic and artistic knowledge informs their sense of belonging. It may be beneficial for researchers in related institutions to explore links between particular forms of related experience (e.g., fine arts training, technical training, etc) and belonging. Such research may be to inform programs aimed at demystifying the academic and artistic expectations of entertainment arts programs, assist students with enrolment decisions, advanced preparation, as well as knowledge of the resources students may access to improve their skills while enrolled.

The suggested link between tentative self-concepts and students' inability to develop a sense of belonging may have important implications for admissions and advising practices, student resources, and teaching strategies. In terms of admissions advising practices, it may be possible to identify students who have a lower probability of belonging through pre-college surveys (Hoffman et al., 2002), and thus help them with enrolment decisions as well as resource referrals. Such research may also have implications for wellness programs. Given the findings in relation to misaligned services, it may be important for related institutions to introduce client-feedback loops to assess the effectiveness of the services offered.

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Appendices

Appendix A.

PCTIA Enrolment and Revenue Data

Noc Code 5241	2008	2009	2010	2011	Variance
Enrolment	1,247	1,263	1,572	Not avail.	21%
# of Programs	Not avail.	67	67	Not avail.	0%
Revenue	Not avail.	\$22,407,360	\$24,535,269	Not avail.	8%
Noc Code 2174	2008	2009	2010	2011	
Enrolment	Not avail.	388	404	Not avail.	4%
# of Programs	Not avail.	25	25	Not avail.	0%
Revenue	Not avail.	\$6,868,928	\$8,073,514	Not avail.	15%

Noc Code 5241 - Selected Job Titles Corresponding to Entertainment Arts

2D animation artist	cartoonist sketch	interactive media designer
2D animator	cell animator	Internet graphic designer
3D animation artist	character animator	layout artist
3D animator	chief, advertising illustrator colour artist – cartoons	layout designer
advertising art director	colourist – cartoons	layout designer, animation
advertising art supervisor	commercial artist	medical illustrator
advertising artist	commercial design artist	multimedia design specialist
advertising designer	commercial designer	multimedia designer
advertising illustrator	communication designer	multimedia illustrator
advertising layout designer	computer animator	multimedia instructional designer and scriptor
animated cartoon artist	computer graphics specialist	multimedia products designer
animated cartoon artist – visual arts	content director	multimedia products designer-ideaman/woman
animated cartoon colourist	content strategist	new media graphics designer
animation artist	digital animator – artist	registered graphic designer (RGD)
animation layout designer	editorial cartoonist	RGD (registered graphic designer)
animator – animated films	electronic games designer	scientific illustrator
animator, graphic design and illustration	graphic artist	storyboard artist
art layout designer	graphic arts room supervisor	supervisor, advertising art
artist, storyboard	graphic design and illustration animator	supervisor, graphic arts room
artistic illustrator	graphic designer	title artist
assistant animator – animated		user experience designer

films	graphic designer – multimedia	Web designer – graphic design
background artist	graphic designer – multimedia,	Web graphic designer
bank note designer	interactive or new media	Web page designer
biological illustrator	graphic designer and layout artist	
cartoon film artist	graphic designer, Web	
cartoonist	illustrator	
	illustrator and graphic designer	

Appendix B.

Noel Levitz Survey Results

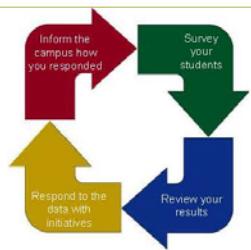
Noel Levitz

PCEAC Student Satisfaction
Survey Assessment

Why Assess Student Satisfaction?

- To provide direction for retention initiatives
- To guide strategic planning efforts
- To continuously improve the quality of academics, career services, campus resources and campus life
- To fulfill accreditation requirements
- To provide positive information for recruitment efforts
- To allow for data-driven decision making
- To foster a student success plan

Systematic Assessment



Demographics

Demographics of students who responded to the survey...

- 425 Respondents
- Gender
 - 43% Female / 57% Male
- Age
 - 11% 18 & under
 - 68% 19 - 24
 - 18% 25 - 34
 - 2% 35 - 44
 - 1% 45+
- Class Load
 - 92% Full-time course load (90% in 2011)

Demographics continued...

- Class Level
 - 52% first year (51%) / 38% second year (42%) / 5% third year / 5% other class level
- GPA
 - 3.4% No credits earned
 - 1.39% 49% or below
 - 3.7% 50-59%
 - 11% 60-69%
 - 33% 70-79%
 - 48% above 80%

Demographics continued...

- Educational Goal
 - 63% College diploma
 - 5% Certificate/AEC program
 - 3% Transfer to another institution
 - 3% Certificate
 - 2% Self improvement/pleasure
 - 7% Other educational goal

Demographics continued...

- Employment
 - 11% Full-time off campus
 - 31% Part-time off campus
 - 3% Full-time on campus
 - 2% Part-time on campus
 - 53% not employed

Demographics continued...

- Current Residence
 - 6% Residence hall
 - 9% Own house
 - 49% Rent room or apt off campus
 - 31% Parents home
 - 6% Other Residence
- Residence Classification
 - 55% from BC
 - 31% from Canada (outside of BC)
 - 13% international (6% increase from 2011)

Demographics continued...

- Disabilities
 - 4% yes (1% increase from 2011)
 - 96% no
- █ was the students...
 - 1st choice - 73% (3% increase from 2011)
 - 2nd choice - 23%
 - 3rd choice or lower - 4%

Demographics continued...

- Respondents by Program
 - 3% Animation
 - 9% Audio
 - 4% Film
 - 10% Game Art
 - 7% Game Programming
 - 4% Interactive Design
 - 13% 3D Modeling
 - 5% Visual Effects
 - 16% Culinary
 - 10% Fashion
 - 9% Graphic Design
 - 5% Interior Design
 - 5% Event Management

Strengths vs. Challenges

Defining Strengths

Strengths are items that students indicated with:

- High Importance
- High Satisfaction
- Low performance gap

* Means for importance and satisfaction for individual items are calculated by summing the respondents' ratings and dividing by the number of respondents.

Strengths – 2012, 2011, 2010

Strengths	2012	2011	2010
The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	✓	✓	✓
I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	✓	✓	✓
Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their fields.	✓	✓	✓
It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.	✓	✓	✓
The campus is safe and secure for all students.	✓	✓	✓
Academic advisor/counsellors are knowledgeable about my program requirements.	✓	✓	✓
Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	✓	✓	✓

Strengths – 2012, 2011, 2010

Strengths	2012	2011	2010
Nearly all classes deal with practical experiences and applications.	✓	✓	✓
Program requirements are clear and reasonable.	✓	✓	✓
On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.	✓	✓	✓
Academic advisors/counsellors are approachable.	✓	✓	✓
People on this campus respect and are supportive of each other.	✓	✓	✓
There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	✓	✓	✓
Library resources and services are adequate.	✓	✓	✓

Strengths – 2012, 2011, 2010

Strengths	2012	2011	2010
This institution has a good reputation within the community.		✓	
Administrators are approachable to students.			✓

Defining Challenges

Challenges are items that students indicated with:

- High Importance
- Low Satisfaction
- High Performance Gap

* Means for importance and satisfaction for individual items are calculated by summing the respondents' ratings and dividing by the number of respondents.

Defining Challenges

Challenges are broken down into 5 main categories

- Facilities/Technology
- Academics
- Career Services
- Financial Aid
- Student Services

Challenges 2012, 2011, 2010: Facilities/Technology

Challenges	2012	2011	2010
Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	✓	✓	✓
The equipment in the lab facilities is kept up to date.	✓	✓	✓

Challenges 2012, 2011, 2010: Academic

Challenges	2012	2011	2010
The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	✓	✓	✓
The institution does whatever it can to help me reach my educational goals.	✓	✓	✓
Classes are scheduled at times that are convenient for me.	✓	✓	✓
Internships/work, study or practical experiences are provided in my diploma program.	✓	✓	✓
Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	✓	✓	✓
Students are notified early in the term if they are doing poorly in a class.	✓	✓	✓
There are a sufficient number of study areas available.	✓	✓	✓

Challenges 2012, 2011, 2010: Academic

Challenges	2012	2011	2010
I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	✓		
Faculty are understanding of students' unique life circumstances.		✓	

Challenges 2012, 2011, 2010: Career Services

Challenges	2012	2011	2010
The career/placement services office provides students with the help they need to get a job.	✓	✓	✓
There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	✓		

Challenges 2012, 2011, 2010: Financial Aid

Challenges	2012	2011	2010
Billing policies are reasonable.	✓	✓	
Adequate financial aid is available for most students at this institution.	✓	✓	
Scholarships and bursaries are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	✓		

Challenges 2012, 2011, 2010: Student Services

Challenges	2012	2011	2010
The college shows concern for students as individuals.	✓	✓	
Channels for expressing student complaints are readily available.	✓		

Action Plans

Action Plans

- Each department to come up with an action plan to address challenges by August 2012
- Communicate results and action plans to the student body
- In November 2012 follow up with each department to ensure that the action plans developed have been implemented

Action Plans

- Schedule results presentations with each department before the end of the [REDACTED]

- Student Financial Services
- Tech Services
- Academic Affairs
- Career Services
- Student Success Persistence Committee
- Executive Committee
- Student Affairs
- Student Association
- Town Hall Meetings
- Faculty

Questions?

Please provide feedback on the results and the plan for action to respond to the survey.

Appendix C.

Introduction Letter



Faculty of Education

Study: 2011s0240

Educational Leadership

Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive
Burnaby BC Canada
V5A 1S6

www.educ.sfu.ca

Month, day, year

Participant's name

Participant's address

Dear [participant's name]:

Re: How Students Develop a Sense of Belonging to their Academic Community:
A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate Students in a Private Canadian Applied
Arts College, SFU, Study 2011s0240

I am a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. Currently, I am conducting research for my dissertation, "How Students Develop a Sense of Belonging to their Academic Community: A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate Students in a Private Canadian Applied Arts College". As part of the data collection process, I am interviewing individuals who are central participants or knowledgeable observers of this social phenomenon at The College. During the next six months, I will be conducting interviews with educators, administrators and students in this setting. Prior to conducting this study, The College has provided me with consent to access key participants for interviews, observations as well as to collect participants' resources (i.e., resource submissions, written statements, artwork, projects, etc.).

The purpose of this study is to understand how students develop a sense of belonging to their academic community in a private, broad-access applied arts college. Ultimately, this study seeks to generate insights into the complex social processes that impinge upon students' perceptions of belonging or fit within this specific college setting, and to assist institutional leaders and educators in identifying factors relevant to educational practice at the college, as well as provide a reference point for other researchers in the field who are focused upon conceptions of belonging in broad-access college settings.

Through a review of current literature on this topic as well as conversations with other researchers in the field and educational leaders at the college, you have been identified as a central participant or knowledgeable observer of this phenomenon. My research would be greatly enhanced if you would agree to be interviewed.

As a participant in this study you will be asked to collaborate in a primary in-person interview that will last up to 60 minutes, and two additional interviews which will take no longer than 30 minutes and 20 minutes respectively. During interviews participants will also be asked if they are willing to provide resource submissions (i.e., an image, artwork, project, teaching resource, document or written statement) to further describe their perceptions of belonging. The interviews will include questions corresponding to the dimensions of the study's analytical framework, and focus upon the factors which are central to students' sense of belonging including academic-artistic capabilities, transition to college, as well as academic and social integration in the college setting.

During interviews, I will ask participants to answer some questions for this research project. I will then use the interview data to write the dissertation and

any subsequent publications that may emerge from this work. The interview will be audio recorded and notes will be taken during your interview. In writing the dissertation and any subsequent publications, I may quote you but not identify you, unless you give me permission. You are not obligated to speak on the record or on an attributable basis, and your participation in this study will be kept strictly confidential. I have presented a study outline to the college and have received permission to ask you to take part in the study.

Possible benefits of participation may include the opportunity for participants to reflect upon their involvement in the educational process, including for instance participants' motives, goals, values, as well as students' academic-artistic capabilities and sense of belonging within the college community. Furthermore, participants will have an opportunity to share their insights into the process of belonging.

Participants' views and voice have the potential to contribute to this growing field of research, and may provide views which are not captured in the current literature or are not known to educators and administrators at the college or related settings. You will have an opportunity to learn more about the process of belonging in a private, broad-access, applied arts college setting. In order to protect confidentiality, every attempt will be made to keep confidential records. There are no foreseen risks associated with participating in the interview process (e.g., effects on grades, privacy risks, etc.), and students may withdraw at any time.

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact [REDACTED] Thesis Supervisor, and Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education [REDACTED]. If you experience any adverse effects, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject you may contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics, [REDACTED]

I hope you will be able to find some time in your busy schedule to share your own experiences and insights on this important topic. Please contact me with your schedule availability and any questions that you may have. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Edward Gervan
Ed.D. Candidate in Educational Leadership, Faculty of Education

Appendix D.

Letter of Informed Consent

SFU

Faculty of Education

Study: 2011s0240

Educational
Leadership

Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser
University
8888 University
Drive
Burnaby BC Canada
V5A 1S6

T: 778.782.7666
F: 778.782.3203

www.educ.sfu.ca

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM FOR IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

Title: How Students Develop a Sense of Belonging to their Academic Community: A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate Students in a Private Canadian Applied Arts College, SFU, Study 2011s0240

Principal Investigator: Edward (Ted) Gervan. [REDACTED]

Senior Supervisor: [REDACTED]

INVITATION

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask us questions if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to understand how students develop a sense of belonging to their academic community at The College. Ultimately, this study seeks to generate insights into the complex social processes that impinge upon students' perceptions of belonging or fit within a specific college setting, and to assist institutional leaders and educators in identifying factors relevant to educational practice at the college, as well as provide a reference point for other researchers in the field who are focused upon conceptions of belonging in broad-access settings. Prior to conducting this study, The College has provided me with consent to access key participants for interviews, observations as well as to collect participants' resources (i.e., resource submissions, written statements, artwork, projects, etc.).

Why are you being invited?

Because you have been identified as a central participant or knowledgeable observer of this social phenomenon.

Do you have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you do decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason.

What will you need to do if you take part?

Primary Interview: A primary interview will last up to 60 minutes, but its duration could be extended if you volunteer additional information and/or resources and have available time. The interview will take place in-person. The interview will include questions focusing upon the participants' conceptions of belonging as well as other factors associated with belonging including: academic-artistic literacy competency, college transition, academic and social integration, and various personal details (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, etc.). A preliminary account of the interview will be emailed to participants for their comments and input. Should a participant wish to confirm how their story is being reported and/or make changes, they may do so at that time. This review process may take up to 30 minutes.

2nd Interview: A second in-person interview will occur 8 to 12 weeks after the initial interview.

1-3

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY THINKING OF THE WORLD

This interview will last up to 30 minutes. The interview will include questions focusing upon the students' sense of belonging to their academic community, as well as other associated factors. A preliminary account of this interview will be emailed to participants for their comments and input. Should a participant wish to confirm how their story is being reported and/or make changes, they may do so at that time. This review process may take up to 20 minutes.

3rd Interview: A third in-person interview will occur 24 to 28 weeks after the initial interview. This interview will last up to 20 minutes. The interview will include questions focusing upon the students' sense of belonging to their academic community, as well as other associated factors. A preliminary account of this interview will be emailed to participants for their input. Should a participant wish to confirm how their story is being reported and/or make changes, they may do so at that time. This review process may take up to 15 minutes.

Additional Information and Resources: During each interview and/or during a classroom observation participants will be asked if they are willing to provide resource submissions (e.g., copy of an image, artwork, a classroom resource, document, or a written statement) to further describe their perceptions of belonging. Submissions will be analyzed in comparison to participants' interview responses, and participants will be encouraged to discuss their submissions in subsequent interviews.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no foreseen risks associated with participating in the observation process. There are potentially minor adverse effects given that the project involves collecting information that might be embarrassing or awkward for some participants to share. Participation will in no way impact students' course grades or academic standing.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Possible benefits of participation include the opportunity for participants to reflect upon their role in the educational process including for instance participants' motives, goals, and values. Faculty and administrators will have an opportunity to reflect upon their students' academic-artistic capabilities as well as their roles in terms of helping students' belong to their academic community. Students will have an opportunity to reflect further upon their academic-artistic capabilities and sense of belonging within the academic community. All participants will have an opportunity to share their insights into the process of belonging. Participants' views and voices have the potential to contribute this growing field of research and may potentially express views which are not captured in the current literature or are not known to educators and administrators at the college or in related settings. Through the resulting study participants will have an opportunity to learn more about the process of belonging in a private, broad-access applied arts college setting.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Confidentiality is assured unless otherwise determined by the participant. Participants will have the opportunity to speak on or off the record, and to determine whether or not their comments are provided on an attributable basis. In writing the dissertation and subsequent publications, I may quote participants but not identify them. Unless participants have reviewed my draft report prior to release or publication and have provided written permission participants will not be identified.

In order to protect confidentiality, every attempt will be made to keep confidential records. Recordings of the interview, transcription and interview notes will be coded to a participant key, and personal identifiers will be removed if a participant chooses to comment anonymously. Copies of relevant data which identify all participants will be identified only by code number. Coded, transcribed data will be stored in electronic storage (memory stick) separate from campus systems and computers, password protected and in a locked environment. Signed consent forms and other documents that identify participants will be stored separately from the coded data. Recordings and notes will be taken during your interview, which may be made available to a second researcher to review for coding purposes. You will not be identified by name without your consent unless required by law.

Consent: By signing this form, I give my consent to the researcher to use my resource submission(s): artwork(s), project(s), words, classroom resource(s), or document(s). I am giving this consent in consideration of this research project. I give the researcher the right to publish, distribute, publicly perform and display my contributions for this study as well as for other works in connection with this particular study. This study or derivative may be published in scholarly journals or related academic publications. My permission is on-going and will continue until I revoke it by notifying the researcher of revocation in writing.

- (check to opt out)* I retain my intellectual property rights and the researcher does not have my permission to re-produce or publish my submissions to this study.
- (check to provide permission)* The researcher has my permission, but not the obligation to identify me by name in connection with this resource submission.
- (check to provide permission)* The researcher has my permission to use my resource submission(s) for purposes associated with this research study.
- (if applicable please check)* I certify that the resource submission submitted is original, is mine alone and that I have full authority to grant the permissions to the researcher to utilize this resource submission for research purposes. Resource submission description:

-
-
- (if applicable please check)* I included a resource submission that others may own or have rights to. Please explain:
-
-

Who is organizing and funding the research? This study is not sponsored, but is undertaken as doctoral research through Simon Fraser University.

Will You be paid for being in this study? No.

Contact for further information.

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact [REDACTED] Thesis Supervisor, and Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education [REDACTED]. If you experience any adverse effects, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject you may contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics, [REDACTED]

Why are you signing this consent form?

By signing this consent form, you agree that: you have read and understood the information in the consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. The principal investigator or research coordinator have answered your questions to your satisfaction. You understand your participation is voluntary and that you may refuse to participate or you are free to withdraw at any time. If you agree to take part in this study, you will receive a copy of the signed consent form for your records.

Signatures:

Signature of Subject

Date (written by subject)

Subject's Email

Signature of Investigator

Date (written by investigator)**Contact for further information.**

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, or if you experience any adverse effects, you should contact Ted Gervan. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics, Dr. [REDACTED]

You may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting: [REDACTED]

Appendix E.

Student Interview Guides

First Term Interview Guide

Warm Up:

How is your experience going at the college so far? Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.
Do you like your courses this term? Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

A. Belonging/Fit

What does the college experience mean to you?

Prompts: holistic experience, practical necessity, both or neither?

What is your understanding of the concept of 'belonging'?

Purpose: confirm and/or establish a mutual understanding the concept of belonging.

Prompts: feelings of membership/respect within community, and/or perceptions of valued involvement/fit.

Can you tell me if you belong at school? If yes, how does this occur? Prompts: belonging to what specifically (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers, place)?

Do you help other students belong to their academic community? Prompts: mentoring, social activities, etc.

What do you notice about students who "fit in" to school?

B. Academic-Artistic Literacy

Can you tell me about the different kinds of art that you do?

Prompts: prior to college (e.g., sketch book, drawing, painting, digital, etc.).

Where/when did you first become interested in art?

Prompts: did you have prior experience with art (e.g., home, high school, other post-secondary, intrinsically, etc.)?

What about course work? How is making art different now that you are in college? Do you like having your art critiqued?

Prompts: compare with other experiences. What do you think about the school's learning philosophy? Is the program experience what you thought it would be?

Are there shared patterns or beliefs which exemplify successful students?

Do rules or expectations in your classes play a role in your sense of belonging? Prompts: e.g., classroom policies, educational policies, etc?

Was it easy to develop your creative talents?

C. Transition

I'm interested in understanding how students' transitions to college relate to their sense of belonging.

Tell me about how the transition to college is going so far?

Prompts: were there any challenges (e.g., financial, cultural, academic, artistic, social, disability, etc.)?

D. Academic/Social Integration

I'm interested in understanding how students' integration within the school community relates to their sense of belonging.

What is it like trying to make friends in college? Prompts: clubs/groups, part-time/full-time status, academic, cultural, social (age/maturity/gender).

What is it like trying to interact with faculty and administrators at the college? Prompts: are faculty and administration supportive?

What are your perceptions about the services that are available to students?

Prompts: e.g., advising, tutoring, physical resources.

What are your classroom experiences like?

Do you spend a lot of time on campus? Prompts: Do you study on campus or interact with peers and faculty? Do you engage in social campus activities? If no, do you have external commitments (e.g., work, dependents, long commute, etc.).

E: End Questions

Would you be willing to provide an image, artwork, or a written statement which best symbolizes how you belong to your academic community? We will use your submission to make comparisons with your interview responses and we will discuss these comparisons during our next interview in 8 to 12 week's time.

Do you have any recommendations for the college that would help improve students' sense of belonging?

Would you be willing to provide me with some additional personal details? I'll use this information in order to compare responses to the other questions according to individuals' personal details:

Full-Time/Part-Time Status:

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Domestic/International:

Student/Bank Loan/Self-Financed:

Work Outside School:

Sponsored Housing:

Commute:

Dependants:

1st Generation:

Second and Third Term Interview Guides

Warm Up:

How is your experience going at the college this term?

Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

Can you tell me about your experiences studying on your courses this term?

Prompts: art/design, transition, expectations, challenges and success strategies.

A. Belonging/Fit

Can you tell me about your sense of belonging at school this term?

Have your perceptions of belonging changed in any way since our last discussion? Prompts: belonging to what specifically (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers, place)?

Let's consider the resource submission you provided (i.e., image, artwork or written statement). Can you tell me why you chose to submit this article to symbolize what belonging means to you?

When we compare your primary interview responses with the resource you submitted, do you notice any similarities or dissimilarities? Prompts: researcher will highlight similarities or dissimilarities for further discussion/clarification.

B: End Question

Do you have any recommendations for the college that would help improve students' sense of belonging?

Would you be willing to provide another resource submission (e.g., copy of an image, artwork, document or a written statement) which best symbolizes how you belong to your academic community? We will use your submission to make comparisons with your interview responses and we will discuss these comparisons during our next interview in 8 to 12 week's time.

Second and Third Term Interview Guides for Students who Withdraw

Warm Up:

Since leaving the college, how are you doing?

Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

Can you tell me about what you are up to?

Prompts: art/design, transition, expectations, challenges and success strategies.

A. Belonging/Fit

You described your sense of belonging during our last interview. Looking back, do you feel the same about your belonging to the college?

Prompts: belonging to what specifically (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers, place)?

Can you please reflect back upon your experience and describe any key events or turning points which led to your decision to leave the college?

Were there any events or experiences which made you feel as though you would like to stay at the college?

How did these experiences relate to your sense of belonging?

Have your perceptions of belonging changed in any way since our last discussion? Prompts: belonging to what specifically (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers, place)?

Let's consider the resource submission you provided (i.e., image, artwork or written statement). Can you tell me why you chose to submit this article to symbolize what belonging means to you?

What will you miss most about the college experience? What will you miss least?

B: End Question

Do you have any recommendations for the college that would help improve students' sense of belonging?

Would you be willing to provide another resource submission (e.g., copy of an image, artwork, document or a written statement) which best symbolizes how you belong to your academic community? We will use your submission to make comparisons with your interview responses and we will discuss these comparisons during our next interview in 8 to 12 weeks time.

Appendix F.

Faculty Interview Guides

First Term Interview Guide

Warm Up:

How is your experience going at the college this term?

Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

A. Belonging/Fit

What do you think the college experience means to our students?

Prompts: holistic experience, practical necessity, both or neither?

What is your understanding of the concept of 'belonging'?

Purpose: confirm and/or establish a mutual understanding the concept of belonging.

Prompts: feelings of membership/respect within community, and/or perceptions of valued involvement/fit.

Do you feel that it is important for the college to think about students' sense of belonging? Why/why not?

How do you feel that students represent their sense of belonging at school?

Prompts: belonging to what (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers)?

How does your role allow you to help students belong to their academic community?

In observing students who fit into the academic community, what identifiable patterns or behaviors do they demonstrate?

B. Academic-Artistic Literacy

Can you comment on students' artistic capabilities in your classes?

Prompts: prior to college (e.g., high school, personal practice, professional practice, etc.).

Do you think that students in your classes are interested in art and design?

Prompts: do they demonstrate knowledge of their field of practice (e.g., practitioners) or awareness of art processes?

How well do your students adjust to college expectations in academic-artistic terms?

Prompts: school's learning philosophy, course expectations, etc.

To what extent do you allow space for less formal skills/abilities or non-standard creative approaches in your students' work?

Are there shared patterns or beliefs which exemplify successful students in your classes?

Are there rules or expectations in your classes which play a role in students' sense of belonging?

Prompts: e.g., classroom policies, educational policies, etc?

Was your artistic talent easy to develop in school?

C. Transition

I'm interested in understanding how students' transitions to college relate to their sense of belonging.

How does your role allow you to help your students' transition to college?

Prompts: are there any challenges that you are aware of (e.g., financial, cultural, academic, artistic, social, disability, etc.)?

Did you find the transition to post-secondary school easy?

D. Academic/Social Integration

I'm interested in understanding how students' integration within the school community relates to their sense of belonging.

In your classes do students make friends easily?

Prompts: Do they talk about doing things together outside of class? Do they help each other in class and communicate frequently?

How do students interact with faculty?

Prompts: how do you interact with students? How do your peers interact with students?

What are your perceptions about the services that are available to students?

Prompts: e.g., advising, tutoring, physical resources.

Can you tell me about students' classroom experiences?

Can you comment on your students' commitment to school?

Prompts: e.g., focus and constraints, etc.

E: End Questions

Do you have any recommendations for the college that would help improve students' sense of belonging?

Would you be willing to provide examples of institutional documents, a written statement, or an image which best symbolizes your perceptions of students' sense of belonging? We will use your submission to make comparisons with your interview responses and we will discuss these comparisons during our next interview in 8 to 12 week's time.

Would you be willing to provide me with some additional personal details? I'll use this information in order to compare your responses to the study's analytical frameworks as well as the literature on students' sense of belonging:

Full-Time/Part-Time Status:

Age:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Languages:

Work Outside School:

Years of Service to the College:

Years of Teaching Experience:

Years of Teaching Experience in Broad-Access Settings:

Second and Third Term Interview Guides

Warm Up:

How is your experience going at the college this term?

Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

Do you like your classes?

Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

A: Follow-Up Questions

How do you feel that students represent their sense of belonging at school this term?

Prompts: belonging to what (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers)?

Have your perceptions of how students develop a sense of belonging changed in any way since our last discussion? Prompts: belonging to what specifically (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers, place)?

Do you feel that it is important for the college to think about students' sense of belonging? Why/why not?

How do you help students belong to their academic community?

Let's consider the resource submission you provided (i.e., image, artwork or written statement). Can you tell me why you chose to submit this article to symbolize what belonging means to you?

When we compare your primary interview responses with the resource you submitted, do you notice any similarities or dissimilarities? Prompts: researcher will highlight similarities or dissimilarities for further discussion/clarification.

Would you be willing to provide another resource submission which best symbolizes how you belong to your academic community? We will use your submission to make comparisons with your interview responses and we will discuss these comparisons during our next interview in 8 to 12 weeks time.

Do you have any recommendations for the college that would help improve students' sense of belonging?

Appendix G.

Administrator Participants' Interview Guides

First Term Interview Guide

Warm Up

How is your experience going at the college this term?

Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

A. Belonging/Fit

What do you think the college experience means to our students?

Prompts: holistic experience, practical necessity, both or neither?

What is your understanding of the concept of belonging?

Purpose: confirm and/or establish a mutual understanding the concept of belonging.

Prompts: feelings of membership/respect within community, and/or perceptions of valued involvement/fit.

Do you feel that it is important for the college to think about students' sense of belonging? Why/why not?

How do you feel that students represent their sense of belonging at school?

Prompts: belonging to what (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers)?

How does your role allow you to help students belong to their academic community?

In observing students who fit into the academic community, what identifiable patterns or behaviors do they demonstrate?

B. Academic-Artistic Literacy

How does your role afford you opportunities to view students' art and design?

Prompts: do you sit in the classroom; attend critiques, art events, etc?

How does the college address students' diverse academic-artistic capabilities?

Prompts: e.g., tutoring, faculty development, teaching philosophy, etc.

How well do you think students adjust to college expectations in academic-artistic terms?

Prompts: How do students adjust to the school's learning philosophy? How do they adjust to course expectations?

Are there shared patterns or beliefs which exemplify successful students?

Do tacit rules or expectations in your department play a role in students' sense of belonging?

Prompts: e.g., classroom policies, educational policies, etc?

C. Transition

I'm interested in understanding how students' transitions to college relate to their sense of belonging.

How does your role allows you to help students make the transition to college?

Prompts: are there any challenges (e.g., financial, cultural, academic, artistic, social, disability, etc.)?

D. Academic/Social Integration

I'm interested in understanding how students' integration within the school community relates to their sense of belonging.

How do students interact with administrators?

Prompts: how do you interact with students? How do other administrators interact with students?

How do you help students make friends in school?

Prompts: what approaches do you employ?

What are your perceptions about the services that are available to students?

Prompts: e.g., advising, tutoring, physical resources.

Can you comment on students' commitment to school?

Prompts: e.g., focus and constraints, etc.

E: End Questions

Do you have any recommendations for the college that would help improve students' sense of belonging?

Would you be willing to provide examples of institutional documents, a written statement, or an image which best symbolizes your perceptions of students' sense of belonging? We will use your submission to make comparisons with your interview responses and we will discuss these comparisons during our next interview in 8 to 12 weeks' time.

Would you be willing to provide me with some additional personal details? I'll use this information in order to compare your responses to the study's analytical frameworks as well as the literature on students' sense of belonging:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Languages:

Years of Service to the College:

Years of College Admin Experience:

Years of Teaching Experience:

Years of Teaching Experience in Broad-Access Settings:

Second and Third Term Interview Guides

Warm Up:

How is your experience going at the college this term?

Purpose: warm up, ice-breaker.

A: Follow-Up Questions

How do students represent their sense of belonging at school this term?

Prompts: belonging of self and peers.

Have your perceptions of how students develop a sense of belonging changed in any way since our last discussion? Prompts: belonging to what specifically (e.g., college, class, peers, teachers, place)?

Do you feel that it is important for the college to think about students' sense of belonging? Why/why not?

How do you help students belong to their academic community?

Let's consider the resource submission you provided (i.e., image, artwork, document, or written statement).

Can you tell me why you chose to submit this article to symbolize what belonging means to you?

When we compare your primary interview responses with the resource you submitted, do you notice any similarities or dissimilarities? Prompts: researcher will highlight similarities or dissimilarities for further discussion/clarification.

Would you be willing to provide another resource submission which best symbolizes how you belong to your academic community? We will use your submission to make comparisons with your interview responses and we will discuss these comparisons during our next interview in 8 to 12 weeks time.

Do you have any recommendations for the college that would help improve students' sense of belonging?

Appendix H.

Coding Sample

05/04/2013

Codes

Academic Community	1st Interview, Administrator Support, Admin
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> facilitate the good...you can't force it, acting as a resource for students, resource staff support, setting the right expectations for success, listening and being supportive..... Acknowledging excellence: students' creative efforts. It is helpful when administrators have knowledge of pedagogical strategies which may support the belonging process... Understanding the differences between students. Orientation, hosting town hall meetings, student association/council, student success committee, clubs (e.g., breakdancing), leadership and mentoring opportunities and facilitating students' coming together – GD networking club. Bringing students together. Acknowledgment and discussion of deficiencies The idea that for students to fit – they need to believe in The College, and conversely to do so, the college must believe in itself. Advocacy: Try to help them when they bring creative ideas forward – try to facilitate for them – advocate for them. General assumption that administrators who have experience in broad-access settings or sensitivity towards the needs of non-traditional students will be better facilitators for such students. Helena may be a good facilitator for non-traditional learners given her own proclivities and background experiences – e.g., lesbian, rooting for the underdog...she has been an underdog. Also simply helping with basic life needs (i.e., medical coverage, food, etc.) promotes belonging. When dealing with at-risk students administrators attempt to work with the whole life cycle of the student. Pat might also be based upon 9 years of experience in broad-access settings, and her own feelings of being an educational underdog. Helena is sensitive because she herself had adjustment issues in school (i.e., shyness). She studied in an environment where lots of misfits took arts. Although not a poor student, she learned to empathize with those students. She had an excellent teacher who was supportive. She is a lesbian.... can totally relate to those who struggle with that sort of experience in school. Fairness in advocacy. Championing ideas that are in the best interest of students. Helping students access resources. Helping students make friends. Responsiveness
	1st Interview, Overall Support, Admin, Overall, The College administration appears to be very supportive of non-traditional students. Administrators can relate to what it means to be a non-traditional students based upon their own background experiences and/or due to become attuned to their needs through their roles. This strong sensitivity, coupled with robust performance metrics which further

Comment [TG2]: Helena: An example...

Comment [TG3]: Helena: Along with...

Comment [TG4]: Pat: Student of the...

Comment [TG5]: Sophie: ...

Comment [TG6]: Sasmira: It is...

Comment [TG7]: Sasmira: It does...

Comment [TG8]: Carley: I have a lot...

Comment [TG9]: Daniel: Int: So yes...

Comment [TG10]: Pat Acknowledges...

Comment [TG11]: Helena: But, we...

Comment [TG12]: Sasmira: To give...

Comment [TG13]: Carley: Um, prid...

Comment [TG14]: Pat: So I think th...

Comment [TG15]: Int: So their suc...

Comment [TG16]: Daniel: Subject: ...

Comment [TG17]: Pat: They may...

Comment [TG18]: Sasmira: In...

Comment [TG19]: Sasmira: I think I...

Comment [TG20]: Carley: So when...

Comment [TG21]: Carley: when yo...

Comment [TG22]: Daniel: I know st...

Comment [TG23]: I believe that I w...

Comment [TG24]: Pat: Housing for...

Comment [TG25]: Pat: Anecdotally...

Comment [TG26]: Sasmira: issue w...

Comment [TG27]: Sophie: Subject: ...

Comment [TG28]: Pat: One of the...

Comment [TG29]: Daniel: Whether...

Comment [TG30]: Pat: refining...

Comment [TG31]: Sophie: I help...

Comment [TG32]: Sophie: Subject: ...

Comment [TG33]: Pat: Honestiv, fr...

Comment [TG34]: Sasmira: makes...

Comment [TG35]: Daniel: ...

Comment [TG36]: Daniel: Int: Are...

Comment [TG37]: Pat: Employees...

Appendix I.

Ethics Approval



Minimal Risk Expedited Approval

Date	File	Approval	Principal Investigator
27 June 2011	[2011s0240]	Approved	Gervan, Edward
Title	Start Date	End Date	
How Students Develop a Sense of Belonging to their Academic Community: A Qualitative Study of Undergraduate Students in a Private Canadian Applied Arts College.	27 June 2011	27 June 2014	
SFU Position	Department / School	Supervisor	
Graduate Student	Education	Marshall, Steve	

Hello Edward,

Your application has been categorized as 'Minimal Risk' and approved by the Director, Office of Research Ethics on behalf of the Research Ethics Board, in accordance with University Policy r20.01 (<http://www.sfu.ca/policies/research/r20.01.htm>)

The Research Ethics Board reviews and may amend decisions made independently by the Director, Chair or Deputy Chair at the regular monthly meeting of the Board.

Please acknowledge receipt of this Notification of Status by email to [REDACTED] and include the file number as shown above as the first item in the Subject Line.

You should get a letter shortly. Note: All letters are sent to the PI addressed to the Department, School or Faculty for Faculty and Graduate Students. Letters to Undergraduate Students are sent to their Faculty Supervisor.

Good luck with the project,

Hal Weinberg, Director

