Exploring the experience of academic suspension and subsequent academic resilience for college students who were reinstated to the institution: A phenomenological analysis

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Exploring the experience of academic suspension and subsequent academic resilience for college students who were reinstated to the institution: A phenomenological analysis

by

Jennifer J. Suchan

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Larry Ebbers, Major Professor
Terri Boylston
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2016

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Karen Younie—my beautiful mother. You started this journey with me, but your spirit no longer resides here on Earth. I miss you truly and deeply. You gave me your heart and passion for education. It was you who taught me to see hope and opportunity in the experiences students would much rather forget, and it was you who taught me to balance the challenge and support I provide students, so as not to overwhelm them, but to encourage and foster growth. Thank you for everything. I love you.

Leland Suchan and Bella Suchan—my lovely children. May you look upon my educational journey and realize that you, too, can do whatever you choose. May you find your own passion and pursue it with all your heart. Know that I will be here to support, love, and push you. I am so proud of both of you and of the young people you are becoming. I love you.
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Within the larger group of students who are placed on academic suspension for failure to meet the expectations of minimum academic performance, there is a unique subset of students who seek reinstatement to the institution and, furthermore, who are able to achieve academic success in subsequent semesters. Despite the significant amount of empirical research that exists on the topics of student achievement and attrition, there is still much to be understood about academic suspension and, in particular, the academic resilience of academically suspended college students. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the academic resilience of academically suspended college students at a state-supported, midsized, comprehensive, 4-year university in the Midwest with a total enrollment of around 12,200 students. The population for this study consisted of 13 undergraduate, degree-seeking college students who were academically suspended, later reinstated, and subsequently in good academic standing at the same institution. This study was designed to explore the experience of academic suspension and to understand the deep perspective shifts and learning that may have occurred as a result of that experience through the use of Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory. Furthermore, the study was designed to uncover and illuminate how students’ new frames of reference may have contributed to their subsequent academic resilience upon reinstatement to the same institution from which they were academically suspended. Conclusions were drawn based upon an analysis of the data, and they are embedded within the theoretical lens used to frame this study. It was found that being placed on academic suspension rose to the level of the disorienting dilemma; students built competence, self-confidence, and persistence as they moved through the experience; and that the experience led to perspective transformation.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Tinto (2012) posited that “more students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay” (p. 1). According to Tinto (2012), of the 2.4 million students who entered higher education for the first time in 1993, more than “1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree. . . . 1.1 million will leave higher education altogether, without ever completing either a two- or four-year degree program” (p. 1).

According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Research Center (2014), more than 31 million individuals enrolled in an institution of higher education during the last two decades but left without ever earning a degree or certificate. Moreover, these “potential completers” had not returned to higher education for at least 18 months. Data analyzed by the NSC Research Center suggest that many dropped out quickly. Roughly one-third—or 10 million—of the identified noncompleters left college after enrolling for just a single term. . . . Among the remaining 21 million former students who attended college for more than a term, about 17.5 million failed to get beyond two years of academic progress. The remaining 4 million moved past the two-year mark. (Fain, 2014, para. 3–4)

Carey (2004) reported that, even among students who are most likely to persist and graduate in an institution of higher education (i.e., first-time, full-time degree-seeking students at 4-year colleges and universities), the statistics surrounding academic success and degree completion are disconcerting: only six out of every 10 students will receive a bachelor’s degree within 6 years of matriculation. That translates to over 500,000 college students every year who do not acquire the academic credentials sought upon admission to the institution (Carey, 2004). Of the 31 million potential completers identified by the NSC
Research Center (2014), 35.6 percent had attended 4-year institutions exclusively, and
approximately 30 percent had attended both 2-year and 4-year institutions.

According to data from ACT, Inc. (2015), in 2015 at 4-year public colleges and
universities, the national average for bachelor’s degree completion within 5 years was 49.5
percent. Spradlin, Rutkowski, Burroughs, and Lang (2010) found that just over 55 percent of
students did so within 6 years of matriculation. When combining all different classifications
of institutions together (e.g., community colleges, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive
universities, research universities, etc.), the 6-year graduation rate is approximately 50
percent (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

There are several different types of college student departure present within the
literature, but at the broadest level, there are two categories of student departure: institutional
departure and system departure (Tinto, 2012). According to Tinto (2012), institutional
departure occurs when a student chooses to leave an individual institution of higher
education. It is important to note that, in this instance, the student may choose to enroll in
the same institution at a later date or may choose to enroll at another college or university.
System departure describes students who choose to leave higher education as a whole and
never return to any institution to complete the academic requirements necessary for
certification or degree completion (Tinto, 2012).

As previously noted, not all student departures from institutions of higher education
result in system departure. Tinto (2012) noted that some students may choose to transfer to
another college or university within the same or immediately subsequent semester in which a
withdrawal occurred (i.e., immediate transfer). In this instance, students may attain their
degree, but the time to completion may be extended beyond the “average” length of time.
Some students may choose not to immediately transfer to another institution of higher education but, instead, may temporarily withdraw from the system (i.e., stopout). Among this group of students, “some return to their initial institution (i.e., institutional stopouts) and others enroll in another institution (i.e., delayed transfer). In the latter case, some students may delay their return for many years” (Tinto, 2012, p. 8; see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Types and relationships of student departure from higher education.](image)

Despite the significant amount of literature that exists on the academic departure puzzle, there is still much to be understood. When a student leaves an institution of higher education, any number of factors, or the complex interplay of several factors, could have been the cause. Although models of retention have assisted institutions of higher education in developing intentional support services and interventions to bolster student success by improving their integration into the academic and social systems of the college, the many complex factors involved and the increasingly diverse student population leave practitioners and scholars with many unanswered questions (McDermott, 2008).

Student departure has many roots, one of which is poor academic performance. Within the larger group of students who do not persist in institutions of higher education,
students who are involuntarily dismissed for failure to meet the expectations of minimum academic performance are a fairly unique subset. Tinto (1996) reported that 30–35 percent of student attrition is attributable to poor academic performance. However, “less than 25 percent of all institutional departures, nationally, take the form of academic dismissal” (Tinto, 2012, p. 49), a statistic that is further supported by research from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (Spradlin et al., 2010).

According to Hansmeier (1965), who was one of the first researchers to study academic difficulty and subsequent academic success, institutions are “faced with the inescapable assumption that academic failure among students will always be a part of American higher education” (pp. 194–195). All institutions of postsecondary education have students who fail to meet the minimum expectations of academic performance. Such students are most often identified as a result of institutional policy regarding academic performance. “Academic difficulty typically reflects a situation in which the demands of the academic system prove too great” (Tinto, 2012, p. 117). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) asserted, “If standards are set too high, beyond the reach of students’ current ability to perform, many will struggle, become frustrated, and perform poorly” (p. 124), which indicates a lack of integration into the academic system of the institution. This lack of integration can be due to incongruence between the skills and abilities of the student and the level of demand placed upon them by the institution (Graunke, Woosley, & Sherry, 2005; Tinto, 2012).

According to the theory of individual student departure developed by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012), a lack of integration into either the social or academic system is directly linked to student departure. Tinto (1987) argued, “Some degree of social and intellectual
integration must exist as a condition for continued persistence” (p. 119). Bray, Braxton, and Sullivan (1999) suggested that, in general, students who fail to achieve integration into the social system of the institution depart on a voluntary basis, whereas students who fail to achieve integration into the academic system of the institution depart on an involuntary basis.

Depending upon a student’s academic performance and institutional policy, some students may be subject to academic suspension, which is also referred to as academic dismissal, for a period of time. Rita (1998) found that the required length of time a student must sit out as a result of poor academic performance typically ranges from one semester to one academic year. It is important to note, however, that the practice of academic suspension is in stark contrast to what many scholars have found as critical components for fostering student retention and completion. Much of the professional literature suggests that separation from the institution—for any length of time—negatively impacts a student’s decision to return to the institution and, ultimately, to complete the academic requirements necessary for degree completion. For example, the theory of individual student departure (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) indicates that the likelihood for a student to return following a stopout period is greatly decreased because a student has little to no opportunity to experience engagement with the institution. In a study conducted by Berkovitz and O’Quin (2006), it was found that students who were academically suspended from the institution or who had been granted at least one retroactive withdrawal were less likely to graduate than those who were not. Similarly, Mathies, Gardner, and Webber-Bauer (2006) reported that the graduation rate of students who had been placed on academic probation at some point in their academic career was considerably lower than that of the general college student
population: “Only 31% of students who had earned probation (ever) graduated within 6 years or less compared to 83% of students who never earned probation” (pp. 10–11).

**Background of the Problem**

At Achieve University (pseudonym), where this study was conducted, a new Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy was adopted in Fall 2011. According to the policy, students are expected to meet academic standards set by the university and to demonstrate academic progress toward earning a degree. Depending upon individual students’ classification and academic performance in a given semester, they may be assigned one of the following academic standings:

- **Academic alert:** This is assigned to any first-semester student who earned an institutional semester grade point average (GPA) between 1.00 and 1.99. At the conclusion of the student’s semester on academic alert, one of the following actions is taken: (a) The student is removed from academic alert and shall be in good academic standing if his/her institutional cumulative GPA is 2.00 or higher, or (b) the student is placed on academic probation if his/her institutional cumulative GPA is less than 2.00.

- **Academic probation:** This is assigned to any first-semester student who earned an institutional semester GPA below 1.00. It is also assigned to any continuing student whose institutional cumulative GPA falls below 2.00. At the conclusion of the student’s semester on academic probation, one of the following actions is taken: (a) The student is removed from academic probation and shall be in good academic standing if his/her institutional cumulative GPA is 2.00 or higher, (b) the student continues on academic probation if his/her institutional semester GPA is 2.00 or
higher and if his/her institutional cumulative GPA remains below 2.00, or (c) the student is placed on academic suspension if his/her institutional semester GPA is less than 2.00 and if his/her institutional cumulative GPA is less than 2.00.

These two academic standings serve as a warning to students that, unless their academic performance improves, they may be placed on academic suspension. Academic suspension at Achieve University lasts for a minimum period of a single calendar year and is permanently noted on a student’s official academic record. If a student is placed on academic suspension, he/she may not re-enroll at the institution, or at any of the university’s Regent-affiliated institutions, until he/she has applied for readmission from academic suspension and has been academically reinstated by the Committee on Admission, Readmission, and Retention (CARR). As shown in Table 1, at Achieve University, a notable number of students are placed on one of the aforementioned academic standings for failure to meet the minimum expectations of academic performance.

Table 1

Number of Students by Academic Standing and Semester at Achieve University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Academic alert</th>
<th>Academic probation</th>
<th>Academic suspension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2011</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2012</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Since implementation of the new Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy.
As indicated previously, academic suspension at Achieve University is for a minimum period of a single calendar year. After that time, a student may apply for readmission from academic suspension. However, just because a student applies for readmission from academic suspension does not mean that request will be approved by the CARR. Members of the CARR try to grant readmission only to those students who have demonstrated that they will be academically successful upon readmission to the institution. Additionally, it is important to note that a student may apply for readmission to the institution before 1 calendar year is complete, but only in the most extenuating of circumstances will such a request be approved. The number of students who have been reinstated from academic suspension at Achieve University by semester is shown in Table 2. Also displayed is the total number of students who were placed on academic suspension for a second time,

Table 2

*Number of Reinstated Students and Their Academic Suspension, Completion, and Persistence at Achieve University Since Reinstatement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Reinstated</th>
<th>Placed on academic suspension following reinstatement</th>
<th>Who graduated following reinstatement</th>
<th>Enrolled in the Spring 2014 semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2012</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the number enrolled in the Spring 2014 semester, and the total number who went on to graduate.

**Statement of the Problem**

The practice of academic suspension is inconsistent with retention theory; it has a direct, negative impact on student retention (McDermott, 2008), because it fails to foster a mindset that positively contributes to persistence and completion. Yet, it is common practice for institutions of higher education to place students on academic suspension for failure to meet the minimum expectations of academic performance (Wang & Grimes, 2000). During the stopout period, students have little to no opportunity to engage—or experience integration—with the institution (Boyd et al., 1994). Denovchek (1992) studied the persistence of students who had been academically suspended and later reinstated to a large university in the Midwest over a 9-year period. Her results showed that just 25 percent of the students persisted, which she defined as students who were currently working toward degree completion or who had graduated from the institution. Similarly, McDermott (2008) conducted a quantitative study at a midsized, comprehensive, 4-year, public institution in the Midwest to examine how academic suspension impacted re-enrollment decisions and subsequent academic success. She found that only 20 percent of students who returned to the institution were able to achieve good academic standing following their reinstatement.

Academic suspension can be a defining moment in a student’s life, particularly as it relates to the value and worth they ascribe to higher education. With such a small percentage of academically suspended students applying for readmission, and with an even smaller subset of that group experiencing subsequent academic success, further exploration of this unique population of students is warranted. Much can be gleaned and learned from listening
to the stories these students have to share about their personal academic journeys. What individual students can tell us about their experience(s), both the good and the bad, gives life, meaning, and context to the data (Hoell, 2006). Qualitatively oriented research methodologies may be of particular value in capturing the complexity of their personal narratives and, moreover, in uncovering and illuminating the important insights they have to share with regard to this particular phenomenon (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

Although the aforementioned studies have contributed much needed insight into the academic achievement and persistence of academically at-risk college students, there is limited research on students who have been academically suspended and later reinstated to the same institution. There is even less empirical research on students who have experienced both ends of the academic continuum: academic suspension and subsequent academic success. Furthermore, within that small area of the literature, qualitative studies are even less well represented, with the students’ experiences—their voices—being largely silent. More research must be conducted that examines the experience and academic resilience of academically suspended college students from a qualitative standpoint, seeking to discover and understand the phenomenon from the perspectives of the students themselves (Esterberg, 2002). In doing so, it was hoped that the findings of the present study would contribute to the dearth of research that exists on this topic.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience of academic suspension and to gain understanding of the deep perspective shifts and learning that may have occurred as a result of that experience. Furthermore, the study was designed to uncover and illuminate how students’ new frames of reference may have contributed to
their subsequent academic resilience at the same institution from which they were academically suspended.

The present study was conducted at Achieve University—a state-supported, midsized, comprehensive, 4-year university in the Midwest—with 13 undergraduate, degree-seeking college students who were academically suspended, later reinstated, and subsequently in good academic standing at the institution as defined by the Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy (i.e., the student had earned an institutional cumulative GPA of 2.00 or higher). Data were gathered through the use of one-time, semistructured individual interviews with participants and were analyzed through the use of the empirical phenomenological approach developed by Giorgi (1985).

By conducting this research, it was hoped that the findings of this study would have implications for practitioners in institutions of higher education with regard to designing, implementing, and refining intentional support services aimed at improving the achievement, persistence, and completion of academically at-risk college students and, more specifically, of those students who have been reinstated from academic suspension. Moreover, by giving voice to the students’ lived experiences, it was hoped that the results would illuminate and identify key frames of references that members of reinstatement committees should look for when working with this particular population.

**Research Question**

This study fills a void in the literature on the academic achievement and persistence of academically at-risk college students. Specifically, it contributes to the dearth of qualitative research that has explored the experience and academic resilience of academically suspended college students who are later reinstated to the same institution and it gives voice
to their perspectives and insight into their life-worlds. The following research question guided the data collection and analysis for this phenomenological study: How do students describe the experience of academic suspension both retrospectively and in the present day, and what meaning and/or learning do they attach to their experience?

**Methodological Approach**

“All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The *primary* goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (Merriam, 2002, p. 39). That is, qualitative researchers are not only concerned with describing the way things are but also are interested in gaining insight into how things got to be the way they are, how people feel about the way things are, what these people believe, and what meaning(s) they attach to various activities (Gay, 1996).

To understand the phenomenon of academic resilience, particularly among students who have been academically suspended and later reinstated to the same institution and, moreover, to explore the experience of and learning attributed to academic suspension, a qualitative research design was employed. Use of a qualitatively oriented methodology was important for the study because it allowed me the opportunity to gain access to, deeply explore, and describe the shared experience of academic suspension. More than that, though, I was able to uncover and interpret the meaning that students attached to that lived experience and, as such, to illuminate how the new frames of reference contributed to their subsequent academic resilience at the institution after reinstatement from academic suspension.
Significance of the Study

Exploring the experience the academic resilience of academically suspended college students who are later reinstated to and academically successful at the same institution is important for several reasons. Although there are vast amounts of literature available on college student retention, attrition, and achievement, there is a dearth of research that has studied these topics from a qualitative perspective. Moreover, within the larger body of scholarly literature, there is limited research on students who have been academically suspended. Even less research has examined the unique subset of students who sought reinstatement after academic suspension and who, in turn, experienced subsequent academic resilience at the institution. The concept of academic resilience itself is fairly unique. Much of the research on resilience has centered on the ability of individuals in at-risk populations (e.g., first-generation students, minorities, those with low socioeconomic backgrounds, etc.) to be successful in other aspects of their lives, and very little research has examined the topic of resilience as it relates to academically at-risk college students.

These students’ experiences—their stories and their voices—are largely absent in the literature; capturing their stories through rich, thick description begins to paint a clearer picture of these students’ lives and of the social, emotional, and mental complexity they experience throughout their academic journey. Conducting an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the students themselves may lead to better understanding and illumination of how these students make meaning of and what learning they attach to their academic suspension. Additionally, this research begins unveiling just how these students are able to achieve academic resilience despite the significant mental and academic obstacles they had to overcome.
This research provides new insight into the existing body of literature by focusing on a topic and a population that has received little attention in previous studies. Furthermore, it enhances the empirical research by employing methodologies and methods not commonly used. This study is unique in that it includes interviews with students who have experienced both ends of the continuum: academic suspension and subsequent academic success. Brady (2008), in her recommendations for future research, specifically highlighted the need for conducting interviews with students in hopes of “identifying factors that have led the students to be successful” (pp. 64–65). McDermott (2008) and Houle (2013) further echoed Brady’s sentiment(s). Much can be learned about the nature of academic achievement from these students in particular.

The results of this study could be used to identify and address institutional, structural, or personal barriers to academic success and, moreover, to assist with institutional planning efforts aimed at improving the success of academically at-risk college students at 4-year colleges and universities. Ultimately, the data produced findings that will help practitioners and scholars advance their understanding of how to better support students, be it through the improvement of practices, through the designing of intervention and/or support programs and services, or through the examination and refinement of institutional policy.

This study aimed to benefit the participants by providing them with an opportunity to reflect upon, understand, and articulate their lived experiences. This study may have implications for college students who have experienced or who may experience similar circumstances during their own academic journeys. The participants’ stories are a testament to the resilience one can experience when truly committing oneself to a goal; furthermore, the data clearly indicated that academically at-risk students should not be written off as
incapable—they, too, are capable of succeeding in an institution of higher education.

Finally, the study may have implications for other stakeholders, including but not limited to academic advisors, college retention personnel, faculty, educational administrators, and members of reinstatement committees.

**Summary of the Theoretical Framework**

The professional literature asserts that a theoretical framework can be profoundly effective in helping a researcher bring understanding and meaning to how the world is experienced by the participants in their study. “It is a ‘lens’ . . . framing and shaping what the researcher looks at and includes, how the researcher thinks about the study and its conduct, and in the end, how the researcher conducts the study” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 189). Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) theory of individual student departure and Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory were used as relevant theories in the present study. A brief overview of the research and theories developed by Tinto and Mezirow is provided below.

**Tinto’s Theory of Individual Student Departure**

The theoretical framework for this study included Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) research and theory on college student attrition. Tinto gained a foundational context to help him frame his theory of individual student departure from the work of Van Gennep (1960), Durkeim (1951), and Spady (1971), and he based the theory on sociological research and the body of literature that identified key factors associated with student persistence. Previous theories of college student departure emerged from psychological, economic, organization, and environmental theory (Blumer, 1969; McNelly, 1937; Summerskill, 1962). According to Tinto (2012), the findings from previous theories were misleading, because they were based
on stereotypical portraits of student dropouts and they failed to address the dynamic and interrelated forces contributing to individual student departure decisions. As a result, practitioners developed the “mistaken view that student dropouts are different or deviant from the rest of the student population. . . . But leavers often do not think of themselves as failures. Many see their actions as quite positive steps toward goal fulfillment” (Tinto, 2012, p. 3).

Recognizing the dynamic nature of social and intellectual life as contributing factors to individual student departure decisions, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) based his research upon longitudinal data. His theory takes into consideration each student’s pre-entry attributes as well as their skills, goals, and commitments, institutional experiences, and the final outcome (i.e., their decision to persist in or depart from the institution). Because of this, Tinto (2012) postulated that “student departure may then serve as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of institutional life as much as of the experiences of students in the institution” (p. 5).

Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) theory of individual student departure proposes that a student’s likelihood to persist at an institution of higher education increases when a student is both academically and socially integrated into the institution and, moreover, when a student experiences productive interactions with peers, staff, and faculty. Furthermore, the theory suggests that students’ failure to acclimate into the educational and/or environmental setting contributes to their departure. Tinto (1987) asserted that “some degree of social and intellectual integration must exist as a condition for continued persistence” (p. 119).

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) used this framework as a foundation to identify and address students’ decisions for departure by separating the causes and sources of student
departure. “Student leaving arises from a great variety of sources and takes on a range of
different forms. . . . As a consequence, the actions taken to respond to one form of departure
may differ from those required to treat another form” (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). By defining the
different types of student departure, and by identifying the individual factors and/or forces
that contribute to individual student decisions to persist or depart, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993,
2012) established a conceptual framework for better understanding the student departure
puzzle.

**Individual-Level Attributes**

At the individual level, two attributes stand out as central to the issue of departure:
intention and commitment. These are personal dispositions with which an individual enters
an institutional of higher education. Intention is a student’s primary goal, and it directs all
related educational activity. Tinto (2012) postulated that the higher the educational goal, the
more likely a student will be to persist—even in the face of difficulty. Similarly,
commitment is a student’s individual level of motivation—or drive—to persist through a
degree program. According to Tinto (2012), “these not only help set the boundaries of
individual attainment but also serve to color the character of individual experiences within
the institution following entry” (p. 37).

**Institutional-Level Experiences**

At the institutional level, Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) identified four types of
occurrences (or individual experiences) that affect a student’s decision to depart from, or
persist in, an institution of higher education—adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and
isolation—each of which describes a significant interactional outcome that arises from an
individual experience within the institution. Tinto (2012) noted,
though these are largely the result of events which take place within the institution following entry, they necessarily also mirror the attributes, skills, and dispositions of the individuals prior to entry and the effect of external forces on individual participation in college. (pp. 37–38)

Adjustment. From the beginning, persistence in college requires a student to adjust, both socially and intellectually, to a new world—departing from the safety and familiarity of family and friends and, in turn, joining a new world full of intellectual and social challenges that are often more demanding and not yet fully understood or known (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012). A student’s intentions, commitments, and level of resiliency will contribute to the success of an individual’s initial adjustment; “presumably either lofty goals or strong commitments, or both, will lead individuals to persist in very difficult circumstances. Conversely, modest goals and/or weak commitments may lead persons to withdraw” (Tinto, 2012, p. 46). Most students, even those who are the most capable and socially mature, will experience some level of difficulty during the adjustment. Although the adjustment period is brief for most, some find it so overwhelming that they choose to leave. Tinto (2012) stated, “The academic difficulties, social isolation, and sheer sense of bewilderment which often accompanies the transition may pose real problems for the individual. . . . Some are simply unable to clear the first hurdle to college completion and withdraw from further participation” (p. 46).

Difficulty. Persistence in an institution of higher education requires more than a student’s ability to adjust, though; it requires that a student meet the minimum standards for academic performance as outlined by institutional policy. Unfortunately, not all students are able to meet such standards. Increasingly, an array of students from diverse backgrounds are
entering higher education unprepared to meet the academic demands of college life and, if this trend continues to rise, it follows that involuntary departure, due to academic dismissal, will also increase (Tinto, 2012). “Though some students experiencing academic difficulty will withdraw voluntarily to avoid the stigma of failure, many will endure until forced to leave” (Tinto, 2012, p. 48).

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) attributed academic difficulty to a lack of necessary academic skills and cited several empirical studies that identified high school preparation, individual unpreparedness, and inconsistent standards among high schools as key contributing factors. However, he also noted that these common measures of ability are not always good predictors of the study skills and habits required for academic performance. Tinto (2012) noted that, for some students in higher education, “limited intentions and/or weak commitments may be manifested in poor academic performance” (p. 48). Beyond the aforementioned sources of academic difficulty, though, Tinto (2012) identified weak commitment as another possible contributor: “Though the individual may possess the needed skills, he/she may be insufficiently committed either to the institution or to the goal of education to meet the academic demands of the institution” (p. 117).

**Incongruence.** Incongruence occurs when there is a mismatch or lack of fit between the needs, interests, and preferences of the student and those of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012). Tinto (2012) stated that, in particular, incongruence “refers to that state where individuals perceive themselves as being substantially at odds with the institution” (p. 50). In such cases, students’ lack of integration into the social or academic system(s) of the institution is a direct result of their individual perceptions; what matters most in such
circumstances is the view of the individual students—whether they perceive themselves as being incongruent with the institution in some way (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012).

A lack of congruence may arise for any number of reasons. For example, a mismatch with the academic system may be due to the academic demands being perceived as “too hard or too easy” (Tinto, 2012, p. 51). Additionally, incongruence may reflect differences in: intellectual and/or social values, behavioral styles and preferences, one’s peers, the faculty, or any other group representing the primary intellectual orientations of the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012). Although some degree of incongruence should be expected, when a student is made to feel substantially at odds with the dominant culture, departure may follow.

It can be argued that incongruence may be the result of poor and/or uninformed choices on the part of students at the time they were looking for an institution in which to enroll (Tinto, 2012). According to Tinto (2012), “pre-entry expectations generally become the standard against which individuals evaluate their early experiences within the institution. When expectations are either unrealistic and/or seriously mistaken, subsequent experiences can lead to major disappointments” (p. 54).

**Isolation.** Isolation is a situation in which there is an absence of sufficient interaction, resulting in a lack of integration into the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012). Such students fail to establish a significant personal tie with someone on campus (e.g., peers, faculty, other members of the institution). Tinto (2012) referred to several studies in the professional literature to demonstrate the significant importance of personal interaction on individual student decisions to persist. He stated, “The absence of sufficient contact with other members of the institution proves to be the single most important predictor of eventual
departure” (p. 56). Interestingly, frequent contact with faculty is a particularly important element in student persistence, with encounters occurring beyond the formal classroom environment most strongly associated with continued persistence. Tinto (2012) asserted that for many students:

The isolation is only temporary, the sense of normlessness only fleeting. Most establish new friendships and soon come to feel at home among the byways of the college. But some do not. Those who have difficulty meeting people and making new friends and/or who respond to ambiguous situations by withdrawing into themselves tend to have greater difficulties than do those whose typical response is to reach out to others. Their isolation frequently becomes a lasting and eventually debilitating experience. (p. 58)

**Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory**

Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) stems from Mezirow’s (1978a, 1978b) empirically grounded theory study of women re-entering higher education after an extended period of time. Through his study, Mezirow (1978a, 1978b) found that all of the participants seemed to go through a similar series of steps and/or actions in order to make meaning of their experiences, which he termed perspective transformations. As a result, he outlined a multiphase approach to learning, which begins with a “disorienting dilemma” and ends, ultimately, in perspective transformation. Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) consists of three overarching phases—critical reflection, discourse, and action—whereby the learner critically reflects on his or her assumptions, engages in dialogue to validate insights, and decides whether or not to act.
When developing the theory, Mezirow (1991, 2000) drew on the work of Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher, as a foundation to explain how adult learners make sense of the meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meaning, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes. (Mezirow, 1994, p. xii)

According to Mezirow (2012), transformation theory’s focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others—to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers. (p. 76)

Mezirow (1991, 2000) posited that a disorienting dilemma serves as a trigger for reflection. In particular, it is a life experience that cannot be resolved cognitively. As a result, it requires the learner to engage in greater reflection in order to integrate and/or build new meaning, which leads to a shift in the learner’s understanding of self or understanding of worldviews. A disorienting dilemma can be a singular instance (e.g., a positive diagnosis for a life-threatening illness) or a series of events (e.g., ongoing domestic violence). It is important to note that what acts as a trigger can be different from person to person. For some, “common” life events (e.g., falling in love, marriage, having children, death) can be triggers for transformational learning. For others, a trigger may be something rarer (e.g., traveling, mass shootings, an HIV-positive diagnosis).

Critical reflection is the process of taking prior unquestioned assumptions and questioning them as a way of making sense or meaning of oneself and one’s world.
Discourse is a specific form of dialogue that is free from coercion, whereby the learner seeks to understand a variety of perspectives. Action refers to what the learner chooses to do—or not to do—with the learning that has transformed their previously held frames of reference/habits of mind. Eventually, the reflection that occurs leads to perspective transformation, which forever changes the person. These three overarching phases (i.e., critical reflection, discourse, and action) can be further broken down into the 10 phases of meaning that comprise transformational learning theory, which starts with a disorienting dilemma or trigger event. The 10 phases of meaning as outlined by Mezirow (1991, 2000) are as follows:

1. A disorienting dilemma;
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame;
3. A critical assessment of assumptions;
4. Recognition of one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
6. Planning a course of action;
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;
8. Provisional trying of new roles;
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.

Over time, Mezirow (1991, 2000) has written more about transformational learning theory and its various tenets as well as about changes in the way he has thought about transformational learning as a result of the growing discourse the field. At present, it is safe
to say that “researchers find transformative learning constantly evolving” (Taylor & Snyder, 2012, p. 37).

College students comprise one of the many populations covered in the adult learning literature. However, empirical studies that have connected the experience of academically at-risk college students to transformational learning theory are almost nonexistent, and no studies were found that examine the experience of academic suspension and subsequent academic resilience through this particular theoretical lens. Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) has the ability to broaden what is understood about this very unique population of students in higher education.

**Definitions of Terms**

Listed below are definitions of terms as they are used in this dissertation.

*Academic probation:* A particular academic standing at Achieve University that is assigned to any first-semester student who earned an institutional semester GPA below 1.00; it is also assigned to any continuing student whose institutional cumulative GPA falls below 2.00.

*Academic resilience:* “The ability to effectively deal with setback, stress or pressure in the academic setting” (Martin & Marsh, 2003, p. 1).

*Academic suspension:* A particular academic standing at Achieve University assigned to any undergraduate student who, while on academic probation, earns an institutional semester GPA less than 2.00 and if his/her institutional cumulative GPA is less than 2.00. Academic suspension at Achieve University is for a minimum period of one calendar year and is permanently noted on a student’s official academic record.
Achieve University: The pseudonym for the study’s research setting, a state-supported, midsized, comprehensive 4-year university in the Midwest with a total enrollment of around 12,200 students.

Attrition: defined by Tinto (1975), who has been credited with developing one of the first models to study college student attrition in higher education, as:

a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person’s experiences in those systems . . . continually modify his goals and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

Committee on Admission, Readmission, and Retention (CARR): A standing committee at Achieve University that considers the admission and readmission of undergraduate students to as well as their retention in the university. The committee participates in the administration of the admissions policies as provided by the State Board of Regents, the administration of the undergraduate academic standing policy, and readmission of undergraduate students according to the principles adopted by the university faculty and procedures developed by the committee. The committee comprises 14 members, who represent the following areas: each of the five undergraduate colleges, the Office of the Provost, the Office of the Registrar, the Office of Admissions, the Office of Academic Advising, the Office of Student Financial Aid, the Dean of Students Office, the Counseling Center, Student Support Services, and the Academic Success and Achievement Center.

Delayed transfer: a student who chooses to enroll in another institutional of higher education, and in some cases, delays his/her return for many years (Tinto, 2012).
Departure: among several different types of college student departures present within the literature; at the broadest level there are two categories of student departure: institutional departure and system departure (Tinto, 2012). Institutional departure is when a student chooses to leave an individual institution of higher education; it is important to note that, in this instance, students may choose to enroll in the same institution at a later date, or they may choose to enroll at another college or university (Tinto, 2012). System departure is when a student chooses to leave higher education as a whole and never return to any institution to complete the academic requirements necessary for certification or degree completion (Tinto, 2012).

Disorienting dilemma: a catalyst for perspective transformation that usually occurs when individuals have experiences that do not fit their expectations or make sense to them, and they cannot resolve them cognitively; that is, an incident or experience outside a person’s control that triggers perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978b). Critical reflection and transformation can happen suddenly/all at once (i.e., “epochal” transformation), or gradually/incrementally over time (i.e., “incremental” transformation; Mezirow, 2000).

Good academic standing: a particular academic standing at Achieve University that is assigned to any undergraduate student who has an institutional cumulative GPA of 2.00 or higher.

Institutional stopout: A student who returns to their initial institution of higher education after taking some time away (Tinto, 2012).
Readmitted/Reinstatement: when a student who has been placed on academic suspension is allowed to return to Achieve University after their Application of Readmission has been reviewed and approved by the CARR.

Stopout: When a student chooses to temporarily withdraw from the system of higher education (Tinto, 2012).

Transformational learning: described by Mezirow (2000) described transformational learning as the process by which one transforms one’s taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7–8)

Outline of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience of academic suspension and to gain understanding of the deep perspective shifts and learning that may have occurred as a result of that experience. Furthermore, the study was designed to uncover and illuminate how students’ new frames of reference may have contributed to their subsequent academic resilience at the same institution from which they were academically suspended. A theoretical framework consisting of Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) theory of individual student departure and Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory was utilized to help bring understanding and meaning to how the world was experienced by the participants in the study.

Chapter 1 comprises an introduction and overview of the research topic, the background of the problem, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the
research question, an introduction to the methodological approach, the significance of the study, a summary of the theoretical framework, and definitions of terms.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature that is relevant to the research topic. This review includes academic support programs and interventions for academically at-risk college students; coping with academic failure, academic suspension, readmission from academic suspension; and in particular, detailed overviews of studies that have employed exclusively a qualitative research design to study the subsequent academic achievement of students readmitted from academic suspension.

Chapter 3 includes a brief introduction to qualitative inquiry and provides a rationale for the use of a qualitative research design in the present study. It also gives an overview of the methodological approach and methods used. A discussion of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval process is given as is a detailed description of the research design, including the setting, eligible participant selection, methods used for contacting eligible participants, the study participants, and data collection and analysis procedures. An overview of the methods used to ensure the goodness and trustworthiness of the data is provided, as is the positionality/role of the researcher. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the delimitations of the study.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to presenting the profiles of each of the 13 undergraduate students who participated in this study. These profiles afford the reader an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and sense of connection with each student by providing a brief glimpse into their private worlds—one where the reader can better comprehend their pains, joys, and support structures, or lack thereof, and perhaps in doing so, the reader can be touched at a deeper level by their stories.
Chapter 5 catalogs the study’s findings. It provides a detailed description of the themes that were revealed after examining the experience of each participant. This chapter is broken down into two sections: (a) a retrospective exploration of academic suspension and (b) exploration of academic suspension in present day. Each section comprises the themes that were extracted from the data. Within the retrospective exploration of the participants’ academic suspension, the themes include: shock, wake-up call, shut down, devastation, disappointment, worthless, and embarrassment/shame. The exploration of the participants’ academic suspension in the present day includes: increased self-confidence/self-belief and will to persist, and learning experience, maturation and perspective transformation.

Chapter 6 outlines conclusions drawn from the data analysis. A discussion of the findings is presented, and connections to the existing body of literature are drawn. Based upon the findings, the implications and recommendations for enhancing practice are outlined and several recommendations for future research are offered. An overview of the study’s limitations is provided, and the chapter concludes with a reflexivity statement, which provides the researcher’s personal reflections.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews relevant literature related to academic support programs and interventions for academically at-risk college students, academic suspension, and readmission from academic suspension. In particular, this literature review provides a detailed overview of studies that have employed an exclusively qualitative research design to study college students who were readmitted from academic suspension and who experienced subsequent academic success at the institution. This review of the literature situates the present study among the known qualitative studies, and it illuminates how the students’ stories—their voices—are largely absent from the literature.

Academic Support Programs and Interventions

All institutions of higher education have academically at-risk students. Many of these students struggle not only academically but also socially and emotionally, which may result in their (voluntary or involuntary) departure from the institution. Tinto (2012) emphasized that institutions of higher education should “not leave academic improvement to chance. [Instead, institutions should] expect, indeed often require, that at-risk students participate in a variety of programs” (p. 182) to ensure that they become integrated academically and/or socially into the institution.

The literature is rich with examples of interventions and programs that have had a direct, profound, positive impact on students who, at one point, failed to meet the minimum requirements of academic performance as outlined by an institution’s academic standing policy (Boyd et al., 1994; Brooks-Harris, Mori, & Higa, 1999; Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Cobble & Hohengarten, 1998; Dill, Gilbert, Hill, Minchew, & Sempier, 2010–2011; Heiman,
These institutions have successfully designed and implemented intentional support structures and practices to help academically at-risk students bring meaning and focus to their college experience. Such systemic support has resulted in the academic recovery of this particular population; moreover, it has helped increase their persistence, retention, and completion rates, too. The empirical literature is clear that academically at-risk college students and, in particular, students readmitted from academic suspension, can be successful when provided with the right support structures. As a result, retention plans must be both redesigned and expanded to focus on serving multiple populations of students, aiming to strengthen their social and academic integration with the institution.

**Academic Suspension**

Hansmeier (1965) asserted, “Academic failure among students will always be a part of American higher education” (pp. 194–195). It is true that all institutions of higher education have students who fail to meet the minimum expectations of academic performance and, as a result, they are academically suspended per the institution’s academic standing policy. Nationally, although less than 25 percent of all student departures are due to academic suspension (Spradlin et al., 2010; Tinto, 2012), according to Pitcher and Blashild (1970), still around 380,000 students are academically dismissed annually from colleges and universities.

Throughout the years, researchers’ approaches to studying college student departure have varied widely. Many researchers who have examined student attrition did not differentiate between voluntary and involuntary departure. Conversely, Berkovitz and
O’Quin (2006) found that “some retention researchers deliberately excluded students who were suspended or academically dismissed” choosing “to study only those students who voluntarily left college” (p. 201). As a result, the literature focusing specifically on students who have been academically suspended from the institution due to poor academic performance is, at best, sparse.

The practice of academic suspension is inconsistent with retention theory (McDermott, 2008). A student placed on academic suspension has little opportunity to experience social or academic integration with the institution, and a lack of integration contributes to decreased rates of student retention, persistence, and completion (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 2012). High rates of attrition and poor completion rates can place significant financial strain on an institution (Tinto, 1993). Berkovitz and O’Quin (2006) found that students who had been reinstated to the institution after academic suspension were less likely to graduate than were their peers who had stopped out for another reason (e.g., financial problems, personal issues, etc.).

Kuh et al. (2005) suggested that if academic standards are perceived as unreachable by a student, that student will likely struggle, become frustrated and discouraged, and perform poorly. Despite the fact that academic difficulty, and thus academic suspension, is typically due to incongruence between the skills and abilities of the student and the level of demand of placed upon them by the institution (Graunke et al., 2005; Tinto, 2012), some academic suspensions may be, in fact, “voluntary” in nature, mirroring a decision made by a student not to invest the time and energy needed to maintain minimum academic standards (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2012) conjectured, “Though the student may possess the needed skills, he/she may be insufficiently committed either to the institution or to the goal of education to
meet the academic demands of the institution” (p. 117). In a study conducted by Trombley (2000), it was found that, more often than not, students reported personal problems as the primary contributor to their poor academic performance. As a result, Trombley (2000) concluded, “Interventions that focus on how to balance their education with their personal commitments would be ideal for these students” (p. 247).

**Readmission from Academic Suspension**

Within the larger group of students who are placed on academic suspension for failure to meet the minimum expectations of academic performance, there is a unique subset of students who seek and are granted readmission to the institution. Unfortunately, among those students who are reinstated, only a very small percentage achieves academic success in subsequent semesters (Denovchek, 1992; McDermott, 2008). Husa (1961) posited that the issue of readmitting students from academic suspension is one that will be constantly encountered by institutions of higher education. Cobble and Hohengarten (1998) noted that, although some academically suspended students do not return to the system of higher education, others do wish to continue their academic endeavors. They commented, “The dilemma that many college administrators and/or reinstatement committees face is that of deciding which students should be reinstated” (Cobble & Hohengarten, 1998, p. 2).

Giesecke and Hancock (1950) observed that the decision to readmit students who have been dismissed due to poor academic performance “is made more often than not on the basis of inspired guesswork” (p. 72). Dole (1963) concluded that identifying reliable predictors of academic success for students readmitted from academic suspension is critical to enhancing the decision-making process and, as such, warrants further study.
After reviewing the literature concerning students who have been readmitted from academic suspension, Fowles (1962) observed that there was a paucity of reported research about such students. Similarly, Hansmeier (1963) noted, “Thus far, relatively little attention has been given to the situation created by students who encounter academic failure and are dismissed and who subsequently apply for readmission at the same or another institution” (p. 2). Elaborating further, he asserted, “There is a scarcity of research data regarding the post-readmission achievement of students” (p. 2).

**Quantitative Studies**

Unfortunately, little has changed since the early 1960s. Today, there is still limited research on the academic outcomes of students who have been readmitted following academic suspension. Some researchers have attempted to isolate and identify variables capable of predicting the academic success of this particular population after reinstatement. However, much of the research on the predictive variables of academic success is inconclusive and inconsistent (Hall & Gahn, 1994), resulting in the recognition that it is extremely difficult to predict exactly what variables and/or factors lead to academic success for such students (Brady, 2008). A review of the quantitative studies examining predictive variables of academic success for students reinstated from academic suspension is provided.

**High school performance.** Several researchers have studied the relationship between high school performance (e.g., high school rank, high school GPA, college entrance examination scores, etc.) and the subsequent academic success of students who have been reinstated from academic suspension. Data from a study conducted at Michigan State University involving 294 readmitted students found that students who were not academically successful upon readmission were more likely to have earned lower scores on college
entrance examinations, to have earned grades in high school that were far below the grades of those earned by students who were academically successful upon reinstatement, and to have ranked in the bottom 25 percent of their high school class (Hansmeier, 1965). Holmes (1997) analyzed the records of 280 students who were reinstated to Washington State University between 1989 and 1995. His analysis identified high school GPA as a significant predictor of academic success.

Dyck (1967) conducted a study in which he analyzed the records of 899 students who had been reinstated from academic suspension to the University of Kansas. After data analysis, it was determined that students who ranked in the top half of their high school graduating class were more likely to achieve academic success upon reinstatement as compared to their peers who ranked in the bottom half of their high school graduating class. Similarly, Schuster (1971) also found high school rank to be of significance when combined with other variables (e.g., amount of high school math classes, number of quarters out of school, etc.) as a predictor of subsequent academic success.

The findings of the aforementioned studies were disputed by Himmelreich (1968), who determined that intellective variables (e.g., high school rank, scores earned on college entrance examinations, etc.) were not related to the subsequent academic success of students reinstated from academic suspension. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Brady (2008), who examined the records of 348 students reinstated to a small, midwestern, 4-year public university, it was found that high school rank, composite ACT score, and high school GPA do not serve as significant predictors of academic success for students reinstated from academic suspension. Cobble and Hohengarten (1998) also determined that high school rank was not significantly related to the subsequent academic success of this particular population.
Similarly, Rita (1998) found “past academic achievement in high school . . . and placement scores” (p. 520) to be unrelated to their academic success upon reinstatement to the institution.

In a study involving 86 freshman and sophomores who were readmitted into the General Studies division of a 4-year institution, it was found that male students who achieved academic success upon reinstatement had scored significantly higher on the math section of the ACT when compared with their peers who were not academically successful (Lautz, MacLean, Vaughan, & Oliver, 1970). It is important to note, however, that the results of the study did not reveal any other ACT scores to be significantly related to the subsequent academic success of reinstated students (Lautz et al., 1970). Similarly, Langer (1968) and Hall and Gahn (1994) determined that the composite ACT score did not rise to the level of significance when attempting to predict the subsequent academic success of students who were reinstated from academic suspension.

**Coursework completed prior to academic suspension.** Results from a study conducted by Yoder (1962) suggested that students who successfully complete more semesters prior to being academically dismissed (i.e., those students who earn more credit) are more likely to experience subsequent academic success upon reinstatement and, in particular, are more likely to graduate as compared to their peers who did not earn as many credits. However, more recent research conducted by Rita (1998) found that the amount of credit earned prior to academic suspension was not significantly related to subsequent academic success at the institution.

It is important to discuss distinctions between these two studies, though. That is, Rita (1998) analyzed the records of 86 students who were readmitted to Bronx Community
College. Academic success in Rita’s study was defined by the GPA earned in the re-entry semester. Yoder (1962) conducted her study at Purdue University. Academic success in Yoder’s study was defined as those students who graduated from the institution or as those students who were still enrolled and persisting toward a degree at the time of the study. The differences in institutional type and in the operational definition of “academic success” are important distinctions that help the reader better understand the context of each study and the relevance of the findings to the present study.

**Duration of academic suspension.** According to Meadows and Tharp (1996), there does not appear to be a significant relationship between the length of academic suspension (e.g., dismissal for one semester, 1 academic year, etc.) and subsequent academic success, particularly as it relates to the GPA earned in the semester immediately following reinstatement, which is consistent with the findings of Cobble and Hohengarten (1998), Gage (2004), and Hall and Gahn (1994). Similarly, Dyck (1967) and Langer (1968) determined that the amount of time between academic suspension and reinstatement did not differentiate between those students who were academically successful upon readmission and those who were not. Neither study (Dyck, 1967; Langer, 1968) found evidence to suggest that if students are dismissed from the institution for a specified period of time that their chances of academic success increase upon readmission.

However, the results of the aforementioned studies are in stark contrast to those of Bissiri (1966), Caldwell (1980), Campbell and Hahn (1962), and Schuster (1971). Data analyzed by Campbell and Hahn suggested that students who are absent from the university for six semesters or more (i.e., at least 2 years) demonstrate greater academic improvement upon readmission as compared to their peers who were reinstated earlier. Likewise, Caldwell
found that students who were away from the institution five or more semesters were more likely to succeed upon readmission when compared with those students who were reinstated immediately or before a period of five semesters. When attempting to identify variables that would predict academic success for students readmitted from academic suspension to Iowa State University, Schuster revealed that a significant positive relationship existed between the length of students’ dismissals and their subsequent academic success at the institution. Schuster speculated that students who took a several year hiatus from the institution were more strongly motivated to succeed than were those who returned sooner. Further, he speculated that students who had been away from the institution for a longer period of time may possess a clearer vision of what they want to achieve personally and professionally (Schuster, 1971).

Consistent with the findings of Caldwell (1980), Campbell and Hahn (1962), Schuster (1971), and Bissiri (1966) found evidence to suggest that students who spend an extended period of time away from the institution are more likely to achieve academic success upon readmission. Bissiri’s study was conducted at Los Angeles City College, and it included the analysis of the academic records of 387 students who had been readmitted to the institution. It was found that students who spent nine or more semesters away from higher education prior to seeking readmission were the most successful academically upon reinstatement, with 74 percent of the group achieving subsequent academic success. Seemingly conversely, though, it was found that 54 percent of students who were reinstated immediately after having been academic suspended achieved academic success as compared to only 38 percent who sat out for one semester.
Constructive activities during academic suspension. After examining the academic records of 538 students who were academically dismissed and readmitted to the University of Utah between 1952 and 1959, Campbell and Hahn (1962) found that the grades of students who engaged in constructive activities (e.g., taking coursework at another institution, participating in active military duty, and holding responsible and skilled employment) during their academic suspension improved significantly more than did the grades of students who did not engage in such activities. Their findings were supported by Rita (1998), who determined that any students who indicated that they loafed—regardless of whether or not they actually loafed—were not academically successful following their readmission to the institution. Rita concluded, “A student who reports he or she loafed . . . either has little incentive to succeed or considerable incentive to fail” (p. 527).

Grade point average upon reinstatement. Berkovitz and O’Quin (2006) conducted an archival study of at-risk students who had stopped out of college for a number or reasons (e.g., academic suspension, financial issues, personal problems, etc.) but who later were readmitted to the institution. They examined 16 variables in an attempt to predict whether the students would later graduate. The data analyzed by Berkovitz and O’Quin suggested that GPA at readmission does not serve as a predictive variable of graduation. Their findings are similar to those of Himmelreich (1968) and Rita (1998), who also found that GPA at readmission did not predict subsequent academic success.

Conversely, Denovchek (1992), who studied predictors of persistence for academically suspended students who were readmitted to Michigan State University over a 9-year period, found that GPA upon readmission was the strongest predictor of persistence. Likewise, Hall and Gahn (1994) accounted for several variables when attempting to predict
the success of academically reinstated students. They found that students with higher GPAs upon academic suspension and students who had higher transfer GPAs were more likely to achieve academic success upon reinstatement. Cobble and Hohengarten (1998) also found that “cumulative GPA at time of dismissal is significantly related to academic success” (p. 6). Dole (1963) and Hansmeier (1965) found a significant positive relationship between the cumulative GPA prior to academic suspension and the GPA earned after reinstatement, which is consistent with studies conducted by Brady (2008); DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca (2003); and McGrath and Braunstein (1997).

**Quality point deficiency.** Quality point deficiency, also referred to as honor point deficiency (Kinloch, Frost, & MacKay, 1993; Russell, 1984; Schuster, 1971), is a measure that enables college personnel to determine the magnitude of a student’s academic deficiency. Quality point deficiency is but one of the many variables examined by Cogan (2011), who designed a study to determine which factors could be used to predict students’ potential for success during their first semester of reinstatement from academic suspension. Cogan’s study was conducted at a medium-size, midwestern university. The study included 973 cases and, of those, 344 (i.e., 35.4%) achieved good academic standing at the end of the first semester after reinstatement. A logistic regression was employed to predict academic success, and the model predicted nearly 74 percent of the cases in his sample (Cogan, 2011). He found that

the higher the negative quality point status, the less likely a student is to succeed. The model revealed 143 students who accrued a quality point status of –13 or lower during the term of dismissal. Of these students 135 (94.4%) failed to achieve good academic standing. (Cogan, 2011, p. 397)
Cogan concluded, “quality point status identifies a group that fails nearly 95% of the time” (p. 400), clearly demonstrating the value of such a measure in identifying those students who are most likely to succeed.

Kinloch et al. (1993) analyzed several variables, including but not limited to race, age, major, classification, high school GPA, quality point status, and transfer status. Their results indicated that, in addition to gender and reinstatement requirements, quality point status accurately predicted success for students reinstated from academic suspension. Similarly, Cobble and Hohengarten (1998) demonstrated that a low quality point deficiency, when coupled with the successful completion of an academic skills course, had the greatest likelihood of predicting success after readmission. Schuster (1971) and Russell (1984) also found quality point deficiency to be an effective predictive variable when attempting to identify which students will be successful upon reinstatement.

**Changing academic college and/or major after reinstatement.** Langer (1968) found that a change of major did not differentiate between those students who succeeded and those failed after readmission from academic suspension. However, Langer’s findings are inconsistent with much of the research that has examined a similar relationship. For example, Yoder (1962) conducted a study at Purdue University for which she followed 925 reinstated students over a 10-year period. Of those students, 60 percent graduated. She found that successful students were more likely to have changed their major after being reinstated, among other factors. Himmelreich (1968) studied the relationship between selected variables and subsequent academic achievement as measured by the first-semester GPA earned following readmission to the University of Nebraska. His data suggested that the strongest predictor of academic success following readmission was whether the student
had transferred to a different college within the university, with those students who had changed earning significantly higher grades.

Himmelreich’s (1968) and Yoder’s (1962) findings are consistent with a study conducted by Danis (2002). Danis followed a small sample of 25 students who had been readmitted into a special division of the institution because their grades were too low or because they lacked the necessary coursework to enter a major division. Of those students, 72 percent were in good academic standing just 1 year later. Danis concluded, “Students who are formally dismissed from our colleges and universities should not automatically be considered hopeless cases” (para. 7).

**Courses taken upon reinstatement.** Research suggests that, after a student is reinstated from academic suspension, much attention should be given to the courses in which they enroll. Brady (2008) found that the number of courses repeated was statistically significant as a predictive factor of academic success for this particular population. Similarly, Cobble and Hohengarten (1998) demonstrated that the successful completion of an academic skills course, when coupled with low quality point deficiency, had the greatest likelihood of predicting success after readmission. In addition to monitoring the classes being taken, Kelly (2010) determined that limiting the number of courses in which students can enroll upon readmission is also an important strategy to aid in the academic recovery of students reinstated from academic suspension. In reflecting on the remarks of his participants, Kelly concluded, “The sense that students gave during the interviews is that enrolling in only four classes, they were able to focus on fewer classes, which allowed them to do better academically and build their confidence” (p. 142).
Mixed-Methods Studies

Within the small amount of literature that focuses specifically on students who have been readmitted from academic suspension, three studies were identified that utilized a mixed-methods research design (Kelly, 2010; Liberto, 2002; Reagan, 1992). An overview of each study is provided next. Doing so affords the reader with a clearer picture of the qualitatively oriented studies that have been conducted to date.

Reagan. Reagan (1992) utilized a mixed-methods approach to determine what motivated students who had been academically dismissed from a community college to continue their academic pursuits despite their previous academic failure(s). Reagan administered both the Approach/Avoidance Achievement Questionnaire and the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory to a group of 100 students; 50 of who were in good academic standing and 50 of who were academically suspended. In addition to survey administration, Reagan conducted individual interviews with 10 students who had been academically suspended.

Combining the Need Achievement Theory of Atkinson (1957, 1964) and the Self-Worth Theory of Achievement Motivation of Covington and Beery (1976), Reagan (1992) determined that the students continued to enroll in courses beyond their third unsuccessful semester because they were operating with a psychological orientation that Covington and Beery labeled as “failure-avoiding.” For such students, their primary motivation was to protect their sense of competency and ability, which ultimately kept their self-worth intact. As a result, they would display patterns of nonparticipation and false effort, and moreover, they would establish impossibly high goals, which would allow them to attribute their poor academic performance to factors other than academic ability (Reagan, 1992). The qualitative
results further revealed that students continued to persist despite poor academic performance because they believed that college was essential for getting a “good job” and having a “good life.” The ability to visualize their desired end goal(s) provided the necessary motivation to continue. Reagan concluded that the students believed that, if they really tried to succeed, they could.

**Liberto.** Like Reagan (1992), Liberto’s (2002) methods also included survey administration and individual interviews. Liberto’s study focused on “environmental, social, and personal factors contributing to the success of adult students who had demonstrated academic competency after initially experiencing prior college suspension” (Liberto, 2002, p. 1) at a community college. A self-administered questionnaire was provided to 35 students who had successfully completed a semester of coursework resulting in their earning a GPA of 2.00 or higher after readmission from academic suspension. A total of 23 students completed the questionnaire. Liberto used the results to identify variables common among the group that appeared to predict academic success.

Liberto (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with 15 of the 23 respondents, and she evaluated the resulting transcripts using narrative theory to discover themes identified by the students as contributing to their academic success upon reinstatement. Liberto found that students succeeded academically when they made use of academic and student support services on campus, exercised time management techniques, increased their commitment to academics, focused less on partying, increased their contact with faculty members, received support from their families and/or employers, and experienced “changes in personal, family, and employment situations” (p. 2).
Kelly. Kelly’s (2010) study was conducted at a private, 4-year college located in the mid-Atlantic region, and it served a twofold purpose. First, the quantitative portion of the study examined the extent to which certain variables would differentiate academic success for students readmitted from academic suspension. Second, the qualitative portion of the study was designed to identify differences between students who achieved subsequent academic success and those who did not. Unlike other studies that included interviews with only those students who were able to achieve academic success upon reinstatement (Hoell, 2006; Liberto, 2002; Reagan, 1992; Robeson, 1998), Kelly’s study included interviews with students who achieved subsequent academic success as well as with those who had not.

Data analysis of the academic records of 113 students who had been academically suspended and subsequently reinstated between the Fall 2003 and Spring 2009 semesters revealed that students who had a high quality point deficiency as well as students who sought immediate reinstatement from academic suspension were less likely to achieve academic success (Kelly, 2010). The interviews with students illuminated several differences that helped to distinguish the successful students from the unsuccessful students. Themes that emerged from the qualitative arm of the study included the following: “managing distractions, motivation and confidence, engagement in the campus environment, and active participation in mentoring” (Kelly, 2010, p. viii).

Qualitative Studies

Very few studies were found that had incorporated exclusively a qualitative research design to study students who were able to achieve academic success at the same institution following reinstatement from academic suspension (Hoell, 2006; Houle, 2013; Pyne, 1999; Robeson, 1998; Saunders, 2008). Given the small number of studies found about this
specific topic that incorporated qualitative inquiry, a more thorough overview of each individual study and the findings will be provided. Doing so will afford the reader a clearer, more holistic picture of the existing body of literature as it stands today.

Robeson. In a qualitative study using case study methodology Robeson (1998) examined the life stories of seven male students who experienced academic recovery at a large, midwestern, research university following their reinstatement from academic suspension. The study was concerned primarily with how male reinstated college students made sense of their world through their life stories. In particular, Robeson designed the study to examine: (a) how student’s precollege experiences influenced their approach to college, (b) how they perceived their college successes and failures, and (c) the perceptions of their factors that contributed to their academic decline and subsequent recovery. Some of the common characteristics among the subjective, narrative accounts with regard to precollege life experiences and academic decline uncovered by Robeson (1998) included the following: values, attitudes, and beliefs adopted through family socialization serving as a point of reference for students; prior school experiences—particularly those of high school—influencing the assumptions students held about learning and academic achievement upon entering college; and students experiencing difficulty in making the transition from a structured home environment to an unstructured college environment.

All seven of Robeson’s (1998) participants identified their academic dismissal as a defining moment in their lives that helped them to recognize that their academic situation had reached a crisis point. Many were surprised by how poorly they had done, as they had overestimated their academic performance repeatedly and likened it to their experiences in high school. The participants articulated a lack of familiarity with college grading systems
and infrequent and unclear communication from professors. Their academic dismissal was a source of disappointment, shame, embarrassment, and anxiety. Robeson stated, “The reinstated process seemed to take a heavy toll on these students emotionally. . . . This was a trying experience. . . . The implications of . . . their experience with academic failure in college served as a catalyst. . . . Academic dismissal was an important turning point” (pp. 392–393).

With regard to the students’ subsequent academic recovery upon reinstatement, Robeson (1998) found that communicating with professors and other resource people helped students better understand the expectations of academic life. Additionally, most of the participants believed that visualizing their “possible selves” was important to their subsequent success; doing so provided them with the motivation necessary to push through times of academic difficulty. According to Robeson’s data, academic recovery appeared to be facilitated by

- reflective reconstruction of the cognitive map, which served as the template for negotiating the college terrain. . . . Finding their way in college involved understanding one’s self within the context of the college environment, while at the same time figuring out the college system in relation to the self. (p. x)

Furthermore, the data from Robeson’s study suggest that prior experiences with academic success may fortify academic self-efficacy beliefs:

- Because they attributed their academic failure to a lack of effort, most of the study participants seemed to hold relatively strong beliefs in their efficacy to succeed in college. Subsequently they may have seen their situation as controllable; accepted
responsibility for their poor academic performance; and invested the effort required to rebound from academic failure. (pp. 432–433)

**Pyne.** Pyne (1999), also using case study methodology, examined the process, structure, and culture of an academic dismissal from the perspectives of the students as self-reported in their appeals for reinstatement. A portion of the study was dedicated to understanding whether or not students who demonstrated academic gain after reinstatement tended to attribute their initial poor academic performance to issues within their control and, conversely, whether those students who were not successful following reinstatement attributed their prior poor academic performance to circumstances outside of their control. In order to do so, Pyne (1999) performed a content analysis of 413 applications submitted for reinstatement through the use of Benoit’s (1995) typology for image restoration.

In addition to examining the appeals for reinstatement, Pyne (1999) also conducted interviews with members of “State U’s” Reinstatement Committee to better understand the decisions related to possible reinstatement. It is important to note that “State U” is a Midwestern, state, comprehensive university, s to “Achieve University” in the present study.

Contrary to previous research on locus of control and attribution (Noel, Forsyth, & Kelley, 1987; Wilson & Linville, 1982), Pyne’s (1999) study did not support the idea that students who perceive what went wrong as being within their locus of control were more likely to succeed. According to Pyne, those students were as successful in returning to good academic standing as were their peers who perceived the circumstances contributing to their initial poor academic performance as outside of their control. The data from Pyne’s study suggested, “that students [who] perceive that they can not actually change what happened to
them, but are able to control how they react to what happened to them are those students destined for success” (p. 94).

**Saunders.** Similar to the study conducted by Pyne (1999), the purpose of the study conducted by Saunders (2008), using content analysis methodology, was to gain an understanding of the explanations for academic failure given by students who had been academically dismissed from a large, public, research university. A portion of the study was designed to determine if differences were present in the explanations given by students who were successful in the two semesters following their reinstatement as compared to those who did not experience subsequent academic success at the institution. In order to do so, Saunders conducted a descriptive content analysis of 139 dismissal appeal statements submitted by students.

Saunders (2008) identified differences in the themes that were present in dismissal appeal statements between those students who experienced subsequent academic success and those students who did not. In particular, the following themes were present more often in the appeals of students who achieved academic success:

- heavy course load, academic planning around degree requirements, discussing the specifics of their summer courses, specific adjustments to work arrangement in order to have time and energy for their school work, changing living situation to deal with related problems, discussing positive interactions with academic advisors, describing newfound priorities and goals, acknowledging academic difficulties and accepting responsibility for dismissal, not being surprised by their dismissal, and expressing disappointment primarily in themselves. (Saunders, 2009, pp. 209–210)
The following themes, however, were more prevalent in the appeal statements of those students who did not experience academic success upon reinstatement: the size of the institution; mentioning previous academic success, specifically in high school; excessive partying and socializing; concerns with regard to their physical or mental health, and/or the physical or mental health of a loved one (e.g., depression, anxiety, ADHD, life-threatening illness, etc.); difficulty with one’s major due to rigor, lack of interest, or parental pressure; transportation difficulties; and expressing conflicting feelings about one’s ability to succeed at the institution (Saunders, 2008).

**Phenomenology Methodology.**

*Hoell.* Hoell (2006) investigated the perceptions of six undergraduate college students who experienced academic difficulty, academic suspension, reinstatement, and subsequent academic success at the University of Montana in Missoula through the use of the phenomenological method for narrative collection and data analysis. Hoell’s study was designed specifically to discover what “academic adversity feels like, what contributes to academic turnaround, and what students reflect after-the-fact about their experiences along the academic continuum” (p. 10).

The results of the data analysis revealed that students traveled an emotional path that consisted of three distinct parts. During the students’ initial transition to the institution, they articulated that they felt overwhelmed, insignificant and, ultimately, disengaged from the college experience. Hoell (2006) noted that some of her participants did not know what to do about their academic problems, so they gave up; the fear of academic failure motivated them to “disidentify” (p. 140) with the university as a primary defense, which was a response that Hoell equated to avoidance-oriented coping.
Once the students in Hoell’s (2006) study began to struggle academically, they began to identify as frustrated, embarrassed, anxious, and ashamed. An unawareness of or inability to access support services was a pervasive theme in each of the participant’s interviews. Moreover, they kept their poor academic performance to themselves because it was perceived as devastating, and for some, it spurred feelings of regret. Akin to the students in Robeson’s (1998) study, “academic suspension shocked and scared these students but finally forced them to face the facts they had tried to ignore” (Hoell, 2006, p. 143); no longer could the students continue to employ avoidance-oriented coping strategies—those simply did not work.

The experience of academic suspension forced them to reflect upon their reasons for being in college and to discern the changes that were necessary to achieve college success. According to Hoell (2006), students “made a conscious decision to change and develop different habits, felt empowered and changed by success and support, and were hopeful and looked toward the future” (p. ii). However, it is important to note that Hoell stated it was difficult to isolate a factor, or even several variables, that impacted the students enough to put them on track, but what they all did share in common was a break from college, and moreover, all reported that they reflected on their situation. “Perhaps this time to reflect was related to a discovery or re-discovery of their academic purpose” (Hoell, 2006, p. 149).

For all of the participants, leaving their old habits behind and replacing them with new ones contributed to their “upward spiral.” Some of the habits employed by the students upon their return included closer contact with instructors, better class attendance, sharing grades with others, and increased study habits (Hoell, 2006). “As these students’ relocated
their educational identities from failure to success . . . [they were] determined to look up, look forward, and look to the future” (Hoell, 2006, p. 163).

**Houle.** Houle (2013) also investigated the lived experience of five undergraduate college students who experienced academic difficulty, academic suspension, and re-enrollment, using a phenomenological framework to “reveal the inner and personal experience of the outward manifestation of perseverance against adversity” (p. 46). Unlike the aforementioned studies, however, Houle’s study was conducted at a private, 4-year, highly selective, research institution in the northeast Atlantic region; the institution is described as “highly selective” and ranked in the top 25 for best colleges and universities in the *U.S. News and World Report’s* 2012 edition (Houle, 2013). Additionally, the students in Houle’s study differed a bit in that the criteria for inclusion did not require students to be in good academic standing but, instead, just to have been reinstated to the institution following academic suspension. Houle contributed new insight to the existing body of literature by examining students’ choice of whether to return to school after academic suspension and the factors that impacted their decision-making.

Data from Houle’s (2013) study suggest that the decision to return to college after academic suspension is a logical one. Many of the participants had a strong personal desire to earn a college diploma—a feeling that was fortified as a result of being in the world of work while on academic suspension. The participants recognized that their job-satisfaction and earning power were directly related to the attainment of a college degree. “This ‘real world’ realization gave them motivation to return to college” (Houle, 2013, p. 69).

Moreover, for one participant in particular, being in an environment surrounded by
individuals with college degrees provided the necessary inspiration to return to the institution (Houle, 2013).

In addition to the “value” students placed on the college degree, all of the participants mentioned the importance of feeling connected to the campus. Specifically, the participants mentioned that a critical factor in their decision to return to the university after their academic suspension was whether they believed someone had a vested interest in their academic success (Houle, 2013). Houle (2013) stated:

If a staff person reached out to the student, the greatest impact was made because they felt someone was taking interest in them and that a part of the university had not given up on them. Once they felt like a staff person was on ‘their side,’ they wanted to do what they could to come back and succeed because they did not want to disappoint the people who have helped them. (p. 70)

Houle (2013) developed several recommendations based upon the data, several of which were from the students themselves. These recommendations include but are not limited to: (a) Allow students to continue accessing campus services/resources; (b) remain in direct contact with students placed on academic suspension; (c) employ more intrusive advising measures with students who are in academic jeopardy (e.g., students on academic probation), and continue advising students who are on academic suspension; and (d) enhance professional development opportunities for advisors, particularly as it relates to effective advising practices for working with academically at-risk college students (Houle, 2013).
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of academic suspension and to gain understanding of the deep perspective shifts and learning that may have occurred as a result of that experience. Furthermore, the study was designed to uncover and illuminate how students’ new frames of reference may have contributed to their subsequent academic resilience at the same institution from which they were academically suspended. This study fills a void in the literature on the academic achievement and persistence of academically at-risk college students. Specifically, it contributes to the dearth of qualitative research that explores the experience and academic resilience of academically suspended college students who are later reinstated to the same institution. The use of qualitative inquiry in the present study begins to give voice to those who have been largely silenced.

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology and methods that were employed to meet the purpose of this study. The chapter begins with a brief description of qualitative inquiry, and justification for the selection of a qualitative research design is offered. Information about the research site is provided, as is the criteria for participant selection. The methods employed to collect and analyze data are outlined. Finally, identification of the measures taken to ensure the goodness and trustworthiness of the data is provided, as is identification and discussion of the study’s delimitations.

Research Question

The following research question guided the data collection and analysis for this phenomenological study: How do students describe the experience of academic suspension both retrospectively and in the present day, and what meaning and/or learning do they attach to their experience?
Qualitative Approach to Inquiry

To understand the phenomenon of academic resilience, particularly among students who have been academically suspended and later reinstated to the same institution and, moreover, to explore the experience of academic suspension, a qualitative research design was used. Such a design provides increased flexibility in exploring an isolated subject (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Qualitative inquiry investigates the lived human experience. Schwandt (2001) explained that the object of such a study “is the life-world as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings” (p. 84).

Qualitative studies focus on the importance of the participant’s perspective and how it informs the personal meaning held by the participant (Creswell, 2009). “All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (Merriam, 2002, p. 39). That is, qualitative researchers are not only concerned with describing the way things are but also are interested in gaining insight into how things got to be the way they are, how people feel about the way things are, what they believe, and what meaning(s) they attach to various activities (Gay, 1996). According to Crotty (1998), meaning “is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in an object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it. . . . Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (pp. 42–43).

Creswell (1998) stated that qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). It is primarily inquiry based, exploring experiences through questions, narrative descriptions, and an analysis of emerging themes (Creswell, 2009).
Qualitatively oriented methodologies seek to gain access to the lived experiences of individuals with a goal of both describing and analyzing the activities and meanings that individuals attach to those experiences (Patton, 1991).

**Rationale for the Use of a Qualitative Research Design**

Manning (1992) asserted, “Qualitative research methods have much to offer the student affairs field. They can help make sense of complex questions, address the meaning present in a situation, and delve deeply into understanding another’s perspective” (p. 135).

With a primary purpose of the present study being to explore, describe, and analyze what meaning college students attach to their academic suspension and, moreover, to also gain insight into how the students were able to achieve subsequent academic resilience at the same institution from which they were academically suspended, it was necessary to utilize the inductive strategy of qualitative inquiry. A good qualitative study allows for an “up-close, deep, credible understanding of complex real-world contexts” (Miles, Huberman, & Saladaña, 2014, p. 43).

A qualitative approach was the most appropriate and effective research design for the present study, as it allowed for a more holistic investigation of the central phenomenon under investigation. Creswell (2009) shared that qualitative inquiry is a useful mechanism for understanding the experiences of individuals. Limited research has been conducted on students who have been academically suspended, and even less research has examined the unique subset of students who sought reinstatement after academic suspension and who, in turn, experienced subsequent academic resilience at the institution. Their stories—and their voices—are largely absent from the literature. College students who have experienced academic resilience have rich stories to tell about their experience and their ability to persist
and succeed despite their prior poor academic performance (Palmer, 2002). As such, a qualitative research design was critical because it allowed the researcher to “identify recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6), which resulted in rich, thick description being used to tell the story of the students’ experience.

Another reason for the use of a qualitative research design is that the research question was most appropriately answered using qualitative inquiry. Creswell (2009) noted that how and what questions are best pursued through the use of qualitative methods. The question guiding the present study focused on how students described the experience of academic suspension both retrospectively and in the present day.

**Methodology and Methods**

**Phenomenology**

According to Kockelmans (1967), the term *phenomenology* was first coined in 1765 in the area of philosophy, and it occasionally appeared in the writings of Immanuel Kant. However, it was not until Hegel that a well-defined technical meaning of the term was constructed. To Hegel, phenomenology referred to knowledge as it appears to consciousness and is the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and/or knows with regard to their immediate experience. This particular process allows one’s phenomenal consciousness to be unveiled through science and philosophy “toward the absolute knowledge of the Absolute” (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 24).

What appears in consciousness is the phenomenon. The word *phenomenon* comes from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, which means to show itself, to appear (Heidegger, 1977) —thus, the maxim of phenomenology: “‘To the things themselves.’ In a broad sense that which appears provides the impetus for experience and for generating new knowledge.
Phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Phenomenology is but one of many methodologies that informs interpretive qualitative research. When conducting a basic interpretive qualitative approach, researchers “seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspective and worldviews of the people involved. . . . By understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). In order to do so, researchers must seek to gain direct access to the lived experience(s) of an individual as he and/or she understands and deals with ongoing events (Patton, 1991). Such an approach is descriptive more than experimental in nature with a goal of better understanding or illuminating a process or problem (Hart, 1998).

To understand and illuminate the students’ meaning making, the researcher chose phenomenology as the methodology for the present study. This approach not only provided insight into the experiences of the students themselves but also helped provide an understanding of how the meanings arose. This methodology is based upon the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences (Patton, 1990). Moustakas (1994) noted that during the process of conducting a phenomenological investigation, the researcher: becomes an expert on the topic, knows the nature of the findings of prior research, has developed new knowledge on the topic, and has become proficient enough in recognizing the kinds of future research that would deepen and extend knowledge on the topic. (p. 162)

Phenomenology, in which the researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon from a context-specific perspective, is rooted in the philosophy of social constructivism, of which
the basic tenet is that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The goal of phenomenology is to capture the lived experience or to understand how individuals perceive and experience a central phenomenon. To do so, phenomenologists explore how complex meanings are built out of simple units of direct, lived experience(s). That is, phenomenological inquiry is primarily concerned with the essence or underlying structure of an experience or phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). According to Patton (2002), phenomenological inquiry seeks to answer the question: “What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (p. 104).

Some important concepts of phenomenology include “an emphasis on examining the pure experience, an attempt to personalize the experience by making meaning of it through the filter of existing mental structures, and an accounting of how each person exists in a social world” (Morse & Richards, 2002, as cited in Hoell, 2006, p. 72). Phenomenology emphasizes a focus on participants’ subjective experiences and interpretations of the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). From phenomenology comes the idea that “people interpret everyday experiences from the perspective of the meaning it has for them” (Merriam, 2002, p. 37).

Without the subjective view, valuable viewpoints are absent in the literature; such viewpoints both reveal and celebrate individualization within participants, and they provide evidence of commonality and differences. The present study helps bring those viewpoints to life. Phenomenologists, in particular, strongly emphasize the “subjective aspects of people’s behavior. They attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects in order to
understand how and what meaning they construct around what events in their daily lives” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 34).

Creswell (2009) described phenomenology as the study of the way several individuals perceive or report a common theme of some aspect of their life or some aspect of a specific experience. With that said, Polkinghorne (1989) noted that phenomenological research intends to “describe the structure of an experience, not to describe the characteristics of a group who have had the experience” (p. 48). As such, participant selection is a critical element of phenomenology, as it serves to cover a range of variation in order to provide richly varied descriptions. The researcher “needs to choose an array of individuals who provide a variety of specific experiences” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 48). Given this understanding, the researcher took care to utilize purposive sampling, which is further discussed in the Eligible Participant Selection and Participants sections of this chapter.

**Interviews**

Semistructured, individual interviews were a logical method to accompany the aforementioned phenomenological methodology given their broad use in many areas of research. According to Wertz (2005), individual interviews are a common data collection method for phenomenological researchers. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) asserted, “Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which to try to understand our fellow humans beings” (p. 645). In fact, “both qualitative and quantitative researchers tend to rely on the interview as the basic method of data gathering” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 646). Dilley (2004) espoused that interviews are “perhaps the most dominant qualitative research method” (p. 132).
Interviews cannot be understood in isolation nor can they be considered as a distinct, single entity, though. There are multiple methods for conducting interviews, a wide variety of types, numerous uses of interviews, and no common procedure for interview research, which contributes to their flexibility and applicability. In fact, Kvale (1996) advocated for rigorous, nonuniversal approaches to conducting interview research, noting that “interview research . . . if well carried out, can become an art” (p. 13). Ultimately, the act of data collection and meaning making is dependent upon the “skill of the interviewer obtaining it” (Patton, 1991, p. 394), and such skills are “unteachable by any method other than trial and error” (Dilley, 2004, p. 128). Rather than conceiving of this as a deficit, though, Rubin and Rubin (2005) contended that imposing positivistic methods upon qualitative research is not fitting:

Qualitative research is not looking for principles that are true all of the time and in all conditions, like laws of physics; rather, the goal is understanding of specific circumstances, how and why things actually happen in a complex world. Knowledge in qualitative interviewing is situational and conditional. (pp. 38–39)

Rubin and Rubin (2005) argued that qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. “Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 3). This open approach to learning is what the researcher used in the present study to begin making sense of the students’ experience. She wanted to explore the experience of academic suspension and resultant learning from their perspective, which was the central phenomenon under study.
Seidman (1998) also placed interviews within the context of qualitative philosophy, but he went a step further with his definition by relating it to the main concepts of phenomenology. “Interviewing,” he wrote:

> provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience. . . . Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action. (p. 4)

For an interview to be successful, there must be a sharing of responsibilities and an appreciation of “the collaborative nature of the effort” (Stewart & Cash, 2008, p. 2) by all parties involved in the process. Therefore, an interview must be interactional; there needs to be “an exchanging, or sharing, of roles, responsibilities, feelings, beliefs, motives, and information” (Stewart & Cash, 2008, p. 1). Furthermore, there must be a recognition that “interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 646). Each individual brings his or her own knowledge, experiences, ideologies, and expectations to the interaction. For the present study, semistructured, individual interviews were used, with the students generally guiding the conversation and offering insight deemed pertinent. This method of data collection was important given that, in qualitative interviews, “each conversation is unique, as researchers match their questions to what each interviewee knows and is willing to share” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). The open nature of the interviews allowed for an exchange of information between the students and the researcher.
It also allowed for a revelation of feelings and motives, which ultimately “[led] to new and unexpected areas of insight and exploration” (Stewart & Cash, 2008, p. 2).

It is important to note that a number of skills—physical, social, interpersonal, mental, communicative—embody the actual act of interviewing, but those alone do not determine answers to the research question; help the researcher understand the relationship between what was said, how it was said, and what the interviewee was actually attempting to convey; help the researcher extract themes from the data; or help the researcher analyze and interpret the data within the conceptual context or theoretical framework in which the research is being framed (Dilley, 2004). For such determinations, a researcher “must learn the skill of comprehension, the complex aptitude and competence of reflection and representation” (Dilley, 2004, p. 128).

“Interviewing is a craft: It does not follow content- and context-free rules of method, but rests on the judgments of a qualified researcher” (Kvale, 1996, p. 105). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not have a predetermined set of steps or formulas for collecting and analyzing data; there is “not a process that will generate or guarantee replicable results or investigations among any group of researchers” (Dilley, 2004, p. 130). This recognition was an important contributing factor for the selection of semistructured interviews as the method of data collection for the present study. During data collection and analysis, the researcher was required to go beyond what was directly said in order to work out the structure, essence, and relationships of meaning that were not immediately apparent. Use of other methods (e.g., structured interviews, surveys, etc.) would not have provided the flexibility and exploration necessary to achieve the purpose of the study.
**Institutional Review Board Review and Approval**

Prior to gathering data for the present study, an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans had to be reviewed and approved by the IRB at Iowa State University. The signed original application and all supporting materials were submitted to the Office for Responsible Research on September 26, 2013. E-mail correspondence between the IRB Administrator and primary investigator took place over the course of the month of October 2013, and the primary investigator attended the Tuesday, November 5, 2013, IRB meeting.

A few updates were made to the original application as a result of the aforementioned e-mail correspondence and attendance at the IRB meeting. These include:

- The number of individuals included in the study—including those involved in screening procedures—was increased from 20 to 50;
- The exclusion criteria for minors was further elaborated upon;
- The methods for recruitment were modified to include only letter or e-mail communication from the Office of the Registrar at Achieve University. Phone calls were removed as a possible recruitment method;
- English was approved as the only language to use for documents and interviews;
- The approved length of the individual interviews was increased from 30–45 minutes to 1 hour; and

- Participants had to sign an informed consent document giving the primary investigator access to their academic records (e.g., residency status, gender, race/ethnicity, semester(s) of suspension, semester(s) of reinstatement, grade point averages, etc.) before they could be released by the Office of the Registrar.
While attending the November 5, 2013, IRB meeting, the primary investigator and the members of the IRB engaged in dialogue about the importance of ensuring participants were not identifiable. Methods to ensure such confidentiality included obscuring the data (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, residency status, etc.) if appropriate and necessary and using androgynous pseudonyms. Given the small sample size and the qualitative methods being employed, the members also recommended scrubbing the data of identifiable names and locations if they could be linked in any way to the identity of the student.

A final approval letter was provided by the IRB administrator to the primary investigator on November 13, 2013. A copy of the approval letter and final application was forwarded to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Achieve University on that same day.

**Research Design**

**Research Setting**

This study took place at a state-supported, midsized, comprehensive, 4-year university in the Midwest with a total enrollment of around 12,200 students. For the purposes of this dissertation, the institution is referred to as Achieve University. The institution has an undergraduate student enrollment of around 10,500 students and a graduate student enrollment of around 1,700. Approximately 10,300 of the total population are full-time, degree-seeking students. The institution has a gender breakdown of approximately 7,100 females and 5,100 males. Approximately 11,100 are classified as in-state, resident students, 750 are U.S. nonresident students, and 450 are international students. During the 2012–13 academic year, the racial/ethnic breakdown was: 24 American Indian/Alaskan
Native, 128 Asian/Pacific Islander, 367 Black/African American, 313 Hispanic/Latino, four Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 153 two or more ethnicities.

Achieve University has consistently been ranked among the top in the “Best Regional Universities (Midwest)” category for public universities according to *U.S. News & World Report*’s America’s best colleges listings. It also has been consistently among the top 20 on a combined list of all public and private Midwest regional universities. The magazine’s ranking criteria include peer assessment, academic reputation, retention, faculty resources, student selectivity, graduation-rate performance, and alumni giving rate. In 2012, the mean ACT composite score for new freshman was 23.3. That same year, of the new freshman class, 10 percent were in the upper 10 percent of their high school class, 38.9 percent were in the upper 20 percent of their high school class, and 84.6 percent were in the upper 50 percent of their high school class. In the previous 20 years, the undergraduate rate of retention from first to second year had fluctuated between a low of 80.2 percent and a high of 84 percent. During that same time period, the 4-year graduation rate had increased from 26.3 to 37.8 percent; similarly, the 6-year graduation rate also had experienced gains, increasing from 62.3 to 66.3 percent. When compared to its peer institutions, as reported by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, Achieve University was consistently within the top third in both categories (i.e., retention rate and graduation rate).

According to the institution’s website, 99 percent of classes were being taught by faculty with a student to faculty ratio of 16:1. Most of the classes at Achieve University had fewer than 30 students, which allows for greater interaction with faculty. Numerous opportunities for student engagement existed via living–learning communities, internships, the National Student Exchange program, study abroad, collaboration with faculty on research
initiatives, on-campus employment, and over 250 recognized student organizations. Furthermore, approximately 4,300 students were living in on-campus housing. Achieve University offered over 90 academic programs through the College of Business Administration; the College of Education; the College of Humanities, Arts, and Sciences; the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; and the Graduate College. Furthermore, the institution boasted over 12,000 enrollments annually via video conferencing technologies, online courses, and onsite workshops through continuing and distance education and special programs. The website stated,

[Achieve University] offers the best of both worlds—a large university experience with a small college atmosphere—where you can really stand out and excel. It’s a great place to start your college career, finish in four years, and be prepared for success in the real world. (Office of Admissions, July 2014).

**Eligible Participant Selection**

Both convenience sampling and purposive стратегії were employed to select eligible participants for the present study. Miles et al. (2014) described convenience sampling as the selection of a case to study because it is accessible to us geographically and immediately. This strategy was important in helping to ensure the sampling plan for the present study was feasible in terms of time, money, and access to people. Although in the present study (micro level), the sampling strategy could be defined as a convenience sample, it is important to also situate this particular study within the larger body of literature on this topic (macro level). When considering this present study alongside the studies conducted by Hoell (2006), Houle (2013), Kelly (2010), Liberto (2002), and Robeson (1998), the sampling strategy could be defined as either comprehensive sampling or
comparable case selection. Such strategies help “increase confidence in analytic findings on the grounds of representativeness” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 32), and they also “strengthen the precision, validity, stability, and trustworthiness of the findings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 33).

Purposive/strategic is a common sampling strategy in qualitative research design given the focus on a case’s unique contexts (Miles et al., 2014). According to Esterberg (2002), purposive sampling occurs when researchers “sample research participants for the specific perspectives they may have” (p. 93). Maxwell (2005) further defined purposeful selection as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten from other choices” (p. 88). Patton (1990) argued that it is important to select “information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). According to Maxwell (2005), there are at least four possible reasons for utilizing purposeful selection, namely: (a) to achieve representativeness of settings, individuals, or certain activities; (b) to effectively capture the heterogeneity in the population; (c) to deliberately examine cases that are critical of the theoretical frameworks utilized; and (d) to establish specific comparisons to better illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals.

To begin purposive sampling, a researcher must first determine what criteria are essential in choosing who is to be interviewed (Merriam, 2002). Individuals who were invited to participate in the present study had to meet *all* of the following criteria:

1. Undergraduate, degree-seeking college student;
2. At least 18 years of age;
3. Enrolled in and completed (i.e., did not withdrawal) coursework at Achieve University during the Spring 2014 semester;

4. Enrolled in courses during the Summer 2014 term and/or the Fall 2014 semester at Achieve University;

5. Placed on academic suspension at Achieve University prior to the Spring 2014 semester;

6. Reinstated as a student at Achieve University; and

7. In good academic standing as defined by Achieve University’s Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy (i.e., the student must have had a minimum of a 2.00 institutional cumulative GPA) at the conclusion of the Spring 2014 semester.

In order to identify eligible participants, a query that included the aforementioned criteria was written against the institution’s student information system database by an individual in Achieve University’s Office of the Registrar on June 6, 2014. At that time, a total of 41 students met all of the criteria for inclusion in the study. Of the 41 students who were eligible to participate, the gender breakdown was 19 females and 22 males. The ages of the eligible students ranged from 20 to 44 years of age, with a median age of 24, a mode age of 22, and a mean age of 26.8. The eligible students represented each of Achieve University’s four undergraduate colleges. Of the eligible students, one was classified as a postbaccalaureate, 31 were classified as seniors, seven were classified as juniors, and two were classified as sophomores. Thirty-seven were classified as in-state, resident students, two were U.S. non-resident students, and two were international students. The racial/ethnic breakdown was five Black/African American students, one Hispanic/Latino student, 32 White students, one student classified as not reported, and two international students. It is
important to note that, per the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System standardized reporting requirements, international students do not get coded as having a race/ethnicity.

Methods Used to Contact Eligible Participants

All students who were eligible to participate in the present study received an individual e-mail communication at their Achieve University-issued e-mail account from the departmental Office of the Registrar e-mail account on June 6, 2014. The e-mail informed them that they were part of a select group of students who were invited to participate in a study being conducted by an Iowa State University doctoral student who was also a member of the staff of Achieve University’s Office of the Registrar. The e-mail outlined the purpose of the study, methods for data collection, compensation options, and the steps that would be used to ensure confidentiality of the data. The e-mail also provided the primary investigator’s contact information should they wish to learn more about or participate in the study. Eleven students contacted the primary investigator after the first e-mail communication was distributed. The same communication was sent out a second time, on June 13, 2014, to all eligible participants (i.e., 30 students) who did not respond to the initial e-mail inquiry. Seven additional students contacted the primary investigator, for a total of 18 students (i.e., a 43.9% response rate) expressing interest. Of those, 15 students (i.e., a 36.6% participation rate) agreed to participate in the present study.

Participants

Unlike quantitative research, in which a large sample size and random selection of participants is desirable, “qualitative researchers usually choose research participants for the specific qualities they can bring to the study” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 93). When conducting a qualitative study, specifically one that utilizes phenomenological methodology, it is
recommended that between five and 25 participants be included (Polkinghorne, 1989). Polkinghorne (1989) noted that phenomenological research intends to “describe the structure of an experience, not to describe the characteristics of a group who have had the experience” (p. 48). When selecting participants as informants, Polkinghorne suggested keeping in mind two specific requirements: (a) The participant must have “had the experience” (p. 47) that is the central topic of the study, and (b) the participant must have the ability to adequately and completely articulate the experience being researched.

For the present study, although 15 students agreed to participate, only 14 students were interviewed, as the data and emerging themes became saturated; that is, the same information was being heard over and over, and no new information was surfacing as data was being collected by the primary investigator (Merriam, 2002). However, it is important to note that only 13 students’ interviews were utilized in final data analysis. One interview was excluded due to the student’s inability to focus on and effectively articulate the experience. The characteristics (e.g., gender, age, etc.) of the study participants very closely resembled those of the eligible participant population (see Table 3). Of the 13 students, seven were male and six were female. The ages of the students ranged from 22 to 41 years of age, with a median age of 24, a mode age of 22, and a mean age of 26.6. The students represented each of Achieve University’s four undergraduate colleges. One was classified as a post-baccalaureate, 10 were classified as seniors, one was classified as a junior, and one was classified as a sophomore. Twelve of the participants were in-state, resident students, and one was a U.S. nonresident student. The racial/ethnic breakdown was 11 White students and two racial/ethnic minorities, whose official reported race/ethnicity is not provided to help protect from the indirect identification of the student.
Table 3

*Characteristics of the Eligible Participants and the Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Eligible participants</th>
<th>Study participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22 (53.7%)</td>
<td>7 (53.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19 (46.3%)</td>
<td>6 (46.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>20–44</td>
<td>22–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postbaccalaureate</td>
<td>1 (2.4%)</td>
<td>1 (7.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>31 (75.6%)</td>
<td>10 (76.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>7 (17.1%)</td>
<td>1 (7.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2 (4.9%)</td>
<td>1 (7.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-state, resident</td>
<td>37 (90.2%)</td>
<td>12 (92.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. non-resident</td>
<td>2 (4.9%)</td>
<td>1 (7.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>2 (4.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>32 (78%)</td>
<td>11 (84.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>6 (14.6%)</td>
<td>2 (15.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>5 (12.2%)</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>1 (2.4%)</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>1 (2.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>2 (4.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a*Not reported to protect from indirect identification.

Participant’s names have been changed to androgynous pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality, rights, and welfare of the participant identities. Furthermore, the use of androgynous pseudonyms makes it more difficult to ascertain the specific gender and race/ethnicity of the participants. Each student was given a list of names from which to choose a personal pseudonym; this was a process that they all seemed to enjoy immensely, as it helped bring greater life to their “character” and story. Names being used for participants in the present study include: Amari, Auden, Carter, Channing, Kai, Lennon, Micah, Milan,
Rosario, Rowan, Sasha, Shea, and Tristan. Additionally, to further de-identify the data, protect the participants, and augment the use of androgynous pseudonyms, gender neutral pronouns are utilized (i.e., “zie” in place of he/she and “hir” in place of him/her) throughout this study when referring to the participants directly. All participants were made aware of and agreed to the use of gender neutral pronouns and androgynous pseudonyms. Individual participant profiles of each of the 13 students can be found in chapter 4.

**Data Collection**

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (Spradley, 1979, p. 34)

The above quote from Spradley (1979) embodies the philosophy of the researcher in the present study. The approach to data collection that was taken was more than a simple recognition of a set of skills to be employed; instead, it was also a mindset—an approach to learning (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Moreover, data collection required the development of a sense of trust between the researcher and the participants, which was developed through openness and a respect of their gifts of time, insight, and privacy; for the researcher’s belief is that “the root meaning of ‘data’ is not something that is collected but something that is given” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 60). As a result, it must be noted that, throughout the duration of the present study, it was understood that securing a participant’s permission was not a single hurdle to be “jumped” via the collection of a signature on an informed consent document; instead, it required dialogue and an ongoing renegotiation between the researcher and the participant(s).
Rubin and Rubin (2005) stressed that the purpose of interviews is to find out what
others think or feel about their world. This notion is reminiscent of Patton’s (1990) remarks
about the purpose of qualitative interviewing, which he asserted is to find out what someone
thinks of a particular topic, so as to learn another person’s perspective.

Such an approach to interviewing must encompass certain elements. Rubin and
Rubin (2005) identified at least two of these as follows: (a) allowing and encouraging
individuals to describe their perspectives in their own terms and (b) establishing a
relationship between the participant and the researcher that requires a mutual sharing of
responsibilities/obligations.

For the present study, data were collected through the use of one-time, semistructured
individual, phenomenological interviews with each of the 13 students that lasted
approximately 1 hour in length. According to Esterberg (2002), the primary goal of a
semistructured interview is to “explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to
express their opinions and ideas in their own words. . . . To really understand the other
person’s point of view” (p. 87). This open, phenomenological approach to learning resulted
in interviews that were largely shaped by/structured around the students’ responses to
questions—with each interview being distinct and specifically tailored to each participant.
Esterberg (2002) called on qualitative researchers to “listen carefully to the participant’s
responses and follow his or her lead,” noting that “the exchange should be more like a ‘real’
conversation” (pp. 87–88).

The interviews were conducted in such a way that the researcher and the student were
collaborating jointly to construct and/or coauthor meaning on the central topic of study. The
central purpose of each interview was to engage in dialogue with the student to explore the
experience of and to elicit what meaning they attached to their academic suspension.

Furthermore, the interviews were designed to illuminate what students reported learning from their experience and to better understand how they explored and/or implemented plans to achieve academic success after reinstatement.

To help structure the conversations, an interview guide approach was utilized. Such a format allows the researcher to select a general list of topics to be covered without formalizing/strict adherence to a specific sequence or wording of questions. “The interview guide lists the main topics and, typically, the wording of questions that the researcher wants to ask. It also usually includes some ideas about follow up questions” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 94). A particular strength of this format—as used in the present study—was that it allowed the researcher to adapt her questions during the course of the interviews, so that they were more like a conversation, with the students (generally) guiding the discussions and introducing information they deemed pertinent to the conversation. Doing so allowed for greater flexibility and situational sensitivity, and it also afforded the researcher the latitude to ask, sequence, and segment questions appropriately for different students.

In the present study, the interview typically began with the student telling the researcher a little bit about himself or herself and about his or her educational journey. The researcher would then ask the student to take them back to the time when their academic performance was very poor, resulting in their placement on academic suspension at Achieve University—what was happening, who was involved, and what were the feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Together, they explored the academic suspension as well as what it meant at that time. The questions then moved forward through time, asking why the student wanted to seek reinstatement and what steps were taken. A few questions also explored what students
reported learning from the experience of academic suspension and how he or she explored and/or implemented plans to achieve academic success after reinstatement. Probes were handled in various ways: as aids to help the researcher flesh out questions, as prompts for areas a student may have overlooked, or as subquestions. Later in the interview, the researcher sought to evoke what meaning the student currently attached to his or her academic suspension.

Interviews were conducted over a seven-and-a-half-week period from June 11, 2014, to August 4, 2014. Eleven of the 13 interviews were conducted face-to-face at a date, time, and location of the student’s choosing. The other two interviews were conducted via phone due to the significant distance between the researcher and the student. Of the 11 face-to-face interviews, eight were conducted at various locations on campus (e.g., the library, the student union, etc.) and the other three were conducted off campus. When determining a location to meet, the researcher reminded the student to consider selecting a location in which he or she felt comfortable but also one that was semiprivate, where conversations could not be easily overheard given the sensitivity of the central topic under examination.

All interviews were simultaneously recorded using GarageBand for Mac and AudioMemos for iPhone. Unfortunately—and unbeknownst to the researcher and the student—the recording technology utilized stopped recording approximately one minute into one of the interviews. While a loss, the student graciously agreed to be interviewed again at a later date and time, so the story was not entirely lost. In fact, the second time the researcher and the student met, more information was disclosed, as the student had a greater amount of time to reflect upon and recall certain details of the experience. The researcher reflects on this in the Reflexivity section in chapter 6.
All interviews were later transcribed verbatim by the researcher and resulted in analyzable text. The text was then condensed, displayed, and used to find emergent themes so as to effectively and accurately draw and verify conclusions.

**Data Analysis and Coding**

Data were analyzed using an approach that consisted of phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation, and the data were then coded using a combination of emotion coding and in vivo coding as the qualitative coding methods. According to Miles et al. (2014), emotion coding provides insight into the participants’ life worlds, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings. It allows for this by labeling “the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant or inferred by the researcher about the participant. Emotion coding is particularly appropriate for studies that explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 75). In vivo coding is one of the most well-known and utilized qualitative coding methods, as it is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies. “In Vivo coding uses words or short phrases from the participant’s own language in the data record as codes” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). Miles et al. noted that words and phrases that are repeated often may serve as a good starting point when in vivo coding, as they often point to consistencies in the experience and give way to the worldview of participants.

**Goodness and Trustworthiness**

The goodness of a qualitative study has been described as ensuring that the results of the study are consistent with the data collected, or more simply put, that the study tests or explores what is actually intended. Similarly, trustworthiness deals with the question of how congruent the findings are with reality (Merriam, 2002). In essence, the validity of
phenomenological research involves the following question: “Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 57). Throughout the study, efforts were made to ensure the goodness and trustworthiness of the data collected, all of which are outlined below.

**Maximum Variation**

Maximum variation occurs when researchers purposefully seek out “variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of findings by the consumers of the research” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). In order to achieve maximum variation, all students at Achieve University who met the criteria for inclusion in the present study received an invitation to participate. Careful and conscious monitoring of the characteristics of the students who expressed interest occurred to ensure a representative cross-section of the population was achieved. In particular, attention was given to the gender, age, classification, residency status, and race/ethnicity of each student. The conscious monitoring of characteristics aligns with qualitative research practice, because “qualitative researchers usually choose research participants for the specific qualities they can bring to the study” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 93). As could be determined from the Participants section of this study, the characteristics of the study participants very closely resembled those of the eligible participant population, which speaks to a maximum variation of participants.

**Audit Trail**

According to Merriam (2002), audit trails are “maintained to provide a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out [a] study” (p. 31). Throughout the course of the present study, electronic copies of everything were
simultaneously maintained on a jump drive, on a laptop, and in an e-mail account. This electronic chronology of events comprised all the questions, responses, procedures, topics, personal thoughts, and decision points that encompassed the present study, much of which provided the framework for chapter 3.

**Reflective Journal**

In addition to maintaining an audit trail of the aforementioned items, a reflective journal was used to engage in critical self-reflection, which is a widely accepted approach in qualitative research. “I chose to make my experiences, options, thoughts, and feelings visible and an acknowledged part of the research process through keeping reflective journals and using them in writing up research” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 695). Keeping a reflective journal is a strategy that can enable reflexivity for the researcher. It allows the researcher to “examine personal assumptions and goals and clarify individual belief systems and subjectivities” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 695). The reflective journal provided a safe outlet—particularly for myself as a novice researcher—to work through my feelings, values, emotions, experiences, privileges, fears, and confusion. Ultimately, the experience made me a better researcher, educator, and practitioner as the writings revealed a journey of self-discovery and recognition.

**Rich, Thick Description**

In qualitative research, it is important that, in addition to good investigative skills, the researcher has the ability to draw people out, so that the participants provide rich, thick descriptions of their experiences. Such description is the result of the researcher “providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context, and hence, whether findings can
be transferred” (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). In an effort to ensure that rich, thick description was utilized, many direct quotations from the participants themselves were incorporated into the write-up; that is, this document is filled with their voices, their accounts, their words, and their worldviews. Doing so honored, valued, and placed importance on the students and their lived experiences.

Rich, thick description is important to include in any qualitative study because it makes the study more noteworthy and relevant to the audience. Additionally, it provides the audience with enough information for them to be able to determine “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 288), and it affords them the ability to “determine the extent to which the findings from [this] study can be applied to their context” (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). However, it is important to note that, given the variability of human behaviors, thoughts, and environmental contexts, “replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results” (Merriam, 2002, p. 27).

**Member Checks**

“Member checking is primarily used in qualitative inquiry methodology and is defined as a quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of what has been recorded during the interview” (Harper & Cole, 2012, p. 510). This is an important quality control process, as it provides participants with an opportunity to review their statements; add additional information, insight, or clarification that may have been overlooked; and ensure accuracy. Harper and Cole (2012) further suggested that participants may acquire a therapeutic benefit from performing member checks, as it can normalize the phenomenon or experience, allowing participants to “feel a sense of relief that their feelings are validated and that they are not alone” (p. 510).
Member checks were performed in the present study. This process was an important part of maintaining ongoing relationships with each student, as doing so allowed for continuing communication, and it demonstrated respect and appreciation. There are several kinds of member checks ranging from summarizing information and confirming with the participant the accuracy of your understanding to allowing participants to weigh in at the end of the study to confirm, deny, deepen, and/or clarify conclusions that have been drawn. In the present study, member checks took the form of allowing the participants to review and edit their individual interview after transcription had occurred. Although each participant was welcome to redact any information that had been shared, no one took the opportunity to do so believing the recorded experience was accurate and true.

**Positionality/Role of the Researcher**

To enhance both the goodness and trustworthiness of the study, it is necessary to provide positionality. Positionality is a practice whereby the researcher delineates his or her own position in relation to the study, with the understanding that one’s position may (knowingly or unknowingly) influence aspects of the research. Researchers must acknowledge that the dynamics of their experiences affects their viewpoint and production of knowledge (Thorne, 2014). As a result, one’s positionality is not static, but relational, a “constantly moving context that constitutes our reality and the place from which values are interpreted and constructed” (Geiger, 1990, p. 171). By reflecting critically on the self as researcher—the “human as instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183)—the reader is better able to understand how the researcher may have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2002).
I come from a home in which both my father and mother graduated from institutions of higher education with a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree, respectively. Being the youngest of three children, I watched my sister and brother attend and graduate from 4-year colleges. My mother was an educator in the secondary school system, and she instilled her love of education in me. I grew up being engaged in conversations about how to help students succeed. Her heart was in serving those students who were classified as “most in need,” which upon reflection, I now realize embodies my own professional practice.

As an undergraduate student, I was heavily engaged in the social and academic systems of the institution—intertwined in the very fabric woven to facilitate an educationally meaningful student experience. This integration contributed to my sense of place and connectedness, and ultimately, it contributed to my success at the institution. I was in the university honors program; worked alongside faculty as a research assistant; served as a teaching assistant for several classes; participated in an abroad experience in Moshi, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya; volunteered my time and talents in the community; was engaged in numerous student organizations; and served in several student leadership roles—most notably as student body vice president, a position that afforded me a seat at the table with university officials and administrators. My experience was one that profoundly influenced my professional career path, and it shaped my operating philosophy to be congruent with the mission, vision, and values of higher education.

Upon graduation, I entered the Postsecondary Education: Student Affairs graduate program, where I earned a Master of Arts in Education. During that time, I was fortunate enough to serve as a graduate assistant in the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students Office. I also worked in the Office of the President, served as a student
conduct administrator, completed an internship with New Student Programs: Parent Programs, and had two practicum experiences at an area community college in the Office of Admissions and in the Office of Student Life.

After graduating from my master’s degree program, I accepted a position as an academic advisor for the Classic Upward Bound Program, and I later went on to accept a position as assistant registrar in the Office of the Registrar. As assistant registrar, I administered the Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy. As a result, I worked with academically at-risk college students on a daily basis. I was able to hear their stories, educate them on their various options and resources, be a shoulder on which to lean when things got difficult, rejoice with them in their victories, and daily reflect upon and engage in conversations about how to help them succeed academically. In my role, I also served on the CARR, which considers applications for readmission from academic suspension. I also taught a course entitled “Achieving Success”; in fact, I developed the course as part of my capstone experience for the Ph.D. program. The course was designed to help facilitate the academic recovery and persistence of academically at-risk college students. It empowered students to be successful in college by equipping them with the information, tools, resources, and mindset that would allow them to thrive and grow. In addition, I met on a consistent basis with a select subset of students who had been readmitted from academic suspension to assess how they were doing academically, socially, and emotionally during their first semester back at the institution. I absolutely loved this position, and it was very formative for me both personally and professionally.

At the time of this study, I was serving as senior associate registrar at a different institution, and although I do not get to work as closely with this population of students,
many of the “tools in my tool belt” were amassed during the prior position I just described.
Thus, I have a high level of familiarity with academically at-risk college students. However,
my familiarity with and interest in this population is not limited to only professional settings;
both my brother and my brother-in-law were academically suspended. I saw the pain and
personal humiliation they endured. I watched them work through the experience and
consider its impact on their personal and professional goals. I also saw “something” change.
I witnessed a newfound determination and will to succeed. I applauded their reinstatements
to the university. I celebrated their graduation. Today, I take pride in their personal and
professional success.

My brother and brother-in-law, and the students just like them—those students who
were academically suspended, later reinstated, and who are able to achieve academic success
—both inspire and humble me. I often wondered: “How were they able to do it—to alter
their trajectory so drastically? What makes them unique as compared to other individuals
who never return to an institution of higher education to attain a degree?” They were the
inspiration for the present study.

**Delimitations**

Baron (2013) reported that delimitations are, to some degree, under the control of the
researcher, and in many ways, they describe the general parameters for the research.
Analogous to all investigators who establish a research design for their study, I bounded (i.e.,
narrowed the scope of) the present study in several ways. Although it is important to note the
limitations of any study, it is equally important to highlight the delimitations, too. For the
present study, I elected to explore a small sample size, which consisted of 13 undergraduate,
degree-seeking college students who experienced academic resilience at the same institution
from which they had been academically suspended. Furthermore, the students in the sample were drawn from the same institution, Achieve University, which is a state-supported, midsized, comprehensive, 4-year university in the Midwest. Finally, a conscious decision was made to explore the experience of academic suspension retrospectively as opposed to having students describe and document the experience as it was being lived and navigated in real time. Doing so allowed the participants time and distance to reflect and make sense of the experience, and moreover, it afforded them an opportunity to describe the meaning they had come to attach to the experience.
CHAPTER 4. PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) urged qualitative researchers to “assume a posture of indwelling,” which they defined as “being at one with the persons under investigation, walking a mile in the other person’s shoes, or understanding the person’s point of view from an empathetic rather than a sympathetic position” (p. 25). As the primary instrument of data collection, I was able to experience this “indwelling” first hand. I was fortunate enough to connect with each participant at a deeper level while they shared their stories with me – letting me into their private worlds for a while. Upon reflection, though, I realized that my readers should share that same level intimacy with the 13 participants in this study. Therefore, I thought it pertinent to include a brief profile of each participant, as in so doing the reader is afforded a deeper sense of connection with each individual.

Rager (2005) shared that “qualitative inquiry is not a purely intellectual exercise but rather one for which researchers enter the world of their participants and, at least for a time, see life through their eyes” (p. 24). Tillman-Healy and Kiesinger (2001) summed up such a challenge as follows:

When studying emotional topics, we become what Behar calls “vulnerable observers.” By confronting the joys and horrors of others’ experience, we face the joys and horrors of our experience. Because of this, we must ask ourselves before embarking on such a project: am I prepared to take on another’s full humanity and to explore and unveil my own? (p. 81)

Writing the profiles was an important part of the research process for me, as it allowed me to work through some or my own discordant emotions. Harris and Huntington (2001) asserted, “Thinking through and working with the emotional rather than just the
technical aspects of our interactions in interviews is important, and we would argue often neglected, consideration” (p. 141). In fact, it has been argued that failing to work through such emotions can detract from the quality of the research itself (Kleinman & Coop, 1993).

Each profile provides a glimpse of the lives and personalities of the 13 students who graciously gave of their time and insight for the present study. It was hoped these participant profiles would allow the reader to transcend into the worlds of each student, even if only for the briefest of moments, allowing better understanding of their lifeworlds and their pains, joys, and support structures or lack thereof. Moreover, doing so affords an opportunity to connect with the students individually and to be touched at a deeper level by their stories—eliciting something somewhere within each reader that makes one truly human.

A summary of the demographic data (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, classification, etc.) of the participants was shown in Table 3.1. As a brief reminder, participant names have been changed to androgynous pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality, rights, and welfare of the participant identities. Furthermore, the use of androgynous pseudonyms makes it more difficult to ascertain the specific gender and race/ethnicity of the participants. Student participants were given a list of names from which they could choose their personal pseudonym; this was a process that they seemed to enjoy immensely, as it helped bring greater life to their “character” and story. Names being used for participants in the present study include: Amari, Auden, Carter, Channing, Kai, Lennon, Micah, Milan, Rosario, Rowan, Sasha, Shea, and Tristan. Additionally, to further de-identify the data, protect the participants, and augment the use of androgynous pseudonyms, gender neutral pronouns are utilized (i.e., zie in place of he/she and hir in place of him/hir) throughout this study when
referring to the participants directly. All participants were made aware of and agreed to the use of gender neutral pronouns and androgynous pseudonyms.

**Amari**

When zie entered the room, I was immediately struck by the way Amari carried hirself. “Shy” is an appropriate descriptor for sure, but in some ways, zie could also be described as cautious. I stood to identify myself among the others who were nearby, and I extended my hand and gestured at the seat directly across from me. Amari approached the table and sat down. Hir quiet, unassuming demeanor was immediately evident. Zie quickly put hir head down and averted hir eyes from my gaze. “I cannot even begin to thank you enough for your willingness to share your story. I know that what you will share will be of great value,” I said. Zie slowly raised hir head, and hir eyes narrowed and fixed on my own. It was in that instant that the faintest of smiles could be detected upon hir face.

Amari grew up in a “rough neighborhood.” At the tender age of six, zie went to live with hir grandma. Hir mother lived in the same city but was not financially secure enough, nor mature enough, to raise a young child on her own. Hir father was never in the picture; he was in and out of jail, and he wanted nothing to do with Amari. It was evident that Amari was very bright. Despite hir passion for both school and learning, though, zie did not have much free time to dedicate to extracurricular activities when growing up because zie had to work. “I was working at . . . the credit union. . . . It was part time, but it was right underneath full time, so you could still be considered part time. I felt pretty much full time.”

At the urging of hir grandmother, Amari participated in Educational Talent Search in junior high and in the Classic Upward Bound program in high school. “I know that . . . in order to get . . . where I want to go, I have to have an education. . . . I knew that I had to go
“further” [than my family]. Given hir remarks, I inquired if zie was the first one in hir family to attend college, and if so, how it made hir feel. Zie was, indeed, the first one in hir family to attend college, and although that was exciting for hir, in many ways, it was overwhelming for hir, too.

It just feels like more pressure. . . . I feel like a lot of people, since they know I’m the first one, they’re more anxious than I am . . . to see what the future holds. . . . Some of my family, like, if they ask me how school is going or . . . what my plans are . . . it’s just kind of overwhelming.

Having grown up in the area, Amari wanted more for hirself after graduating from high school, so zie attended what will be referred to as ABC University. However, zie soon learned that it was too big for hir and that there was “too much going on.” Additionally, shortly after classes had started, hir grandma became very ill, so Amari felt compelled to move back home so that zie could help hir grandmother during that time. As a result, Amari returned home after hir first semester at ABC University and enrolled at Achieve University for the spring semester. Unfortunately, going to school, working, and assisting hir grandmother quickly became too much for Amari to balance effectively, and it had a direct, negative impact upon hir academic performance at the institution. Zie explained:

It was a lot of responsibility—doctors’ appointments, working more hours to help out [financially], having to go pick up prescriptions, and just stuff like that. . . . I guess, I really did know it was impacting me at the time—impacting how I performed. . . . But I felt like . . . I had to take care of my grandmother and help her. I just had to help her . . . and I put that before school.
Despite hir grandmother’s worsening condition, Amari never once considered dropping out of school. Attaining a bachelor’s degree was too important to hir; zie did not want to lose sight of hir dream, which is why zie described hir placement on academic suspension as “devastating”:

I’ve learned how passionate that I am about school because the way [academic suspension] affected me. . . . I just know how passionate that I am about school and how important it is to me. And I knew that before, but I just didn’t know it was that important to me.

At the time of this writing, Amari had one and a half semesters left until zie graduated from Achieve University. Zie was applying to various law schools and had dreams of becoming a lawyer who fights for the rights of the underrepresented and underprivileged. The passion and conviction with which zie spoke about hir future career aspirations was strong. Amari had a clear vision of what zie wanted for hirself and from life, and zie credited the academic suspension with helping hir to recognize and truly know what zie is “capable of achieving.”

**Auden**

Although I did not get to meet Auden in person, I felt a deep connection with hir after our phone call concluded. What a remarkable individual; one whose perseverance and insight I profoundly respect and admire. Many people who experience what zie had experienced in hir life would not be able to exude the positivity and courage Auden did. Hir personal journey was wrought with misfortune, heartbreak, and loneliness, but zie had not let that permanently harden hir into fear, anger, and/or shame. Instead, hir past experience empowered and emboldened hir to rise up and be a voice for the voiceless. Although I
cannot adequately share all of hir story in a few brief pages, I can highlight some of the
elements that impacted hir both academically and socially.

After graduating from high school, Auden left the state to attend a university zie
referred to as hir “happy place.” Zie described,

It was my first time living away from home, and I went there without knowing
anybody, and that was just a really empowering experience for me. . . . The whole
reason that I wanted to move out there was to start a new life for myself.

Unbeknownst to hir, a person zie dated in high school—a relationship Auden described as
physically and emotionally abusive—tracked hir down and moved out there to follow hir.
After realizing zie had been “discovered,” Auden made the decision to move elsewhere at the
end of the semester.

Auden noted,

The summer between when I moved . . . and before I started college [at ABC
University], I was raped . . . and it was extremely traumatic and damaging. And then
I had to move to [the city where the rape took place] in August, which was so
troubling.

Auden never sought help after being raped, but instead, zie carried that burden alone. When
school started in the fall, zie attended a few classes but did not have the types of interactions
with professors and students that zie was used to having at hir former institution.

Additionally, the classes took place in lecture halls filled with 500–600 students, and
“nobody really notices that you’re not there.” As a result, zie “got into the bad habit of not
going to class.” Moreover, the mere thought of attending classes with so many students was
anxiety-inducing for Auden, and to avoid that feeling, zie stayed home in the comfort and
solitude of hir apartment. “I was really unhappy living down there. . . . I pretty much, I dropped out. I stopped going to class, and I only finished one of my four classes.”

After some time, Auden met someone through friends of the family, and the two started dating. The need to be intimately close with someone else was all-consuming for Auden, but zie and hir significant other were separated by quite some distance. The two talked, and it was decided that Auden would move and transfer to a different college and that they would rent a one-bedroom apartment together. So, Auden moved during winter break to a new city and enrolled at Achieve University. Sadly though, hir significant other broke up with hir on Christmas Day.

Therefore, zie found hirself alone, in a one-bedroom apartment, in a new city, with no friends, and zie enrolled, yet again, in a different institution. Zie described:

I hated living there. . . . And it made me dread going to school. . . . With everything that had happened . . . I was put on . . . probably every single antidepressant in the pharmaceutical world. And then I had to be placed on anxiety medications. Then, they found out . . . that I had ADHD, which was crazy to be diagnosed with . . . at 20 years old. . . . I was dealing with a lot of . . . difficult stuff.

Never having been on medication, Auden had a difficult time adjusting, and zie spent a lot of time working with hir doctor to find the correct prescription and dosage. All the while, zie was doing hir best to attend classes at Achieve University and “just trying to make the best of a crappy situation.”

Auden recollected several days when zie felt so overwhelmed and depressed that it was physically impossible for hir to get out of bed. On the days when zie was able to force
herself out of bed, hir anxiety would be crippling. Being in a classroom of “strangers” would elicit a feeling like I couldn’t escape, or a feeling like I was stuck. . . . That first semester was definitely very, very difficult. I had nobody to reach out to, and I was just kind of a lost soul in the sea.

After that semester, Auden was placed on academic suspension—a moment that zie described as a “much needed wake-up call.” Zie shared, academic suspension really had me—it really forced me to sit down and think about the rest of my life and a 5-year plan and where I wanted to establish myself, and what I wanted to do after college. . . . I realized I wouldn’t be able to do all of those things if I left [Achieve University].

So, Auden made the decision that things needed to change—starting with hir. Just having that moment to step back and realize that, yes, stuff happened that was really bad. My circumstances were entirely crappy. But, it’s all part of the story—part of my story. . . . I now realize it’s all a piece of the puzzle that . . . has made me who I am now, and that’s huge!

Auden made a complete about face in hir life. Zie engaged in classes, established a strong support network, was working alongside a faculty member at Achieve University, and was getting ready to embark on a “dream internship” with National Geographic. Zie noted, I never fully gave up believing in myself. . . . I really feel like I’m going to do great things after graduation. It really just took some hard times to actually be able to enjoy some of the good times, I guess. And, I don’t know, I just have such . . . more . . . sophisticated appreciation of education, and . . . how important it is to me. I guess
that would make me unique because of how I view everything now as a puzzle coming to completion.

**Carter**

I think I came to [Achieve University] for the wrong reason. I came because my friend really talked me into doing it, and I don’t think it was exactly what I needed at the time. . . . I got pushed into it, but I don’t think I was ready for it.

Carter’s decision to attend Achieve University, as opposed to the local community college, upon graduation from high school was one zie regretted. Upon reflection, Carter believed zie was not mature enough to be successful in such a setting, and furthermore, zie struggled to fit in socially.

I didn’t know a lot of people, so it was hard for me . . . to talk to people. . . . I’m a really shy, conservative person, so coming into a situation where I didn’t know anybody was really hard for me. I feel like I just shut down. I didn’t want to go to class anymore. I didn’t want to be close to anyone. I just wanted it to be over. . . . [I was] lost and confused. I didn’t really know where to go or what to do. . . . So, I just stayed in my room.

Despite hir negative experience, Carter returned to Achieve University for the spring semester. During this same time, hir home life was beginning to unravel. Carter’s sister was arrested, and hir sister’s children were placed in foster care. Carter’s mother was trying to gain custody of the two children, but her attempts were unsuccessful.

That part was tough, and I didn’t have a lot of people that I knew that I could talk to. . . . I tried not to let it [family issues] bother me, but it’s hard not to think about it . . .
all day long. . . . At this point, I can see that that [family issues] really had an impact [on me academically].

After spring semester, Carter was placed on academic suspension. Knowing that zie could not return to Achieve University in the fall, Carter decided to move back home and enroll at the community college. Breaking the news of the academic suspension to hir mother was difficult for Carter: “She wasn’t very happy. She was devastated. . . . I think because of what was going on with my sister, she really wanted me to succeed. . . . It didn’t make me feel very good. I know I let my mom down.”

Carter thought zie could be successful just by having the support structure of home and hir mother, but hir family issues continued to worsen. By late October, Carter turned to drugs—opiates/prescription pills—as a method to cope with and/or escape from hir family situation. “How I got into it is I had a friend [who] was doing it, and I guess peer pressure pushed me into doing it. . . . I got addicted.” Carter’s mom immediately recognized the change in hir and knew what was taking place. She gave Carter many ultimatums but, in the end, the decision to get clean was hirs and hirs alone.

Ultimately, I did it for my nephews. . . . It was something that I had to do. . . . I’m still in a program where I meet with a counselor every month, and I’m not using drugs anymore. I’m still working on getting clean. I don’t know what to say. Obviously . . . it’s something that’s going to be hard for a long time, so I’m working towards it. I don’t feel like it’s an issue that I have anymore. I’m just trying to push my life forward from that point.

As part of Carter’s rehabilitation program, the counselor encouraged Carter to get a job to occupy hir time and attention. Additionally, the counselor believed that if Carter was
taking classes at the community college, working, *and* attending counseling sessions, zie would be busy and forced to manage hir time more effectively. Carter landed a position as a customer service representative at a store in hir hometown. Working in that position was one of the factors that motivated Carter to return to Achieve University to earn a bachelor’s degree. Zie explained,

*It wasn’t my dream job by any means. . . . That wasn’t the type of job that I would want for the rest of my life. . . . I wanted to succeed as far as being able to have something better in my life—a better career.*

Before applying for readmission from academic suspension, Carter spent time talking with friends and family about hir desire to return, and zie also wanted to gain insight as to what zie could do differently to ensure academic success:

*I knew that I had to spend a lot more time studying, especially reading textbooks. . . . And talking with professors. . . . It was, to a point, overwhelming . . . and I knew it wasn’t going to be easy. . . . But I wanted to succeed. After getting clean, I established new priorities for myself, and finishing college was the highest priority on my list.*

Carter was thrilled to learn zie had been granted readmission to Achieve University. Since returning, zie had worked hard to establish a new story for hirself. Zie noted, “I really want to graduate. When I got suspended, I let people down—I let myself down. It’s a redemption for me, and it shows me that I am able to do something [good with my life].”

**Channing**

After getting a few minutes into the interview with Channing, I had my reservations about whether or not zie would be a good participant for the study. It is not that zie did not
have the experience I was looking for, because zie did. In fact, Channing brought a much
needed perspective to the study that was not present otherwise, and as such, I really wanted
to hear hir story in particular. The issue I was facing was that Channing was painfully shy,
and I was having difficulty eliciting more than three- or four-word responses to the questions
I was posing. As our conversation progressed, though, we broke through a wall, and
Channing revealed hir story beautifully and without reservation.

Channing was the first in hir family to attend college, and the experience was
overwhelming. Transitioning from a small high school with a graduating class of 20 students
to a college of over 12,000 students was difficult. Additionally, Channing struggled to fit in
socially and academically. Each passing day left hir feeling increasingly frustrated and
isolated. “It was miserable. It was horrible. It just made for a really bad experience. . . . It
was very frustrating—a bad experience. . . . I hated it. I didn’t care about stuff.”

As the semester progressed, Channing spent more and more time in hir room, and zie
would make it a point to go home every weekend. When midterm exams came around,
Channing was notified that zie was failing all of hir classes. Zie commented:

I don’t like to fail anything—never have. I don’t know why I let it get to where I did.
I don’t have an answer for that. . . . I’m not one to give up on anything, but I guess I
did. . . . I eventually stopped going. To me, it was pointless. . . . I just gave up
mentally.

Channing found out zie had been placed on academic suspension during winter break.
Even though it did not come as a surprise to hir, zie was disappointed and felt like zie had let
both hirself and hir family down. Zie noted,
I did appeal it, but I didn’t really want to come back. I don’t know why I appealed it.
I guess I felt like I had to or that I should. Obviously, I didn’t win, which is good,
because I probably wouldn’t have done any better at that point.

Knowing that zie wanted some level of education beyond a high school degree,
Channing decided to enroll at the local community college. While zie did not think too
highly of an associate’s degree at the time, zie determined that it was better than nothing.

I was successful there. [After doing well academically] I felt better about myself. I
wasn’t a complete failure. . . . Classes were interesting. They were smaller. The
instructors . . . all had . . . real life experience, and that just made it more interesting.
. . . To me, it all just made more sense. Plus, I got to live at home, too.

Channing graduated from the community college 2 years later with an associate’s degree and
a police science certificate, and zie immediately accepted a position as a security officer at a
casino. Zie was very successful in the position and earned several promotions as a result.

Although Channing was pleased with hir position, zie longed to earn a bachelor’s
degree in accounting, and zie knew that meant zie would need to return to Achieve
University. It was 10 years before zie would re-enroll, though. She explained:

I waited longer then I needed to. I was in a pretty good position. When that
paycheck comes every Friday, you get pretty used to that, and it’s scary to . . . think
about giving that up. I wasn’t going to work full time and go to school full time; I
was too afraid of doing that. And I wanted to take classes on campus, not online. . . .
[ Achieve University] is known for accounting. They do have a really good
accounting program here, so I had to come back here. I had to show them this time.
Because hir first experience had been so negative, Channing was afraid to return to Achieve University, and in many ways, zie still had a chip-on-the-shoulder mentality with regard to the institution. Zie still blamed the university for hir poor academic performance and experience the first time around. However, that fear and anger had since been replaced by respect and admiration. Zie commented,

Exams came around, and I did well. That really changed everything. I could relax a little bit . . . and enjoy things more. . . . I think I always knew I could do it, but . . . that first experience just really messed with my head.

Channing has since proudly graduated from Achieve University with a bachelor’s degree in accounting, and zie was recently granted admission to the Master of Accounting program at the institution. After graduating, zie was hoping to accept a position as a certified public accountant in the area.

Kai

After graduating from high school, Kai needed to leave—leave the town, leave the people, and leave the state. Zie needed to leave the familiar behind and make a fresh start for hirself. Ultimately, Kai needed to free hirself, and the only way to do that was to leave, which is how zie ended up at Achieve University.

I wanted to get out. . . . to escape. . . . I could start clean here—start fresh. I thought, “Nobody here knows who I am. I can actually show people who I really am, and who I want to be. . . . I can start new and not have to worry about what happened in the past. I can escape all of the assumptions, fakeness, and negative emotions.”

Kai’s mother and father could easily be described as stern and judgmental and, in many ways, overbearing. Their high expectations and strict lifestyle created an environment
that was ripe for clear success or failure. In my estimation, Kai’s parents created such an environment in direct response to their own upbringings; they were afraid that, without such an environment, their children would fall prey to the alcoholism that ran rampant through the family. Kai explained, “My whole family is alcoholics, except for my parents. My aunts, uncles, cousins—all of them. It’s pretty bad.” Although Kai described hir parents as “strong supporters,” from our conversation it seemed as though their support was conditional, providing praise, love, and encouragement when things went well and isolation, punishment, and harsh words when things went wrong. Kai was the younger of two children. Zie described hir older sister, Eva, as “smart, talented, and high achieving. She has always been the golden child, and me, well, I have always been the failure.”

Kai’s entire secondary experience was spent in an expensive, small, private school surrounded by many of the same kind of students. Zie noted,

My “friends,” I would say, we weren’t really . . . focusing on what really mattered.

. . . When you go to school for 13 years with the same people—I went to school with at least five people from preschool through senior year—you start to hate each other.

Longing to have “real” friendships in this new setting at Achieve University, Kai often put social pursuits ahead of hir academics, resulting in procrastination and avoidance. That procrastination, in turn, brought about anxiety and depression—a cycle that, ultimately, gave way to drinking. Zie described,

I would get very overwhelmed, and I would have almost near panic-attacks.

Sometimes, I would just start randomly crying, and thinking, “I’m not going to get this done.” So, I would feel like a failure a lot. . . . I would be up all night studying, or attempting to study, but I couldn’t do it because I was too anxious. I would try to
sleep, but I would lie awake worrying. Then, I couldn’t get out of bed in the morning. . . . I was too scared to attempt to try. . . . I started drinking, not trying to, per se, get drunk, but just kind of . . . to drink to the point where you don’t feel the pain of failing anymore.

Kai started becoming increasingly more irritable and depressed and began isolating himself to a greater extent. When the alarm clock would go off in the morning, zie would roll over, turn it off, and go back to sleep. Friends would come by hir dorm room around 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. and find Kai sleeping. Zie noted,

I would wake up and be all stressed out because I didn’t go to class, and because I didn’t get the homework done. And it was just the repeating of the failure mentality. . . . I would hear, “You’re not going to get this. You’re just a failure. Why are you even in school?”

In response to those feelings, Kai would open a can of beer and start drinking. About three-quarters of the way through the semester Kai’s friends confronted hir on the excessive drinking. At first, zie disregarded their concerns, but they kept commenting that zie should not be drinking so much—especially in the middle of the day. It was not until a few weeks later when Kai was picking up the cans in hir room that it really hit hir: “I have way too many cans in my room. . . . Maybe they are right. I should be stopping. I shouldn’t be taking two garbage bags full of cans to the dumpster every week.”

Kai was at home during winter break when zie found out zie had been placed on academic suspension. Zie went downstairs to tell hir mother, and hir mom started crying. Kai’s mother broke the news to Kai’s father, whose response to Kai was, “Fix it yourself. You caused this problem.” Kai recalled:
It was probably one of the darkest days. . . . I just shut down. After I told my parents, I just shut down and didn’t even leave my room. . . . I didn’t talk to anyone. I just kept the lights off and just laid in bed with a blanket over me. . . . I was in shock. . . .

Feeling that rejection was harmful.

Two days later, Kai snapped out of that “dark place,” and came to the realization that zie needed to act if zie really wanted a change. As a result, zie reached out to the Office of the Registrar at Achieve University to inquire how to seek readmission from academic suspension. Kai drove to the state a week later to appear in person before the CARR to request early readmission from academic suspension—a request that was approved. Several members on the committee reached out to Kai, helped hir establish a support network, and connected hir with on-campus resources. It was that show of support that served as a catalyst for Kai’s academic success on campus. She explained, “It helped my morale that someone was still giving me a chance. It just shows that I can do it. . . . They showed that they cared about my education even though they had no idea who I was.”

**Lennon**

Lennon’s was the first interview I conducted for this study, and zie was incredibly friendly and open about hir experience. At the time of our interview, Lennon was enrolled in one online class; in fact, it was the last class needed to satisfy all of hir degree requirements. Hir excitement at the thought of graduating was contagious. In Lennon’s excitement, zie shared a story with me about the previous semester when zie turned in hir undergraduate thesis, which zie identified as the “last major hurdle” that zie needed to overcome:

I remember it was the Thursday of finals week. I’d taken my last final, and I knew that all I had to do was e-mail the thesis and drop off a paper copy to the professor.
I was making the walk [from the professor’s office] to my car, and I probably said to myself a few dozen times, “I did it!” I mean, out loud I said, “I did it!” I think I had a few tears in my eyes at that point—it was a really big moment. . . . It was a journey that started 16 years ago. . . . And it was over. I knew I had done it. I knew that [that moment and feeling] was going to be me with forever—no one could take it from me.

Lennon initially started college as a Nursing major, but that major choice was made more out of “convenience rather than passion.” At the time, Lennon was living with hir father and grandmother, who had recently lost her eyesight due to some health-related issues. It was Lennon’s grandma who had recommended Nursing given their proximity to the hospital. About halfway through the first semester, Lennon’s grandmother and father both ended up in the hospital with fairly serious health problems, and Lennon’s mother was evicted from her home. Not knowing how to balance being a full-time student with taking care of a house, paying bills, and providing moral support for hir family members, Lennon decided to drop out of school, which was a decision that resulted in hir placement on academic suspension. Zie commented, “It was just a lot to take on at the time being an 18-year-old kid. I didn’t know how to deal with it, so I just quit showing up.” It would be 14 years before Lennon would seek readmission to Achieve University.

After dropping out of school, Lennon did not really do much for 3 or 4 months because zie felt overwhelmed, lost, and depressed. Zie described,

I was living in my grandma’s basement. My brother had just moved in—since my mom lost her house—and we just spent a lot of time . . . together just playing video games. . . . I got a job the following year just stocking shelves at Kmart. It wasn’t
anything real fancy, but it was kind of my way of working my way back out into the world.

At that point in hir life, Lennon was a fairly shy person, and zie described hirself as “a heavier kid . . . I was probably 255 pounds at the time.” Three months later, Lennon had dropped 65 pounds as a result of the physicality of the job, and zie experienced a boost in confidence and motivation:

I was a lot more outgoing than I had been before . . . a lot of things changed about me mentally. . . . My outlook on life was a lot better than it was before. . . . It just kind of set me up to be a better person, and to be, ultimately, a better student later on in the future. That was definitely a key moment in my life.

Shortly thereafter, Lennon met someone, and the two became quite serious fairly quickly. After just 6 months, they were married. They both talked about returning to school, and one day they came across a course catalog that was distributed by the local community college. After reviewing all of the programs that were available, Lennon had determined that zie wanted to pursue the 2-year accounting program that was offered. Zie enrolled in that program in 2001, and by December 2003, Lennon graduated with a 3.90 GPA. Zie noted, I was a little burnt out at the time. I thought I’d work for about two years, and then I would pursue a 4-year degree. Well, two years turned into seven. . . . I started back [at the community college] to finish up my gen eds in January 2010 and got into [Achieve University] in January 2012. And here I am, just one class away from graduating [with a bachelor’s degree in Actuarial Science].

Lennon and hir spouse divorced in October 2013. The two had five children—three boys and two girls—who ranged in age from three to 11 years old. Zie recently took on a
second job at a local grocery store stocking shelves at night in order to make ends meet.

When I inquired how Lennon was able to work two jobs; take care of a busy, young family; and attend school full time, zie responded:

    If you believe in yourself and . . . you really want something, you can do it no matter how tough the road gets. . . . You just have to want it more than anything else. . . . I just have to keep saying to myself, “Don’t give up. Just don’t give up. Keep going forward.”

Moreover, Lennon recognized that zie is a role model for hir children and that they are all learning from hir journey: “I am doing it for them, too. They are a big motivator for me.”

**Micah**

At first, Micah seemed a bit nervous to meet with me. Hir dark, penetrating eyes seemed to be searching my face—for what, I could not say. I invited hir to take a seat wherever zie felt most comfortable. Zie began to scan the room and quickly took the seat nearest to the door. After placing hir backpack upright and directly next to hir on the floor, zie slid hir fingers underneath hir thighs. Hir body began to sway, almost undetectably, from side to side, and hir gaze fixed upon me. I could see a slight smile begin to form on hir face with the right side of hir mouth curving slightly upward.

    “Have you ever been here before?” I asked.

    Zie shook hir head and responded, “No. Well, I mean, I’ve been in this building before, but I just haven’t been in this room. It’s nice.”

    “Yes, it is,” I responded. “Actually, it’s one of my favorite places on campus.”

Micah smiled a wide smile, and I could see that zie had crow’s feet beginning to form on the
outside corners of hir eyes and a dimple on hir right cheek. “Zie likes to laugh,” I thought to myself.

I learned that Micah was the first in hir immediate family to attend an institution of higher education, and although zie did have cousins who attended college, they never had graduated. Micah’s parents maintained a fairly hands-off approach when it came to hir schooling, largely due to their lack of experience with such things. “I came to [Achieve University], and I didn’t know what I was doing. . . . It was a whole new experience. . . . That first semester was rough. . . . I got an F, a D, a C, and a B.” The first semester was “rough” in the sense that the coursework was more difficult than Micah had anticipated, and moreover, zie did not know how to fully manage hir newfound freedom, explaining, “I thought I could do whatever I wanted. I forgot that I was here for school. . . . I was . . . more worried about going out and partying and about being able to not have anyone to tell me what to do.”

After grades were posted that fall semester, Micah received notification from Achieve University that zie was on academic probation. At first, zie was shocked, and then zie was both nervous and scared. Zie thought,

“What if I can’t do this? What if college isn’t for me?” . . . I started out thinking that it wasn’t for me, and at first, I was okay with that. I don’t know why I was okay with it, but I was okay with it. . . . I was like, “It’s not for a lot of people.”

Micah began reaching out to several of hir older cousins who had gone to college but had not finished: “They all told me how much they wish they would have stayed in school because it would have benefitted them.” All hir cousins provided their individual insight about how important it was to have a college degree, and about how they were disappointed
in themselves for not having “toughed it out.” It was their remarks about the long-term benefits of college that gave Micah the comfort zie needed to return to school that second semester.

However, Micah came to realize that, at that point, zie was not attending college for hirself but, instead, for them; she noted, “It wasn’t something I wanted for me. I was just doing it to satisfy my family. . . . I don’t think I realized it was what I wanted until later.”

“Why do you say that?” I inquired.

Micah paused for a long while. Zie started wringing hir hands and would not look at me; instead, zie kept staring at the floor. From my line of vision, I could see tears welling up in the corners of hir eyes. I waited quietly, giving Micah the time zie needed to process hir emotions and compose hir thoughts. She continued, “It wasn’t until after my grandma died that I . . . started doing things for me. . . . It was really hard once she passed away for me to build myself back up. . . . I just gave up. . . . She was my source of motivation.” Micah’s grandmother and grandfather had come to the United States with nothing; they were in search of a better life for themselves and their eight children, one of which was Micah’s father. According to Micah, hir grandmother was the “glue” that held the entire family together. It was her dream that someone in the family would graduate from an American college or university someday and, in turn, that he/she would continue to improve the family’s situation.

Not too long after hir grandmother’s passing, Micah’s parents lost their home to foreclosure. It was then that Micah felt a strong pull to leave school and go help hir family through this difficult time. She revealed, “I ended up bringing it up to my dad . . . he got really frustrated with me that I would even consider leaving [college] to go help. He said, ‘No, we have it under control. This isn’t your issue.’” Micah was deeply hurt by hir father’s
remarks. Zie felt like it was hir issue because it was a family issue. Additionally, zie felt guilty for “bettering” hir circumstances by being at college, while hir family struggled to make ends meet. Zie, noted, “It was a very emotional time for everyone—not only for me being far away but also for my parents. They felt like they let us down. I felt helpless at that point because I couldn’t help them.”

Micah and hir family continued to face difficult times for quite a while. At those times when the circumstances seemed too difficult to bear, zie would picture hir grandmother and remember her advice: “Always do your best.” At the time of the interview, Micah’s family had a new home, both of hir parents had stable employment, and hir brother was getting ready to graduate from high school among the top in his class. Zie, too, would be attending a college upon graduation. Micah felt as though zie was on the right track, no matter how difficult it may have felt at times. Furthermore, zie felt certain that zie was in right field of study. Finally, Micah was completely committed to giving back to hir community and to fulfilling hir grandmother’s dream of bettering both hir life and the life of hir family.

Milan

Confident. Adventurous. Focused. Milan struck me as all of these and much more. School was not hir first priority when zie initially enrolled at the local community college. In fact, zie described the classes as “bland.” Milan spent most days working, and zie would attend classes in the evenings. During the summer months, Milan would go home and coach a sport for hir former high school. Not long after enrolling at the community college, Milan’s father suffered a major stroke. Milan shouldered the additional responsibility of taking care of hir family on top of working full time and taking classes. After switching hir
schedule around to better accommodate the needs of hir family, Milan began attending
classes during the day and working in the evenings. “The morning classes were full . . . and
there was more participation. I really got into it. I got involved with the Student Senate over
there. I also started a nonprofit organization and a club. . . . I was actually also Student
Senate president-elect.”

Milan’s growing engagement at the community college was a significant contributing
factor in hir decision to further pursue hir education. After researching hir options and
applying to a few different colleges and universities, Milan made the decision to transfer to
Achieve University. However, shortly before Milan enrolled, hir father suffered a second
major stroke and was forced to sell all of his assets and the investments in his name. As a
result, Milan no longer qualified for financial aid, which meant zie would need to finance hir
education out of pocket. Milan had just enough money saved up to attend school for one
semester without having to take out loans. After that semester, though, zie had to start
working; zie worked various odd jobs—debt collection, hospitality services at a hotel, life
insurance agent, and construction—so zie could continue to pay for hir education. Milan
reflected that, when classes started,

I wasn’t prepared. I barely had the books. I didn’t have the books because I didn’t
have any money. I could barely get to class [because of conflicting work schedules].
. . . I was just running myself into the ground—just going crazy. Something had to
give, and it was school.

This was a decision that ultimately resulted in Milan’s placement on academic
suspension at Achieve University. Milan continued working various jobs, but hir happiness
and drive quickly faded. Zie remembered,
just sitting in a computer chair and thinking, “I don’t want to do this for the rest of my life. I want to do what I want to do. I just don’t know what I want to do yet.” If I’m not passionate about something, I don’t want to do it, and that deeply reflected in my work. . . . I also thought, “If I quit this job right now, and I got a part-time job, what’s the bare minimum it would take to sit in the library as much as I could and just knock out school?” I thought about that every day.

Milan came across an ad on Craigslist for a professional rugby player who was needed in New York City; so, on a whim, zie packed up hir things and went, given that school was no longer keeping hir place bound. During that time, Milan learned much about hirself and hir true passions:

I . . . hung out with the Columbia University students. They really opened my eyes to digital advertising. . . . I think the best thing I could have done was expose myself to the world more. . . . That’s what New York City did for me—getting me on a path that I could actually see down the road.

Milan was even offered an opportunity to serve as an assistant to someone in top management at a digital advertising company in southern New York, but after careful consideration, zie declined the opportunity. When I inquired as to why zie did not take the position, zie responded:

I knew I was capable of achieving more. I wanted to finish what I started. . . . I knew this [graduating] was something I always wanted. There was never a thought that crossed my mind saying that I would not complete. It was always when, not if.

With just one semester left before graduation, Milan was focused and ready to embrace any and all opportunities that lay ahead of hir. Moreover, zie felt as though zie was
at a distinct advantage as compared to hir peers in the classroom: “Being a nontraditional student, I feel like I have a huge advantage over everybody else. . . . I’ve worked full time. I already have experience in my field and professional connections.” When I inquired if there was anything Milan would change about hir path, zie quickly responded, “I’d probably keep it the same. I can’t think of one thing that I would probably turn back and do differently. . . . I’ve just been exposed to so many great people . . . that taught me so much and changed my life.”

Rosario

I am not even sure where to begin when it comes to describing Rosario. Zie was definitely a person of extremes who was just then starting to truly discover hirself and to recognize and appreciate hir many talents and gifts. A self-described “transferring college pro,” Rosario had attended four different colleges since graduating from hir small-town high school. Hir experience included institutions of all types (e.g., a local community college, a selective liberal arts college, a research-intensive university, and a comprehensive university). Fortunately, Rosario asserted that Achieve University had become hir “home.”

The youngest of six children, Rosario had many role models whom zie looked up to, but none was more influential in hir life than hir oldest brother, Casey. He continually encouraged Rosario to exceed the family’s expectations. Zie noted, “We’re the only ones [who] ever graduated college, or even went to college for that matter. . . . It’s always been in my head that I had to. . . . make something of myself.” In addition to pushing Rosario academically, Casey provided a stable home environment, grounded hir when zie was “lost,” and helped hir find a major with which zie could truly “connect” at a personal level—Sociology.
When I met Rosario, zie was completing hir final course—an Independent Study in which zie was researching the similarities and differences in how males and females were portrayed as super heroes in comic books and graphic novels. It was hir hope that, alongside hir faculty advisor, zie could turn it into an article for publication. More than anything, though, Rosario wanted to help people in the same way hir brother helped hir. In particular, zie was interested in serving as a youth counselor, helping troubled adolescents work through their fear, anger, and sadness. Additionally, zie was considering attending graduate school in the future, so that zie could become an adjunct instructor of Sociology at an institution of higher education.

In high school, Rosario was heavily involved in music. Zie explained, “I was all gung-ho on doing . . . opera performance crap. . . . I was good at it, at the time, and . . . I was a two-time all-stater for honor choir.” Upon graduating from high school, Rosario attended a selective liberal arts college approximately two hours away from home where zie pursued a Vocal Performance major. Zie was drawn to the institution because it offered hir a scholarship; zie noted, “It was the highest scholarship you could get for music, so that was cool. But it was only . . . $5,000, so it’s not that much when it’s $30,000 in tuition and fees to go there.” Unfortunately, the distance from home was a bit too much for Rosario. As a result, zie was overcome with homesickness, which was only compounded by hir poor living situation: “I had a roommate who smoked pot a lot, which was weird, and the whole thing made me even more homesick. So, I left [after one semester] . . . and then I moved in with my oldest brother.”

It was during this time that Rosario attended an area community college for one semester before transferring to a large, research-intensive institution—ABC University—for
the next two years. Zie “wanted to be closer to home.” While attending ABC University, Rosario’s parents got divorced, which was “devastating and unraveling.” As a result, zie started focusing hir attention away from academics toward other interests. Zie described:

I saw an ad on Craigslist for a band [that] needed a . . . vocalist. So I was like, “I’ll join this band,” so I did. And then it was . . . 2 hours for me to drive to practice every week, and we were playing out live multiple nights. So I was like, “I’ll just move there, and I’ll just transfer colleges. That’s no big deal.”

Upon transferring, Rosario got a job with a financial institution, but zie was fired shortly thereafter for requesting too much time off. At the time, hir focus was not on academics but, instead, on the band, so hir grades plummeted. Zie explained,

I had the whole mentality that “C’s get degrees.” . . . I didn’t really pay attention to my grades because I was like, “Oh, I’m fine. I’ve got . . . two more years left of college. I’m fine. I’ll just bring them back up—no big deal.”

Further contributing to hir inability to succeed academically was hir ADHD, as zie noted, “I have a hard time focusing on stuff for . . . extended periods of time, so . . . my grades kind of fluctuated.” Rosario’s outlet for all of the negative emotions zie was feeling was to play music. In truth, hir parents’ divorce, hir inability to maintain a job, hir poor academic performance in school, the perceived lack of a support system, confusion as to a major and career path, and the band’s “toxic environment” was too much to handle. Zie stated, “I would just say, ‘Fuck it. I’m sad, and I’m going to play guitar instead.’ . . . I just kept to myself, I guess. I went inside of my little hole and didn’t socialize.”

It took being placed on academic suspension for Rosario to realize that hir life was spiraling out of control. Zie noted,
I think it might have been like a blessing in disguise, in a sense, to kind of get my head out of my ass. . . . Once [it] reality set in that I was getting kicked out of here—that sounds awful as shit—like, that shocked me enough to . . . kind of wake me up. . . . I was disappointed. . . . I was scared . . . really scared.

Rosario speculated that, had zie not been suspended,

I wouldn’t have been able to achieve my potential. . . . I wanted to do something worth a shit. I really wanted to inspire people. . . . Once I got suspended, I felt like I lost that opportunity to be able to inspire other people and . . . influence their lives in some way. . . . I remember feeling like I didn’t matter anymore.

Fortunately, Rosario used hir experience of being placed on academic suspension to transform hir life. As of this writing, Rosario had graduated from Achieve University with a degree in Sociology and was happily employed in the human services field for an agency that works with troubled youth. Zie was engaged to a “wonderful” person and was busy planning a wedding. Rosario had found a strong emotional support system in hir brother, hir coworkers, and hir fiancé, and zie was still planning to pursue graduate school in the near future. I could not help but smile when I was rereading the transcript of our conversation. In particular, I could “hear” Rosario’s voice very clearly in my head when I came across this particular quote from hir: “I just really like being able to go to school, and if I get a bachelor’s degree, in my head that means you’ve made something of yourself.” Yes, Rosario, you have made something of yourself. Additionally, I know you are serving as inspiration to countless youth. I am proud of you.
Rowan

“I was there at [Achieve University] because it was the expectation that I should be there. . . . Once I got in there, I just went off the deep end. . . . Pretty much all I wanted to do was party.” It was difficult for Rowan to reflect upon the person zie was 10 years ago. Zie summed up hir feelings as “guilt” and “regret,” largely as a result of disappointing the people who had taken an interest and invested in hir:

My aunt, she bought my textbooks for me. She had a daughter, but she died when she was 12, so she never got to buy her textbooks. That was her thing; she got my textbooks for me because she didn’t get to do that for her daughter. It was an emotional thing for her. She was happy I was there [at college], and I just pissed it all away. It’s a crappy feeling.

Rowan described hir childhood as one where zie did not spend a lot of time at home primarily due to the fact that hir parents were separated and the environment at home was often tense. Zie added, “My mom wasn’t super involved, but I was always a good kid, so she didn’t have a reason to be concerned.” Rowan first enrolled at Achieve University in 2003 as an Applied Physics major. Zie was an incredibly bright student—boasting an ACT composite score of 33—but zie failed to apply hirself to hir studies. Zie commented,

College is hard. . . . You have to study. You just have to put in the time. In high school, I never did. . . . I just wasn’t prepared for it. Once you fall behind, it’s like, “Well, screw this. I’m just not going to care anymore.”

Not only did Rowan find hirself unprepared for the academic transition but zie was also unprepared to appropriately navigate and handle the social transition that is required for
success in college. Rowan quickly wound up spending much of hir time engaging in unhealthy outlets. Zie described,

I was in a real social atmosphere in the dorms. There was alcohol, and I smoked a lot of marijuana. I didn’t really want to study. I just wanted to hang out and have fun.

. . . I partied pretty much all the time. I got a DUI my second week of school.

As a result, Rowan began skipping classes once or twice a week every week, which had a “snowball effect” on hir poor academic performance. Zie found that once zie was behind in hir coursework—particularly after having skipped the “foundational parts” of hir courses—there was no hope of getting caught up. This only further contributed to hir lack of motivation to study, in turn compelling hir to find solace in inappropriate social distractions. Rowan barely passed hir classes that first semester. Moreover, after spring break during hir second semester at Achieve University, zie “gave up” and stopped attending classes altogether. Zie noted, “I lived in the dorms for eight weeks after that—just hung out. Yea, I was that [person]—awesome.” After spring semester, zie was placed on academic suspension.

Rowan began working odd jobs—construction, call centers, and even handling 401Ks. Zie lacked direction and just wandered from one thing to the next, drifting through life without any real purpose or connection to anything concrete. Searching for direction and discipline, Rowan decided to join the Air Force in the fall of 2007. “I ended up going to my first duty station in Okinawa, Japan . . . in September 2008,” and zie remained there for 2 years. After arriving back in the United States, Rowan was stationed in Tucson, Arizona, for a year. During hir time in the service, “It was made very clear . . . there is a very distinct line between those with degrees, and those without—officer/enlisted. It was the difference in
leaders and followers.” After this realization crystallized, Rowan decided to enroll in online courses through American Military University, which is an accredited online school. Zie stated, “I finished right before I separated from the Air Force. I finished my community college with an Air Force degree in Aviation Maintenance Technology. Then, in conjunction with that, I had another AA in General Studies.”

Rowan was reinstated to Achieve University in January 2012, and zie began studying Electrical Engineering Technology and Computer Science. In addition to being a full-time student, zie worked third shift (i.e., Saturday night, Sunday night, and Monday night from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m.) as a mechanic at a local store. Many students would have felt overwhelmed by working a full-time job and being a full-time student, but Rowan thrived under the structure and pressure, mostly because zie recognized how important the work experience would be when it came to finding a job upon graduation. Zie explained, “I’ve been able to bring a lot of the work ethic to school to help me excel there. Then, conversely, I’ve been able to take what I learn in school and apply it back to the work place.” Rowan was hopeful that, after graduating, between hir degree and hir work experience zie would be able to do something that zie wanted to do, explaining, “then, it’s not really ‘work,’ so much as it’s a lifestyle.”

After working for a couple of years in the field, Rowan would like to return to college to pursue a master’s degree in Computer Science. In particular, zie has been doing extensive research on the program at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. Zie stated, “I’m already setting my sights high because I know I can do it.”

I, too, know Rowan can achieve anything zie sets hir mind to. When I met Rowan for our interview, zie presented hirself as a strong, confident, thoughtful, intelligent,
introspective individual, and I was very taken with hir overall demeanor and outlook on life. For Rowan, everything was an opportunity to prove to hirself just how far zie could go: “For me, it’s about the challenge. It’s about seeing what I’m capable of.” At the time that we met, zie had only four classes left before zie was eligible to graduate from Achieve University. Even though Rowan was starting to feel a little bit “burnt out,” zie knew that staying focused was the key to success. Zie stated,

Just put your head down and play to the end of the game; it’s the long game. Have your goal out there—that carrot that’s going to keep motivating you to push through it. You have to put your head down and just do it.

**Sasha**

When I asked Sasha, “Where does that fear come from?” zie replied, “The idea of not being good enough.” When I asked hir, “What makes you think you’re not good enough?” zie replied,

I’m an only child, and I disappoint them [my parents] a lot. I feel like if I’m not good enough for them, then I’m not good enough for anything; it just kind of transfers into everything. . . . Honestly, I think I’m worthless.

Of all of the interviews I conducted with my participants, Sasha’s was certainly among the—if not the—most emotionally laden. Sasha’s depression had cast a long shadow over hir life; it colored how zie pictured hirself and, furthermore, how zie interpreted the ways others viewed hir. Zie described hir depression as causing hir to “be sad or to not really feel anything at all.” In those dark and lonely days when zie was devoid of any real emotion and/or feeling, Sasha engaged in physical self-harm just so zie could “feel something.” As zie was disclosing this information to me, I noticed that zie was gently rubbing hir left
forearm with hir right hand; hir eyes were almost glazed over, as if zie were someplace else—far away from our room—watching hirself try to find a sense of connectedness and control through cutting. It was in that moment I came to understand why zie was wearing long sleeves and pants despite it being the dead of summer and at the height of humidity.

Sasha’s parents had hir start seeing a therapist during hir sophomore year of high school at the urging of hir English teacher and the guidance counselor, who both noticed some concerning remarks and thought patterns continually emerging in hir creative stories and poems. Despite being upset about the referral at the time, at the interview Sasha noted, “It helped me understand myself a little bit better.” Even though therapy allowed Sasha time for introspection, it did little in the way of addressing hir low motivation and self-harming behavior.

When Sasha arrived at Achieve University, zie did not really know anyone, and the academic workload was much more strenuous than zie had anticipated. Those two things, when combined with hir depression and low motivation, made hir transition from high school to college exceedingly difficult. Zie explained,

I was generally overall sad. . . . No matter how many times people told me to do something, I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. And no matter how much I told myself I needed to do it, I still couldn’t do it. . . . I felt like there was something wrong with me because everyone would be like, “Oh, I’m doing this. Oh, I’m working out. Oh, I’m actually being productive with my life.” Nope, I did not do that, and it was just frustrating.

After some time, Sasha became involved in the marching band and Kappa Kappa Psi, a co-ed band service fraternity. For Sasha, once zie got involved, hir entire collegiate
experience revolved around those two extracurricular activities. Zie noted, “That’s definitely where my friends were. . . . I don’t really have friends outside of band.” Sasha met someone in Kappa Kappa Psi who shared hir same interests and passion for band, and the two became romantically involved. However, this person was “more of a distraction than a motivator” for Sasha, and as a result, it was just one more thing to keep hir from going to classes.

Unfortunately, right before the end of the semester, this person called off the relationship, which sent hir into a downward spiral. After hir first semester at Achieve University, Sasha was placed on academic probation because zie earned an institutional GPA of below 1.00.

The next semester was more of the same. Sasha continued to throw hirself into the social aspects of college to the detriment of hir academics. Despite hir heavy focus on friends and student organizations, Sasha never truly felt fulfilled. Zie remembered, “I wasn’t really happy. I just didn’t care about anything.” As the semester progressed, Sasha continued to miss a significant number of classes, failed to complete and turn in assignments, and further retreated into hirself. At the end of the semester, a sinking fear set in as zie recognized being placed on academic suspension was a very real possibility. Zie described,

“I knew [grades] had come out because people would post stuff like, “Oh, I’m an honor student” sort of thing or ‘I’m on the dean’s list.” And I was like, “Oh, well, screw you, too,” and then I was like, “Okay, well, I should probably look at mine. I really don’t want to, but I should. . . .” I saw it, and it said “academic suspension,” and I broke down.

It was in that moment of being placed on academic suspension at Achieve University that Sasha truly realized talk therapy alone was not enough if zie wanted to achieve success in the way zie defined it. Notions of being “not good enough,” “not smart enough,” a
“failure,” and “worthless” flooded hir thoughts. With much trepidation, Sasha shared the news with hir parents. At one point during the course of their “difficult conversation,” Sasha’s mother said, “College isn’t for everybody, and maybe it’s not for you.” This remark infuriated Sasha, and zie retorted, “Yes, it is!” and stormed out of the room. When I asked Sasha to discuss why hir mother’s remark upset hir so much, zie responded, “I want that higher education. . . . Both my parents went to college. My family went to college. So, I feel like if I don’t, I’m not good enough for the family—that I don’t belong in the family.” So, Sasha enrolled in classes for the upcoming semester at the local community college, and zie also took the step of meeting with hir family practitioner to discuss the situation.

Sasha noted, “I got on medications, and tried them out for . . . a few months to get the right ones. . . . The meds helped tremendously. It was so much better.” When I asked hir to talk about that, zie replied,

I was generally a happier person. I actually wanted to do things. Like, I wanted to go to class. I wanted to succeed. . . . I wanted to do well. I was excited to . . . do homework—to get it done, because it actually felt good to get it done.

After one year at the local community college, Sasha earned an Associate of Arts degree and applied for, and was granted, readmission from academic suspension at Achieve University. Zie noted,

It was a very useful year at [the community college]. . . . I learned about myself. I learned what I needed to do to succeed and what my limitations were when I wasn’t on my meds. . . . It just really helped me understand myself better and how to handle all of my issues.
At the time I met with Sasha, zie was just one year away from graduating from Achieve University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in General Studies. When we spoke about the prospect of graduating, hir excitement was palpable and contagious. What is more, for the first time in hir life, zie believed that zie may actually perceive hirself to be “good enough.” The fact that zie was achieving success academically was the beginning of feeling successful and worthwhile.

I asked hir, “Tell me more about that. What do you mean you were excited to be successful?”

Sasha replied,

The whole idea of not being good enough—I wanted to prove myself wrong. . . . I wanted to prove that I was good enough and that I could be good enough and that I could succeed. . . . Wow, this is making me cry. . . . I wanted to show my parents that I could be successful. . . . I just really wanted to prove them wrong. And this wanting to be successful, and then being successful, I did prove them wrong. I’m still in the process of proving them wrong.

Shea

It’s embarrassing to be a failure. I’ve always been, I was always a success. . . . I didn’t want to disappoint my parents. I just didn’t want to face the embarrassment of being a failure and being suspended. . . . I’ve known people who have been suspended, and it’s just like, “God, what an idiot for throwing that all away. [Zie’s] so stupid. What’s [zie] going to do with his life now?” I didn’t want people to say that about me. So, that’s why all the lies.
I ended up interviewing Shea for my dissertation twice. The first time I interviewed hir, I did not realize that both AudioMemos for iPhone and GarageBand for Mac had stopped recording about 10 minutes into the interview. Fortunately, Shea was remarkably understanding and forgiving, and zie graciously agreed to reschedule the interview. In retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise, as our second interview revealed several new stories and reflections that had not surfaced in our initial interview.

Upon graduating from high school, Shea attended a community college about two hours northwest of hir hometown. Zie received a scholarship to play athletics but noted, I went there for the wrong reasons. I just went there because they offered me the most money . . . not because of the education. . . . I really didn’t look into the school at all. I just saw dollar signs. So, that’s why I went there, and then I ended up hating it.

After the first year, Shea transferred to a different community college that was closer to home, and zie lived with two of hir close friends from high school. The three of them carpooled to and from classes together. Zie stated, “I finished up there without a problem. I was done there in a year plus a couple summer classes. I got my A.A., and then I came to [Achieve University].”

Achieve University was “a different world.” It was filled with distractions, and Shea got caught up in the party scene. Zie would go to the bars and party frequently, spend all of hir of money on alcohol, stay up late, sleep in until late in the afternoon, and miss and/or skip class regularly. Zie began developing lies as a cover up for hir poor academic performance. It did not take long before Shea was so entangled in a web of lies that zie could not escape. Zie, explained, “It’s like when someone is on drugs, and they’re lying about where they’re
going, so they can meet their dealer. . . . It’s like that, except, I wasn’t on drugs. I just didn’t want to be embarrassed by failing out.”

Shea invented lie after lie so as to avoid the shame and embarrassment that the consequences of hir poor choices would bring about. For example, shortly before finals week, university officials sent out a campus-wide e-mail to all students, faculty, and staff about the dangers of West Nile virus due to a recent outbreak and the subsequent death of an on-campus student. The e-mail instructed people who suspected they had West Nile virus to stay at home. It even went so far as to discourage people from visiting the doctor for fear the contagion might spread.

I didn’t have West Nile, but I was failing all of my classes, so I just said I had West Nile. I found the e-mail from [Achieve University], attached the e-mail to a copy of a letter I wrote, and I basically blamed the university for telling me to stay at home. I remember writing, “I fell behind because I did what you asked me to do.” They took it as their fault . . . so they let me continue being on academic probation rather than suspending me.

Shea reflected on hir major choice during winter break and decided that the Business major was not what zie had expected, so zie switched to Elementary Education. Hir first semester as an Elementary Education major went fairly smoothly. Shea earned mostly B’s and C’s, and zie was “feeling good” about everything, as if zie was finally on the “right track.” Unfortunately, the following semester Shea decided teaching was no longer for hir, describing, “I totally flip-flopped, and started boozing all the time.” It was easy to do, as Shea was legally of age, and hir apartment was right above one of the many drinking establishments along Main Street, which was known for its active night life. Zie soon started
to fail hir courses, and rather than fail out, Shea did something “even more crazy and terrible” than before.

As Shea began sharing the following story with me, I could see tears welling up in hir eyes, and it was evident there was a lump in hir throat. Hir entire demeanor changed before me; the confidence and spark in hir eyes were quickly replaced with a heavy burden. Shea had an acquaintance who had been killed in a motorcycle accident about a year prior. Zie found the obituary for the person and edited the date of death to a more recent date. Then, zie printed it off and “made up a story” that zie was depressed by the loss of hir “close friend.” Zie went on to explain to the university official that the depression was keeping hir from focusing on school work. As a result, the administrator granted Shea a total withdrawal for the semester, including a full tuition refund, and zie “got off scot free.” However, zie said,

It’s really shitty. . . . I’ll probably never forgive myself for doing this, because I pretty much just tarnished him. It’s hard to swallow what I did. . . . I was in a pretty bad place. I will never be able to tell anyone what I did, and that’s pretty hard.

I was “the first and only person” with whom Shea had shared these stories and, furthermore, the only person to whom zie has openly admitted about being academically suspended. When I pressed hir as to why zie chose to share the story with me, it was clear that, for Shea, there was healing taking place through the act of sharing hir story, saying,

You don’t know me. I don’t know you. . . . So, I feel comfortable. . . . It’s bad to hold things in, which I do a lot. I tend to bottle things up, as you might have been able to tell. I don’t know. I guess I just thought it was a good opportunity to get some stuff off my chest.
Shea had concocted several other lies, one of which was orchestrated so as to take advantage of the “good heart” of hir aging landlord, so zie would not have to pay rent. Ultimately, though, everything caught up with hir, and zie was placed on academic suspension. Zie described,

It wasn’t a surprise because it progressively led up to that. . . . They didn’t tell me I was going to be suspended, I just knew. . . . One time I went to class, or whatever, and I just realized how far behind I was, and I was just like, “I’m going to be suspended.” . . . There wasn’t really anything . . . there wasn’t a lot of emotion about it. . . . It sucks, I guess, but there’s nothing I can do about it. There’s no one to blame. It’s all my fault.

After Shea was placed on academic suspension, zie bounced around between a few jobs and tried to makes ends meet. Zie told everyone who inquired that zie was “taking a break from school to pay down loans.” Because zie was no longer enrolled at Achieve University, hir parents stopped supporting hir financially. Zie commented, “I had to learn to balance financials and pay bills. . . . I kind of, just, matured and found my balance.” Shea decided to return to school after seeing the success of hir supervisor. He was a younger guy who “had it all going” and who was incredibly supportive of Shea returning to school to earn a degree. Zie, stated,

Basically, I just totally did a 180 in my mindset. . . . Before, it was like, “I don’t care about school; I just want to do everything else.” Now, it’s like, “I don’t care about anything else; I just want to do good in school.” It’s kind of weird.
Doing well in classes and, in turn, staying on track to graduate was Shea’s number one priority at this point in hir life. Hir excitement in returning to school quelled any fears that were below the surface. Zie noted,

I was just so excited about getting back and starting this new . . . chapter in my life. I basically got a redo. I was just so excited to be back and start doing this. I don’t know, it’s weird, because when you get back from suspension, you’re on probation right away. I mean, I knew I was on probation, but it was never . . . a second thought to me. I just knew I was going to get off of it. . . . I have no doubt I will graduate.

**Tristan**

Tristan was incredibly mature for hir age. Zie had a high level of responsibility in hir current position, which was a source of great pride for hir. For Tristan, obtaining a college degree meant that zie was bettering hirself, which ultimately benefited the company for which zie was working. It was evident from our conversation that hir primary motivation and sense of purpose derived directly from hir employment. It was hir job, coupled with attending classes alongside full-time professionals, that inspired hir to return to Achieve University to obtain a 4-year degree. Tristan described,

I started going back to [the local community college]. I started hanging around people [who] were working, and I saw their behavior and how they acted in class. I really liked the examples they were using in class and how they correlated to real-life job experiences. I just saw the difference in behavior and wanted to aspire more to that. . . . I felt like, “Oh, I’m a kid.” I wanted respect where I worked. I didn’t want to run the cash register forever.
Another key factor in Tristan’s decision to return to Achieve University was the support zie received from hir bosses and, moreover, their belief that zie was capable of more. Zie noted, “I saw the potential for growth [in myself] probably because my bosses realized I could.”

While obtaining a degree was a personal goal for Tristan, the whole notion of actually earning a degree, and then crossing the threshold into “adulthood” felt a bit daunting. For hir, it was kind of scary. . . . It’s almost like even though I’m grown up, now I have to be a grownup. Just actually getting that degree, it’s an additional pressure that now I have to use that degree. . . . Once I have it, then it’s, “Okay, now go out and be an adult.”

Tristan graduated early from high school largely because zie wanted to be “done as quickly as possible.” However, in hindsight, Tristan realized that zie was “too young to start college. . . . I wasn’t mature enough to understand what I was doing . . . the impact of the choices I was making.” Zie moved into an off-campus apartment with friends who were quite a bit older than zie was. Zie described,

I stayed with friends who were older—who worked at bars. Probably not the best situation for that age. . . . I was 17 and wanted to have fun. Friends were the most important thing at the time. . . . I chose to make my friends a higher priority than school.

As a result, Tristan found hirself immersed in the party scene and regularly skipping classes. Zie described: “I would stay out late at night the night before and just not show up to class. . . . Either I was hung over, or I couldn’t get up because I had been out until 4:00 a.m.” As a
result, Tristan started to feel increasingly disconnected from Achieve University, and the value zie placed on earning a bachelor’s degree diminished substantially.

When Tristan was placed on academic suspension, zie was disappointed, but hir disappointment did not emanate from regret for poor decision-making. Instead, hir disappointment and worry was a direct result of concern surrounding what hir mother would say. Zie observed,

I would say my mom is probably the person I’m closest to. If she’s not happy, that makes me sad. . . I remember telling her. She was disappointed; obviously, that disappointed me. She told me that I needed to figure things out. I needed to do things on my own. That nobody was going to fix it for me.

Tristan believed that being placed on academic suspension was a good thing—maybe among one of the best things that could have happened in hir life. Zie explained, “I needed to be suspended. I needed the wake-up call that I can’t just do what I want. . . I think it actually made me work harder . . . to prove I can do things. . . I like the way things turned out.” Tristan reflected that zie needed that academic suspension to recognize the impact of hir decisions and, furthermore, to learn the true value of a higher education. Later, at the time of the interview, when zie attended classes, zie wanted to be there; zie wanted to learn and make connections to the world around hir. Zie declared,

I want . . . to show that I’m capable for getting an A . . . I want to actually learn it. I want to apply what I learned in the class to the real world, to the working world, and to my personal life.
CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience of academic suspension and to gain understanding of the deep perspective shifts and learning that occurred as a result of that experience. The essence of these experiences were solicited by asking the following research question: How do students describe the experience of academic suspension both retrospectively and in the present day, and what meaning and/or learning do they attach to their experience?

The present study was conducted at Achieve University—a state-supported, midsized, comprehensive, 4-year university in the Midwest—with 13 undergraduate, degree-seeking college students who were academically suspended, later reinstated, and subsequently in good academic standing at the institution as defined by the institution’s Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy (i.e., the student had earned an institutional cumulative GPA of 2.00 or higher).

Constructionism provided the epistemological foundation for the interpretivist perspective that was employed. Phenomenology, which was used in this study, is but one of the many methodologies that informs interpretive qualitative research. This approach not only provided insight into the experiences of the students themselves, but it also helped provide an understanding of how their meanings arose. Data were collected via semistructured, individual interviews, and the student generally guided the conversation and offered insight deemed relevant. Data were coded using a combination of emotion coding and in vivo coding. This chapter provides a detailed description of the themes that were revealed after coding of the data occurred.
Themes

To clearly present the research findings, the data are presented in two sections: (a) retrospective exploration of the circumstances surrounding the participants’ academic suspension, and (b) exploration of the participants’ academic suspension in the present day.

Retrospective Exploration of Academic Suspension

During the course of the semistructured, individual interview with each participant, I would inevitably pose the following query:

Take me back to the moment when you found out you were on academic suspension.

Tell me how you were feeling and what you were thinking and undergoing at that time. Describe for me your experience and the emotions of the moment and the surrounding days.

The students all shared their personal story and the cycle of emotions they experienced. For a few of the students, the feelings they experienced were so overwhelming and/or all-consuming that they actually felt acute physical pain at the time they were academically suspended. For example, Kai said,

Negative pain—negative thoughts—can hurt me. . . . My body just reacts that way.

My body actually . . . hurts, and I think, “No wonder. That’s bad.” I guess it’s the shock to the system. I was just so overwhelmed that it actually hurt when I got kicked out of school. And, I don’t know, it just hurt, too, because . . . I said, I was a failure—I just let everyone down. “This is how I should feel,” I assumed. “It should hurt to fail someone.”
Although each student had a unique, individualized experience, several themes emerged from the data, including the following: scared/fear, shock, wake-up call, shut down, devastation, disappointment, worthless, and embarrassment/shame.

**Scared/fear.** Of all of the emotions expressed by the participants, feeling “scared” or “fearful” was by far the most prevalent. As I delved deeper into this particular emotion, it was evident that the feeling stemmed from different thoughts and anxieties; although the root causes differed slightly from person to person, they were also very much alike. Ultimately, the students’ feelings of fear and being scared emanated from one or a combination of the following: uncertainty about the future and/or next steps, loss of opportunity, or disappointing a loved one.

Being the first in hir family to attend an institution of higher education, Amari was navigating the academic suspension entirely on hir own; zie did not know who, if anyone, zie could to turn to for advice. “I mentioned [the academic suspension] to my grandmother . . . but after that happened, I didn’t really . . . talk about it with her or with my mom. . . . So, it was . . . scary.” Moreover, Amari feared that zie would not be capable of effectively using hir time while zie was away from college in a way that would allow hir to leverage hir chances for reinstatement. Zie shared:

It was kind of scary, I guess, because I was thinking . . . ‘cause this suspension was a whole . . . academic or calendar year, or something—a whole year. So I was wondering what I would do for a whole year . . . what would I be doing during the year? So that was kind of scary to think about.

Although Amari’s fear initially centered around uncertainty about the future and hir next steps both immediately and in the coming months, zie went on to further explain that zie
was scared about the loss of opportunity that may result from hir academic suspension: “I hear about people . . . when they take a break or sit out, they don’t go back. . . . So I was scared that that would happen to me. . . . I wouldn’t want to come back after the calendar year was up.” For Amari, that was just too much of a possibility given hir family situation and influences, and zie did not want that to happen, explaining: “I was just nervous as far as, if I didn’t come back right away, and . . . a chunk of time went by, that I wouldn’t come back at all.” Not returning to the institution to earn hir degree would mean that all of hir dreams would vanish, and that zie would be resigned to following in the footsteps of hir friends and family—that is, seeking a full-time job that pays minimum wage and enduring a life in which zie struggled to make ends meet.

Like Amari, Auden realized that all zie had worked for was now gone; instead of walking away from Achieve University with a bachelor’s degree and a feeling of boundless opportunity, zie was walking away with sizable debt and nothing to show for it but a transcript riddled with poor grades. Zie remembered asking hirself, “What’s going to happen? . . . What am I going to do? . . . How am I going to continue a life for myself as an individual if I can’t go to college? . . . What in the world am I going to do?” Auden went on to explain that the academic suspension required hir to pause and thoughtfully consider hir life—not just the past and present day, but hir future life as well:

It really forced me to sit down and think about the rest of my life, and a 5-year plan, and where I wanted to establish myself, and what I wanted to do after college. . . . I realized that I wouldn’t be able to do all of those things if I left [Achieve University]. Not only was that scary, it was overwhelming, too. To have everything—all that zie had known and hoped for—so easily slip through hir fingers was almost too much to bear. In
addition to letting others down, zie had also failed hirself, and that was very difficult to accept as zie knew zie was capable of so much more. Zie remembered, “It was really scary. . . . I wasn’t even sure if I was going to get the opportunity to prove to myself and everyone else that this was something I could actually do.”

Rosario shared Auden’s fear with regard to the loss of opportunity and what that meant for the rest of hir life, stating: “I really wanted to inspire people. . . . Once I got suspended, I felt like I lost that opportunity to be able to inspire other people and . . . influence their lives in some way.” That reality scared Rosario because it meant that zie would be resigned to working a “dead-end” job when zie knew zie had so much more to offer the world, and zie asked hirself:

What am I doing? Where am I at with my life? . . . I would have to work at McDonalds for the rest of my life. . . . If I had to work at a job like that for the rest of my life, I don’t think I could. I think because my brain works differently . . . that would have sucked because I wouldn’t have been able to achieve my potential.

When the full gravity of that realization hit Rosario, zie was flooded with fear: “I was scared, more-or-less, I was really scared. . . . It was scary. I was scared. I was scared shitless, basically.” It was at this point that Rosario broke down; all of the walls zie had built to protect hirself came crashing down around hir, and zie was left completely exposed and vulnerable, hir independence shattered. Rosario knew things had to change if zie was going to be successful, and so zie confronted all of hir “demons” (e.g., hir parents’ divorce, hir bandmates, hir anxiety) with the guidance of a therapist and the emotional support of hir fiancé—which was an experience that zie also described as “new and scary.”
Rosario also feared that hir parents would find out and be disappointed in hir for not having made better choices. Zie remembered, “I started . . . crying . . . and I’m like, ‘Oh my God! . . . My parents are going to kill me.’ . . . I think they’d be super disappointed. . . . I felt like I was letting everybody down.” At the time of the interview, Rosario still had not told hir parents that zie was placed on academic suspension because zie did not want to disappoint them. Zie explained, “My parents still have no idea that I was ever suspended . . . because I don’t want to let them down. . . . I don’t want them to find out. . . . I don’t like making my parents sad, and they’d be sad.” Although Rosario joked about telling hir parents about the suspension during hir graduation party, I could easily sense a hint of reservation in the tone of hir voice. For Rosario, it had been a very long and personal journey on many different levels, and to share some parts of hir story with others may diminish the triumph zie experienced since then.

Many of the students expressed similar sentiments with regard to feeling a sense of fear at the thought of disappointing a loved one with the news of their poor academic performance and resulting academic suspension from the university. Sasha noted, “[I felt] complete dread because I knew my parents would be really disappointed in me . . . I didn’t know if they were going to yell at me, ground me, or, I don’t know . . . and so I was just dreading that.” Tristan also remembered hir own feelings of uncertainty and fear, saying “I was worried about it . . . ‘Oh no! What’s my mom going to say now?’ I remember telling her. She was disappointed—obviously.” That feeling of disappointment was shared by Tristan, too.

Lennon also disclosed hir own feelings of fear at it related to disappointing someone zie cared about:
I remember being *really* nervous . . . about telling my grandma about it because I knew she was going to be pretty upset, and she was. . . . There was definitely a lot of nervousness and fear there because I knew that she was going to be . . . disappointed in me. . . . She was very proud of me for even going to school in the first place, and I knew she was getting on in her years; I knew she probably didn’t have a lot longer. I just didn’t want to disappoint her.

Lennon went on to explain that the thought of disappointment being the last thing hir grandma felt toward hir would be unbearable. Lennon loved hir grandma very deeply and wanted nothing more than to make her proud; however, dropping out of school and getting placed on academic suspension would not contribute to feelings of pride, so Lennon desperately wanted to “right the wrong.”

Lennon’s fear originally emanated from disappointing a loved one, but it soon evolved into fear about the loss of opportunity, as zie admitted, “I did have a little bit of fear for what that meant for my future prospects in school.” Lennon was very intelligent, so to have “stumbled” this drastically was new territory for hir. Moreover, to be academically suspended was never a position zie thought zie would be in. Zie noted, “I had to see the D and three F’s on my transcript. . . . I didn’t know if I was going to be able to get back in . . . and that made it a lot more daunting for me.” As the conversation progressed, it was clear to me that, at this point, zie was also struggling with fear surrounding what hir next steps should be. Zie said, “I didn’t know at the time what I was going to go back to school for. I knew it wasn’t going to be nursing! . . . I spent, probably, three or four months just . . . not really doing anything.”
Micah also struggled with uncertainty about the future and/or hir next steps. Zie shared:

I was first really scared and then ashamed . . . and then I got nervous and confused because I didn’t know what the next step was. I didn’t know who to tell. I didn’t know if I should keep it to myself, but I knew I had to at least tell someone because I didn’t know what steps to take. . . . I was like, “What’s going to happen to me? I don’t know.” . . . I was scared . . . and helpless.

Micah’s feelings of fear began spiraling into doubt—doubt about hir value, hir abilities, and hir decision to pursue a higher education: “‘Maybe college isn’t for me. Maybe this isn’t the right thing.’ . . . I was like, ‘It’s not for a lot of people.’ . . . I was almost freaking myself out more than I should have been.” Unsure of what zie should do, Micah reached out to several of hir older cousins who had started college themselves but had ultimately dropped out before ever earning a certificate or degree. Zie disclosed, “They told me how much they wished they would have stayed in school because it would have benefited them in their job field. Where, now, they don’t have the degree.” Micah appreciated their insight and thoughtfully considered how zie did not want to find hirself in their same position—saddled with student loan debt, with no college degree, and with fewer opportunities available to hir.

After reading the content of the academic suspension letter zie received, Kai assumed it meant that any future zie may have had was now gone. As such, zie was incredibly overwhelmed and scared, thinking “‘Now I can’t even graduate. I can’t even say I graduated college. . . . I’m not going to be successful.’ Like, all of these negative thoughts went through [my head], and I was just up all night just stressing out.” Kai went on to articulate
that zie feared that zie would not be able to graduate from any institution of higher education because no one wants a “complete failure.” Kai shared,

It said it would show up on your records that you were suspended from this school. I was like, “Oh, well, now I’m screwed for the rest of my future! I won’t be able to get into any university. They’re not going to want me. Nobody wants me.”

In addition to the loss of opportunity, Kai was afraid to leave Achieve University itself. For Kai, it was hir “new start” and a “safe space.” The impending reality that zie would likely have to return home due to the academic suspension was absolutely crushing. Achieve University is where Kai had found hirself—hir true self. It was where zie had been able to shed the protective cloak zie had continually donned in secondary school—a place where zie could let hir guard down. It was where zie had let the walls zie built up so high crumble—revealing a new life, a renewed spirit, and a newfound sense of confidence and self. Zie shared,

I chose this school. I want to stay at this school. . . . To . . . realize I won’t, I may not be able to stay here was a scare. . . . I just felt like my life was here . . . and I wanted to keep that life. . . . I found a new [home] for myself, and . . . I could start clean here—start fresh. Nobody knows who I am. Instead of in high school where it’s all fake. So that was a great . . . eye-opener; it was just like, “I can start new and not have to worry about what happened in the past with anybody.” . . . There was just a lot of negativity back home . . . I would say, so [Achieve University] has really brought out the positiveness.

**Shock.** Auden thought the change of scenery would be enough to bury the past; zie thought it would be the start of a new chapter, a new life, happiness, and success. But hir
past continued to haunt hir—to weigh hir down—and it would not let hir move forward. Zie shared, “This [academic suspension] was . . . an alarming thing . . . I was struggling. So, that’s when I first realized this was going to be really hard to finish what I started here at [Achieve University].” Upon reinstatement, Auden was doing well academically and emotionally. Zie attributed hir initial success to the summer course format, saying, “It’s a smaller class size—usually about 10 students . . . they’re shorter, so it was much easier for me to stay focused for that short amount of time—usually for 4 weeks.” However, when fall semester came around, Auden again began to struggle with anxiety and depression, which caused hir to retreat into isolation for solace. Ultimately, zie was placed on academic suspension for a second time. Zie disclosed,

The second one was kind of like, “Okay, I’ve been working really hard. I’ve maintained a part-time job and still been successful at school, and . . . I feel that I’m putting 100 percent of my effort into school.” . . . I thought that I had just been working really hard, and really done a 180 with my . . . school work.

The shock of having two suspensions on hir record forced Auden to sit down and think through hir life and hir short- and long-term goals. The thought process zie went through at this point is more fully explored in the Wake-up Call section.

Akin to Auden, Carter believed zie was doing better overall, so when the news of the academic suspension came, it served as quite a shock. Zie remembered:

I was surprised because I thought that I was doing a lot better. I was going to class every day the second semester, so it was really a surprise when I found out. I wasn’t expecting it at all. Part of me, I felt like there was some doubt—a little bit. But, I didn’t believe that it, it was just hard to actually realize that. I mean, there were some
classes that I didn’t think that I did the best in, but I guess I kept the optimistic mind
that I did better in that semester than what I did. I wasn’t happy—obviously. . . . I
was just shocked. It’s not what I expected. I thought I had worked out most of my
issues, as far as my academic issues.
Carter decided to move back home where zie would have access to a stronger support
system. Given the shock and significance of the situation, zie needed time to internalize all
that had transpired over that previous two semesters in order to determine where things had
gone “wrong.” As a result, zie did not want to immediately enroll at another institution: “I
felt that it would be a better idea for me to wait . . . before I tried to go back into a situation
that hadn’t worked for me.”

Kai was completely oblivious that academic suspension was a very real possibility, so
when zie learned of the news, it was a tremendous blow. Zie recalled,

A couple days after Christmas, I would say, is when I got the e-mail. . . . I was always
procrastinating on registering for class. So my mom was like, “Get your act together,
and go register.” And I was like, “Okay,” and I pulled it up, and I was like, “What
the fuck?!” I started freaking out. I started crying. I started throwing stuff around
my room.

Kai went on to share that the shock was so overpowering that it actually resulted in acute
physical pain. “Negative pain—negative thoughts—can hurt me. . . . My body just reacts
that way. . . . I guess it’s the shock to the system. . . . It actually hurt when I got kicked out of
school.”

Like Kai, Milan was unaware that zie had been placed on academic suspension, so the
news came as quite a surprise. Zie commented,
I didn’t even know I was on suspension. I really don’t read my mail. I found out through [the student portal] when it didn’t allow me to punch my information in. . . . I tried to sign up for classes, and it just wouldn’t let me. I had to go onto campus to talk to an advisor. They had to verbally tell me, “You cannot sign into your classes to register because you are on academic suspension.” I was shocked. I was like, “How long is that going to take?”

Despite the news, Milan did not slow down; instead, zie just kept moving forward: “I just accepted it. It is what it is. You can’t do much about it.” Hir response is very indicative of the type of person Milan is—constantly moving from one life event to the next without too much pause or concern.

Micah, completely numb from the passing of hir great-grandmother and dismayed at the foreclosure of hir childhood home, was shocked to learn zie was on academic suspension. Zie revealed, “That semester was when I got suspended. . . . I was almost clueless at the time because I was so oblivious to everything else, that I just didn’t even pay attention to my grades.” Despite the awareness that zie was on academic probation, Micah failed to invest hirself in the academic setting of the institution—zie was just too overcome by the other things that were happening in hir life at the time. The result was complete shock. Zie remembered, “I’d be in class, but my thoughts would be elsewhere. I couldn’t focus. At that point in time, school was not a top priority. . . . So, I think that made it harder for me.”

Micah went on to say, “I was really confused just because it came as a surprise, because I didn’t pay that much attention that semester to my grades and my grade point. I didn’t think it was that bad to get suspended.” However, Micah was wrong; it was that bad.
Similarly, being placed on academic suspension came as a surprise to Rosario. Hir response was a mixture of shock and anger, both of which emanated from feeling scared. Zie shared, “I got an e-mail on my phone, and I was at work that day. And I . . . saw it, and it was like, ‘You have been formally suspended from [Achieve University], blah, blah, blah.’” Rosario went on to share that zie started crying and that a coworker had to escort hir to the break room in the back: “I was like, ‘Oh fuck!...What’s going on? . . . I’m screwed!’ . . . Academic suspension came as a surprise.” Rosario was so upset, to the point where zie was unable to calm down, hir manager let hir leave early from work.

Upon arriving home, Rosario shared the news with hir fiancé, who was equally as surprised but incredibly supportive. Rasario noted, “I just wish that someone would have told me that I was on ‘warning’ or something because I just didn’t pay attention . . . up until this last semester, I couldn’t give a shit about my GPA.” It was that very attitude that had landed hir in this predicament to begin with. Rasario had been far too focused on doing what made hir feel good to the detriment of hir academics; for hir, it was about making music and playing shows with hir band—not about giving hir time and attention to hir coursework, hence the shock that played out upon learning the news.

**Wake-up call.** Lennon recollected, “I saw those F’s there, and . . . it was kind of a wake-up call. My grade point average for the semester was . . . pathetically low, obviously. . . . It was a blow to my confidence.” Seeing those low marks had an impact on Lennon because, for the first time in hir life, zie had failed—truly failed. For Lennon, that was meaningful because zie had been at the top of hir graduating class, had earned a 33 Composite ACT Score, was voted “most likely to succeed,” and had experienced success in nearly anything zie had endeavored to try. To Lennon, zie was unstoppable, so “failing those
classes was the first time I ever failed anything . . . it was a wake-up call. . . . It really doesn’t matter how smart you are, or how good you are; anybody can stumble and fall and fail at any time.”

Similarly, Carter also referred to the experience as a wake-up call—one that zie desperately needed if any changes were truly going to happen in hir life. Zie disclosed,

When I got suspended, it was like a slap in the face . . . like having a wake-up call type thing. . . . I had to use it not as an excuse, but I had to use it as a stepping stone as far as where I’d been and where I wanted to go.

For many students, the experience of being academically suspended was a difficult one, and it took them quite some time before they came to recognize the true importance and value the academic suspension had played in their lives. For Carter, though, the appreciation was almost immediate. Hir life was spiraling out of control between hir sister’s arrest, hir two nephews being moved in and out of foster care, hir own addiction to drugs, and hir poor academics. It took something as significant as the academic suspension before reality truly set in. Zie stated, “It was a wake-up call, and I think it was something that I needed to understand more of what I needed to do. I just think it helped me more than it hurt me.”

Akin to Carter, Auden also immediately recognized that changes needed to happen, noting, “school just wasn’t my main priority,” Zie added, “and after that first suspension . . . it was a wake-up call. It was very serious.” At that point, Auden began making changes in hir life, so many changes that zie fully anticipated success in hir academics, but that did not materialize, and zie found hirself on academic suspension for a second time. Zie remembered, “I needed that harsh of a wake-up call. . . . They are not messing around here. If I don’t do what I’m here to do . . . they’re not going to let me come back.” For Auden, the
loss of opportunity and freedom, the possibility that zie may not be able prove to both hirself
and to the world that zie could do this, was monumental:

I wasn’t even sure if I was going to get the opportunity to prove to myself, and to
everyone else, that this was something I could actually do. Because, I thought I had
come a really long way at that point already, and so to be kicked out almost so easily
again, when I had come so far, wasn’t really a slap in the face, but it was like,
“You’ve got to kick up your game—you’ve got to keep doing this. You’ve got to
keep working hard, and even harder than what you have been.”

Kai, too, remembered that sense of a wake-up call as a result of the academic
suspension. However, that notion came more from hir father’s response to the situation and
the pressure he placed upon Kai, as opposed to from the academic suspension itself. Zie
noted,

My dad wasn’t like, “I’m not going to support you.” It’s not like he was trying to
kick me out or anything. It was more like, “This is a wake-up call,” kind of thing.
That’s just how my dad is. And so . . . my dad’s like, “If you want to go back to this
school—you chose this school—you’re going to have to do the work. You’re an
adult now.” So, he’s like, “You’re going to have to make the phone calls and the
e-mails, and go to the meeting and what not. . . . You’ve just got to get your act
together.”

For Kai, though, it took a few days before Zie was ready to “get hir act together” and
figure out all of the steps that zie needed to take in order to seek readmission from academic
suspension. Even though some may perceive hir father’s response as being a bit harsh, it was
an empowering conversation for Kai when coupled with the academic suspension. It was at
that moment Kai “grew up” and realized what zie wanted; it was then when zie chose to stop worrying about what everyone else wanted for hir, and zie started taking action and responsibility for hirself. Zie remembered asserting, “This is my school. I chose this school. I want to stay in this school. . . . My life was here at [Achieve University], and I wanted to keep that life. I was willing to do whatever it took to come back.”

Rosario embraced the academic suspension as a challenge that needed to be overcome, and zie credited hir “stubborn nature” for hir ability to do so: “I saw it as a challenge, and sometimes a challenge is something that a person needs to . . . get out of a slump.” Rosario went on to share that it was the whole idea of “the wake-up call and getting a kick in the ass, to get your head out of your ass, type of thing. Like, just being challenged to do something. . . . I thought, ‘I’ve got to prove them wrong now.’”

Tristan also referred to hir academic suspension as a wake-up call—and a much needed one at that: “I needed to be suspended. I needed the wake-up call that I can’t just do what I want.” Prior to the academic suspension, Tristan did not realize the self-destructive behaviors in which zie was engaging; but, seeing the academic suspension on paper brought everything to a screeching halt. As a result, Tristan decided to take time away from school to reassess hir life and the many poor decisions zie had made.

**Shut down.** Some participants were so overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation that they described themselves as shutting down—be it expressly or indirectly. For these students, their ability to cope with the situation amounted to completely blocking out the world around them in an effort to find safety and security within themselves. They were grasping for something, anything, that could provide some semblance of order, which in turn, would give them greater understanding and a way to move forward.
Micah shared, “I derailed. I just didn’t do anything. . . . I just couldn’t get out of bed.” Micah went on to share that hir friends were critical at this point, as they recognized that zie was in a “bad place.” “I’m normally upbeat around the house or doing something. [My friends] could tell that something was wrong.” Despite their best efforts to get at the core of hir distress, Micah would not relent; zie would sit in silence staring at the ceiling and thinking of all zie had lost. Ultimately, hir friends were able to convince hir to seek help—via counseling—before it was too late. Zie expressed, “My friends definitely helped me. My parents, them being 2 hours away, tried helping, but they didn’t really fully see the picture of it.”

Despite being a self-described “extrovert,” Rosario could not bring hirself to talk with anybody because it was too difficult to face the reality of what had happened. Zie remembered, “I went inside of my little hole. I kept to myself and didn’t socialize.” In hir mind, not only had zie “failed hir family,” but zie had failed hirself, too, and ruined hir chances to chart a new trajectory in life: “I just kind of went into a little hole by myself because I was sad.” Because neither of Rosario’s parents had gone to college, nor had hir fiancé, zie felt lonely and thought no one could truly understand hir situation. Zie stated, “I didn’t have anybody to talk to, really. . . . Even my fiancé, he didn’t go to college, so he wasn’t, he doesn’t really know what it’s like. . . . So I just kind of kept to myself.”

Like Rosario, Kai, too, placed an incredible amount of pressure on hirself. Kai remembered,

The day I was suspended, it was probably one of the darkest days. I was just like blah. Immediately, I just shut down. After I told my parents, I just shut down and didn’t even leave my room. . . . I didn’t talk to anyone. I just kept the lights off and
just [lay] in bed with the blanket over me. And whenever I went out, I just grabbed water and something small to eat and went back to my room. I didn’t acknowledge anyone. I didn’t text or call anyone. I didn’t even go on the Internet. I just, I just shut down. I was in shock.

For Kai, it was just another way zie had come to serve as a “disappointment” for hir family—the “black sheep” of sorts. In Kai’s estimation, hir sister, Eva, was the “perfect one.” Zie noted, “Eva is successful, so they’re happy for her. They’re proud of her. And then there’s me . . . I’m just giving them grief and messing up too much.” Feeling at an utter loss as to how to move beyond the immediate situation, Kai just shut down, completely unable to think, act, and react in the moment and in the surrounding days.

When Auden described hirself as shutting down, it did not look quite like the aforementioned scenarios. Instead, zie was more crippled by the myriad of emotions zie was experiencing and a fear of the unknown. Zie revealed, “It was just so many emotions, and definitely not very many good ones . . . It was just such a huge weight hanging over my head constantly day and night.” Auden went on to describe how zie was unable to navigate the other aspects of hir life because the academic suspension had shattered hir only chance to earn a degree. All zie hoped for and clung to during the “living Hell” was gone, which only compounded hir anxiety and depression. Zie noted, “That just affects all other realms of your life when you’re dealing with something . . . something like finishing your college education. When something that huge is on the line, it’s really hard to do anything else with your life.

**Devastation.** Many of the students specifically referenced the emotion or feeling of devastation upon learning that they had been placed on academic suspension. Amari shared,
“When it actually happened, umm, it was really . . . devastating. . . . I started crying . . . I just didn’t know the feeling of that before, until that, until then, I mean. So, it was just so different to experience.” Similarly, Micah stated, “When I found out, I was devastated . . . [Achieve University] sent the letter that I was suspended, and I cried when I saw it.”

Not all of the students recognized the feeling of devastation, though. Instead, they described the experience of having their plans ruined or destroyed. Carter noted, “I had always wanted to graduate, so to find out that at that point it wasn’t happening as I had planned, it was pretty tough to handle.” Carter went on to explain that zie felt like all of the time zie had spent in school was “completely wasted” and that hir life was, ultimately, “over”; zie could not continue on in life because all possible avenues were now unavailable to hir. Zie would be stuck working a dead-end job and struggling to make ends meet for the rest of hir life.

Sasha knew that the possibility of academic suspension was very real, but the blow rendered by the confirmation was no less powerful. Zie said,

I knew the possibility was there and that I was on [academic] probation. And I knew it was going to be a really close call. . . . I was kind of waiting for a really long time to actually look at my grades. I knew they had come out because people would post stuff like, “Oh, I’m an honor student,” sort of thing or “I’m on the dean’s List,” and I was like, “Oh, well screw you, too!” And then I was like, “Okay, well I should probably look at mine. I really don’t want to, but I should.” . . . I got really confused because I didn’t know what meant what, and then I saw it, and it said, “academic suspension.” I broke down . . . a lot. . . . I cried for like a week. It was bad.
Fortunately for Sasha, zie had a fairly strong support system at home. Hir parents walked through the experience alongside hir, which was not true for all of the students; that is, some of the participants experienced the academic suspension in complete isolation, be it by choice, because they did not think the people in their support system would understand, or because their “support systems” responded initially coldly when told about the situation. For example, Kai shared:

I went downstairs and told my mom, “I’ve been put on academic suspension,” and she started crying. And I was like, “Now I have to wait until dad wakes up to tell him about all of this.” My mom was like, “No, I’ll tell him. You just stay right here.” So she went up and told him, and he called me in. He said, “Fix it yourself. You caused this problem.” And, so, I just felt devastated because . . . I’d disappointed my parents—completely failed them.

Whereas Kai immediately reached out to hir parents upon learning the bad news, Shea kept it to hirself. Zie articulated several times throughout the interview that zie specifically chose not to share the information with anyone largely due to the fact that doing so was just too emotionally difficult for hir. In fact, I was the first person zie had ever talked to about this experience; zie stated, “It’s hard to swallow what I did. . . . I was in a pretty bad place. That I would never be able to tell anyone what I did there, and that’s pretty hard.”

Micah, too, chose to refrain from sharing the information about hir academic suspension with anyone, explaining, “It was easier for me that way. . . . Not talking about it almost made it like it didn’t really happen. . . . That made it easier, I guess. I thought it was a personal matter; it’s no one’s business, really, that this happened.” For Micah, the conscious decision not to share the information—to not acknowledge that zie had been placed on
academic suspension—was largely a way for hir to cope with the devastation. By not thinking about it, by ignoring it, zie did not give it any power over hir life, or so zie thought.

**Disappointment.** Many of the participants in the study experienced disappointment and sadness as a result of their nonfulfillment of hopes or expectations. The perceived loss of opportunity was very real for Rosario, who stated, “It has always been in my head that I had to . . . make something of myself, I guess. Because my parents never went to school or anything. . . . I felt like I was letting everybody down, and so I . . . cried.” Rosario was one of five children, and zie felt like everyone was looking to hir to change the trajectory of the family—to chart a new path by earning a college degree and, thus, securing a “decent job” and a new standard of living. However, upon learning zie was on academic suspension, hir world came crashing down around hir. “Whatever, I’m screwed. . . . I was just disappointed.”

Like Rosario, Channing believed zie had let hir family down, too. Channing disclosed:

I felt like I let myself down, and probably my family. . . . I was the first person that would have—in my family—that would have graduated college. . . . They weren’t really disappointed, or maybe they were and just didn’t show it; I don’t know. But, I did disappoint myself . . . I do know that.

The very next day, Channing enrolled hirself at the area community college. Zie explained, “I felt that I needed to do something. I couldn’t just quit—not after one semester; that’s not enough.” Zie used that disappointment as a motivation to seek out other educational opportunities, which is also what Lennon did. Lennon shared, “I had felt that moment of defeat. . . . I knew I wanted to take on that challenge [returning to a 4-year
college], but I, I didn’t have a time table for it.” Instead, Lennon enrolled at the area community college and focused on doing well in classes. Zie stated,

I just kind of made the decision on my own. . . . I didn’t tell my grandma about it right away because I knew she was going to be really disappointed in me. . . . I just didn’t feel good about it, but . . . at the time, I didn’t really know a better way out of the situation.

Sasha truly struggled with hir disappointment to the point where it was debilitating and, ultimately, evolved into complete devastation and self-harming behavior. Sasha has depression, and zie attributed that depression to hir feelings of fear and inadequacy, specifically to the “idea of not being good enough.” According to Sasha, “I’m an only child, and I disappoint [my parents] a lot. I feel like I’m not good enough for them, and then, I’m not good enough for other people. It just kind of transfers into everything.” Unfortunately, when zie learned zie was on academic suspension for failure to meet the minimum requirements of academic performance, it was just one more way for hir to perceive zie had disappointed hir parents: “I knew my parents would be really disappointed in me. . . . It was just a really bad time. It was really tough dealing with that.”

Tristan found out about the academic suspension via a letter zie received in the mail from Achieve University. Zie reflected, “I wasn’t mature enough to value what education could provide me and how that would affect my future plans. . . . I was definitely disappointed in myself.” Unsure of how to proceed, Tristian confided in hir mother, the person with whom zie is closest. Zie reflected,
She was disappointed—obviously. . . . She told me that I needed to figure things out, I needed to do things on my own—that nobody was going to fix it for me. I took a year off school then and kind of got to realize that these were poor decisions.

**Worthless.** A feeling of worthlessness was present for a few of the students. Being on academic suspension left them believing that they had no good qualities, that they were not of value, and that they were deserving of contempt. For these students, the academic suspension bordered on harmful.

Sasha reflected, “I felt like a failure . . . the whole idea of not being good enough and kind of worthless, like I wasn’t good enough to actually complete school.” Sasha went on to share that after confiding in hir mother, hir mother suggested that college wasn’t for everybody, and maybe it wasn’t for hir. This remark deeply infuriated and saddened Sasha, to the point where zie began to believe zie was not worthy of being a member of the family: “Both my parents went to college. My family went to college. So, I feel like if I don’t, I’m not good enough for the family; I don’t belong in the family.”

Sadly, despite the fact that Sasha was subsequently performing well in school, deep down zie still believed that zie was truly worthless and that zie served as disappointment to hir family because of hir academic suspension. For hir, the wounds inflicted by the academic suspension were only exacerbated by hir depression. Sasha understood mentally that zie was “worthy,” but emotionally zie did not truly comprehend or internalize what it meant or felt like to be worthy.

Rosario also felt worthless, saying, “I remember feeling like I didn’t matter anymore, like if I couldn’t go to college and earn a degree, what’s the point [to life]? Where am I at with my life? Like, what’s the point in doing this anymore?” Rosario went on to say, “It
made me feel like crap. . . . I had it in my head that I’m a piece of shit.” Rosario felt like Achieve University had labeled hir a failure, and zie fully bought into that idea:

I’m trying to think, is it the labeling theory or the self-fulfilling prophecy type thing? Like when someone tells you, “You suck,” so then . . . you internalize it. And you think you suck, and then you suck in real life. . . . It’s kind of what I felt like happened. When the university e-mailed me saying, “You’re suspended,” I was like, “Well, I’m a piece of shit,” because I thought they were telling me I was a piece of shit.

Rosario was able to capitalize on that feeling of worthlessness and turn it into action, though; zie quickly sought readmission from academic suspension. Having come as far as zie did, zie did not want to miss out on the opportunity to finish what zie had started, particularly given that zie was so close to graduating from Achieve University. Zie said to hirself, “I’ve got to get reinstated back to the university. . . . I’ve got to stick it out because . . . I’m already in this this far, I might as well just continue.” Rosario appeared before the CARR to plead hir case, and after doing so, was approved for readmission. Rosario was one step closer to being a youth counselor, one step closer to helping people and, in doing so, closer to dismantling hir feelings of worthlessness by charting a new path and life for hirself.

**Embarrassment/shame.** Feeling ashamed and embarrassed was common across participants. Many of them shared that they were very self-conscious, and that they immediately recognized the “wrong” and “foolish behaviors” that had contributed to their placement on academic suspension. When asked how zie felt upon learning zie was on academic suspension, Lennon responded, “Not good. I definitely felt a little bit of embarrassment. . . . It was a hit to my pride. I just didn’t feel good about it.” Lennon went
on to say that hir decision to quit attending classes, although the only option zie could think of at that time, was a poor one.

Rosario shared, “I was too embarrassed to tell anybody.” Hir sentiments were not uncommon among the participants. Zie further reflected:

I felt dumb or unintelligent. . . . I . . . felt like an idiot. . . . I couldn’t talk to my parents about it, though, because I didn’t want them to find out. Once I get my bachelor’s degree, though, I plan on telling them. . . . [My fiancé] was pretty much the only one who knew about it.

Rosario felt safe disclosing the information about hir academic suspension to hir fiancé because zie believed he would not judge hir for the poor decisions zie had made. He told hir, “You’ve got to keep going. Don’t stop now because you’ve screwed up. You’re screwed if you stop, but if you keep going, you could have a better opportunity.” And so zie did; Rosario kept going despite feeling ashamed and embarrassed because zie wanted more for hir life.

The feelings of embarrassment and shame were echoed in the remarks of other participants. Tristan noted, “I think it was embarrassment . . . embarrassment that I got suspended.” Micah said, “I was . . . ashamed at first.” Zie knew the drinking and lack of focus on hir school work had gotten the best of hir, and now zie was left with, seemingly, no options for moving forward. Channing shared, the zie was “ashamed . . . embarrassed. It wasn’t me to do that. I was almost always at the top of my class, or really close, so to mess up that bad wasn’t cool.”

Carter’s shame emanated from hir mother’s disappointment. Carter’s sister had recently been arrested, and her two sons had been taken into foster care. Hir mother was
trying to do everything she could to keep the family together and in a “good place.”

However, Carter fell into the drug scene as a way to cope with the unfortunate family situation, and zie let them take control and rule hir life. Zie noted,

[My mom] wasn’t very happy. She was devastated. . . . I think . . . because of what was going on with my sister, she really wanted me to succeed; she really wanted me to graduate. And I wasn’t graduating, and I was being suspended for not passing classes. She was really disappointed. It didn’t make me feel very good. I know I let my mom down, and that was pretty crappy.

**Exploration of Academic Suspension in the Present Day**

In addition to exploring how students described the experience of academic suspension retrospectively, I also engaged in an exploration of what the academic suspension meant to them in the present day. This portion of the conversation typically took place about two-thirds of the way into the interview, after the students had had an opportunity to fully reflect upon, relive, and share their stories of the moment and the subsequent hours, days, weeks, months, and in some cases, years after learning of their academic suspension. To shift the conversation away from the past and into the present day, I said something like:

You have shared a good deal of information about your academic suspension as it was in the past and about how you worked through that difficult time in your life. Now, I want to explore what, if any, meaning you attach to your academic suspension today. I want to understand how you define and make sense of that particular experience in your life. Talk to me about your academic suspension as it is today. What meaning does it have for you personally?”
For me, this small portion of the conversation—this intimate journey traversed alongside every participant into their private worlds—was the most rewarding part of the research. This was the first time many of the students had ever truly processed their academic suspension as a whole. To be present with each of them as they reflected upon the experience holistically was a rare and wonderful gift—watching the beauty rise from the ashes of perceived ruin was both humbling and renewing. I remain deeply grateful to each student for letting me join them in their private journey. In doing so, I also felt revived, encouraged, and empowered. Each story was unique and perfect in its own right; however, watching Shea, in particular, process through hir emotions and the meaning of hir academic suspension was truly moving. Shea reflected:

I know before I said [the academic suspension] means nothing. That’s because I don’t want it to mean anything because I’m so embarrassed by it. I don’t even want other people to know about it. But if I’m just being honest with myself, I guess it probably means more than what I want it to because it means sort of like everything that I don’t want to do again. It means it’s an embarrassment. It’s a failure. It’s all the stuff that I used to be while I was in school before . . . stuff that I don’t ever want to repeat. So, it’s a past I don’t want to go back to. So that part about it makes me want to think that it means nothing because I want it to not exist, really. At the same time, it’s hard to say that because I also don’t think I would be where I’m at today if it wasn’t for it. If I was to go through college without that suspension, just flying . . . under the radar, who knows what life would be like after graduation. . . . I could have just skimmed by and got C’s and then struggled getting a job because I didn’t ever change. But with that suspension happening, it just sort of changed me—made me
grow up during this time, and I guess it made me a better student really. I want it to mean nothing. I don’t want it to exist. But, at the same time, it’s hypocritical to say that because it means pretty much where I’m at today—it is everything.

Although each story was unique with regard to how the students viewed their academic suspension in the present day, there were two themes that emerged from the data. It became evident that, since their academic suspension, the students had developed an increased level of self-confidence/self-belief and a will to persist in the face of adversity. Additionally, they all reflected upon the academic suspension as a learning experience that helped them mature and, ultimately, that they were thankful for that. It was an experience they would never change despite how difficult it was at the time.

**Increased self-confidence/self-belief and will to persist.** While listening to the students reconstruct the experience and share their individual story, I enjoyed the sense of redemption with which the conversation always ended. Rosario noted, “[The academic suspension] made me assess what was going on. . . . It feels good to know that I was able to overcome it and now make something of myself.” Zie went on to explain that prior to the academic suspension, zie never really believed in hirself—zie never saw hirself as capable, worthwhile, or intelligent. In fact, zie felt “lost” much of the time, both personally and academically. However, having overcome such a real setback gave Rosario a renewed sense of self. “It made me feel better about myself; it made me feel smart, and I like when I feel smart. . . . There was a lot of navigation that happened” during that time, which left Rosario feeling confident and capable.

Like Rosario, Carter also felt like zie was a failure long before the academic suspension occurred. Zie also was in search of self, in search of what made sense, in search
of hir own voice, in search of something more, and in search of what made hir feel confident and capable. In fact, few people—Carter included—actually thought zie was able to go to college let alone earn a degree from an institution of higher education. Zie admitted, “I came to [Achieve University] for the wrong reasons. I came because my friend talked me into doing it; I don’t think it was what I . . . needed. . . . I got pushed into it, but I don’t think I was ready.” The first semester of college was one that Carter described as having been “frustrating” and “difficult.” Ultimately, zie shut down because it was too overwhelming, which resulted in hir placement on academic suspension. It was through the experience of suspension, though, when Carter learned and grew; it was where zie came to be hir own person, and it was where zie found hir way. Zie noted, “I got suspended, and I let people down. It’s just a redemption for myself to show that I am able to do something like that [come back from suspension and graduate].”

Kai viewed hir academic suspension as “eye-opening” and “freeing.” Although it was a dark time in hir life and could be defined as a negative experience, “it brought about something positive.” Kai reflected, “I have improved myself, and I’ve proved to myself that I can do what needs to be done to succeed. I also know now that I’m not a failure.” Kai went on to speculate that, had the academic suspension not occurred, zie would “probably be in a worse position”—continuing to make poor choices, procrastinating, embracing and internalizing discouraging thoughts, and continuing to search for hir true self and voice. Ultimately Kai concluded, “I feel a lot better and more positive in an overall sense, and . . . I do believe in myself now, too.”

For Amari, the experience of academic suspension was profound. Although it was a difficult and discouraging experience for hir, it was also transformational. Ultimately, it
bolstered hir self-confidence and gave hir a renewed sense of faith in hirself. Amari’s circumstances were such that it was difficult for hir to achieve success in the classroom; zie was too overwhelmed and had had far too much responsibility placed upon hir. Zie shared, “If I could go back and talk to myself, I would say, ‘Ask for help. You can’t handle both . . . school and home and work. . . . It’s not really possible for you to carry so much,’ instead of just doing it.” However, Amari did not let the academic suspension stop hir. Instead, zie made some substantial changes so that zie could achieve hir dream of earning a 4-year degree. Zie asserted, “The academic suspension means a lot to me. It means . . . a challenge that I overcame. . . . I knew . . . I was capable of doing it.”

Micah was incredibly grateful for the experience of academic suspension, as zie learned a great deal from it. Moreover, it challenged and developed hir on several levels: “I did everything without anyone else’s help. It made me more independent. No one knew about it, so I had to take care of everything by myself. And I get it now—that I can do so much.” For Micah, that notion of “getting it” was a powerful one, indeed. Micah came to realize the full extent of hir capabilities and, furthermore, just how strong zie could be when exercising hir full potential: “I was just getting by on doing the minimum to pass to get done what I needed to get done. I was cheating myself . . . but now I’m definitely not doing the minimum. I’m actually doing, trying.”

Akin to Micah, Lennon attributed much of hir independence, drive, and resilience to hir academic suspension. Although those characteristics were always present in Lennon, the academic suspension, when coupled with the other experiences zie went through, grew and refined them. Zie commented, “It’s made me more motivated and determined. It’s made me
appreciate challenges more. It’s made me appreciate the journey more. It’s made me realize not to take anything for granted—to work hard at everything.”

Lennon went on to share that zie believed hir academic hardship had been a blessing in disguise not only for hir, personally, but also for hir children. They got to see the determination with which Lennon approached earning a degree; they got to watch hir face adversity head on, and in doing so, it gave them increased self-confidence and the belief that with hard work and determination, they, too, could achieve success. Lennon shared the following anecdote:

I went to my daughter’s parent–teacher conferences last fall, and they had a list of open-ended questions that the students had to answer. One of them said something to the effect of: “One thing I learned this past year.” And she answered, “To do my best, and to never give up.” And . . . I knew that was coming from me. I knew she was seeing what I was doing, and she was listening to what I was telling her, and she was taking it to heart. . . . Knowing that I was getting through it, not only for my own self, but [also] that she was learning from my journey, was an incredible feeling.

Many of the same concepts and ideas Lennon shared were echoed by Channing during hir interview. Although the two individuals were very different from one another, their shared experience afforded them an opportunity to arrive at similar lessons learned. Neither Lennon nor Channing had ever truly experienced failure before, so when they were placed on academic suspension, it was life changing. The timid, scared, and overwhelmed Channing of hir first semester in college was long gone—replaced by a confident, capable, and responsible person who was committed to always going above and beyond. Channing shared, “You learn how to overcome things. . . . You get knocked down sometimes, and you
just get back up, which is something I just never had to do before.” Channing went on to note, “You only lose if you quit trying. As long as you keep fighting for what you want, you can get it. . . . I’ve worked really hard—harder than anybody—and it has paid off.”

Learning, maturation, and perspective transformation. “In hindsight, it’s probably the best thing that could have happened. I wouldn’t have made it here—not after that first semester. I had to grow up” was how Channing summarized hir experience. For hir, the learning experience was not one that could be replaced; it was too pivotal to the person zie had become, and for that, zie was grateful. Zie stated, “It was a great learning experience. . . . It’s proof to me that . . . you can fail, and as long as you learn from it, it’s okay. . . . It made me a better person because of it. . . . I’m glad it happened.”

Carter also looked upon hir academic suspension as a vital learning experience. It was something that had molded hir into the person zie had become, and it would continue to mold hir in many ways in the years to come. It is not something zie viewed as a blemish, but instead, zie saw it as beautiful and instrumental. Carter noted:

I don’t look at it as a bad thing. I look at it as a learning experience that I’ve had. I know what I’ve done, and I know at this point what I have to do. . . . It’s not a typical learning experience; I don’t brag about it or anything, but I don’t consider it something I regret. . . . I understand myself better. I understand what I have to do. . . . I feel like it’s something that is going to be useful throughout the rest of my life . . . whether it’s in school, or it’s personal, or it’s work life. I feel like it’s something that’s going to stick with me and be useful for a long time.

After talking through hir story and reflecting on who zie had become, Lennon remarked, “I’m not sure I would have learned some of the lessons that I needed to learn to
get to where I’m at right now” had the academic suspension not occurred. Lennon believed that the academic suspension happened for a reason—that it had to happen—so that zie could traverse it and, in doing so, better learn about hirself and the world around hir. Zie, explained,

My outlook on life is a lot better than it was before. I learned a great deal. . . . It . . . set me up to be a better person now and in the future. That [academic suspension] was definitely a key moment in my life.

Rosario was also a firm believer that there is a predetermined greater plan. Zie shared, “Everything happens for a reason. . . . Sometimes bad things happen, so better things can happen later in life.” For Rosario, the academic suspension truly embodied that belief. It was a “blessing in disguise” that forced hir to carefully re-examine hir life or, as zie bluntly put it, “to kind of get my head out of my ass. . . . It made me assess what was going on.” As a result, Rosario came to realize that things needed to change. Zie learned that zie needed to grow up and, in doing so, that zie had to make some tough choices. Zie realized that zie needed to apply hirself more, and to do so, zie needed to seek professional help. Zie recollected, “It made me want to apply myself more. . . . I wanted to improve upon my life.” Rosario speculated that, without the academic suspension, “I wouldn’t have been able to achieve my potential. I guess that’s a good way to put it. . . . It taught me a lot of things. . . . [Without it] I wouldn’t have made something of myself.”

Despite that fact that the academic suspension was truly difficult for Sasha on many levels, zie had come to recognize that it was “necessary and life-changing.” When I asked hir if zie could go back in time and talk to hirself, what zie would say, zie responded,
I have been suspended, but I learned so much from it. . . . I probably wouldn’t say anything [to the old me] because I feel like I genuinely needed to go through that. . . . It was a very useful year. . . . I learned a lot about myself. I learned what I needed to do to succeed. . . . It really helped me understand myself better. . . . It was meaningful, powerful, and important.

The experience of academic suspension appeared to be both humbling and revealing for Sasha. Zie learned a great deal about hirself, and in turn, zie learned, matured, and grew.

Like Sasha, Shea also recognized the learning and maturation that resulted from hir placement on academic suspension. Although the academic suspension itself was a difficult experience for Shea, conversely, it was also an experience that made hir stronger and taught hir about hir true self. When confronted with the question as to whether or not zie would remove hir academic suspension if zie could, Shea responded,

I mean, it sucks, yeah, but from what I know now, I wouldn’t take it back. . . . I could have ended up a lot worse. . . . I don’t know. It just sucked. There was a lot of laziness in my case. A lot of denial. A lot of refusal. A lot of lies. A lot of morally unethical things I did to get out of certain situations, like the West Nile thing and the death of a friend of mine and a lot of bad decisions. I don’t know; it was crazy. It was just . . . a crazy time.

Shea went on to explain how the academic suspension had changed hir life for “the better,” despite the fact that zie wanted nothing more than to erase the experience and culminating events and actions from hir memory. However, zie struggled with that desire, because deep down, zie knew that the academic suspension was a transformational experience—one that, ultimately, was a good thing for hir, and that, as a result of the
experience, made hir grow up and become more responsible and mature. Zie shared, “It was my first instinct to say, ‘Yes, get rid of it,’ when you asked me about my suspension. But, if I really think deeply about it, then, no, I wouldn’t take it back.”

Tristan was similar to Shea in that both individuals always knew they were capable of being successful and, therefore, academic suspension was among one of the furthest things from their minds. That being said, though, both recognized and valued the learning experience that it provided. In fact, Tristan attributed hir work ethic and academic success to hir academic suspension, saying, “I think it actually made me work harder . . . to prove that I can do things. Obviously, it would be nice not to have that on my transcript, but I think I like the way things turned out.” Moreover, Tristan believed zie had gained a greater appreciation for the process of learning, regardless of the content area. It was the “spirit” of learning itself that ignited hir passion and made hir want to give everything zie has. Also, Tristan was looking for ways to apply the classroom content to the world around hir; that is, zie was searching for the connection between the classroom and the boardroom. Zie commented, “I want to apply what I learned in class to the real world, to the working world, and to my personal life. I don’t know if I would be that way if I hadn’t been suspended.”

“I just feel that I’m in a better place behind it . . . after it was all done and over with. And I can say that also because of . . . the improvements that I made,” was how Amari summarized the aftermath of hir academic suspension. For hir, the academic suspension helped hir clarify hir passions and reprioritize hir responsibilities. It required hir to determine what mattered most both in present day and in the long run, and as a result, how zie needed to adjust hir life in order to achieve hir dreams. Amari noted, “I just know how passionate . . . I am about school and how important it is to me. And I knew that before, but I
didn’t know it was *that* . . . important to me.” Zie went on to explain that zie always knew zie was capable of being successful; however, the academic suspension taught hir that in order to be hir best, zie needed to learn how to ask for help, which was a difficult but important lesson to learn.

After careful reflection, Micah, like all of the other participants, came to realize the importance of school and the full impact the academic suspension had upon hir life. However, it was not a realization that zie reached quickly. Instead, it took time and distance from the immediate situation. It took seeing the changes actually materialize in hir life; it took an open perspective, humbling hirself; and a willingness to make the connection between the experience and the result. Micah shared,

It definitely helped. I mean, at that point in time, I didn’t see it as being beneficial at all. But it definitely helped put me back on track as far as schooling . . . as far as my expectations for myself, not only in school, but personally. It made me grow up . . . because I needed to realize that college obviously isn’t forever, so I need to either get the job done . . . or figure something else out. It definitely helped put me back on track, and now it’s completely beneficial because I’m doing 10 times better than I was beforehand as far as grades, life, work—as far as all that stuff goes. It took a while. It wasn’t something that was sudden. It took time adjusting to it. It took a lot of reflection time for me to be able to understand and be okay with it, but now I’m completely okay with it.

Micah went on to share that zie earnestly believed zie would not be who zie was today—zie would not be as successful, happy, motivated, or passionate—had the academic suspension never occurred. It took that “reality check” to shake Micah to hir core before zie
realized that hir “comfort zone” was not working for hir. It took the magnitude of that situation before Micah came to truly understand that real change was needed, and that it would require hard work, dedication, and a change in perspective.

According to Auden, “this whole journey of college, I could write a book about it. There is so much drama, and so much suspense, and . . . it’s so crazy! I don’t even know what genre of book it would be!” Zie was spot on. What a journey zie had been on. What a roller coaster of events that transformed hir into the person zie had become. However, like Micah, it took time and distance from those situations and much thoughtful reflection before zie could realize, appreciate, and respect the full impact of those experiences on hir life. Zie affirmed, “There’s so much crazy stuff that’s happened in the journey of the last 5 years. . . . So much has changed, and so much is better now. . . . I have such a better appreciation for everything.”

When reflecting upon hir time at Achieve University, which was “very dark and sad” as zie was “living” it, Auden came to hold a different perspective. It is a perspective that was filled with greater appreciation, maturity, and a thirst for education—a perspective that recognizes the beauty in ruin and one’s ability to overcome and triumph despite all odds. Auden reflected,

I actually had that moment where I realized that [Achieve University] was a huge part of my life. . . . I now realize it’s all a piece of the puzzle that . . . has made me who I am now, and that’s huge! So, I definitely can’t say that I hate it anymore. . . . It really just took some hard times to actually be able to enjoy some of the good times, I guess. And, I don’t know, I just have such a . . . more . . . sophisticated appreciation of
education, and . . . how important it is to me. I guess that would make me unique because of how I view everything, now as a puzzle coming to completion.

Much like Auden, Milan also recognized that true beauty can arise from the ashes of ruin—that transformational moments and opportunities for growth can be veiled in different kinds of experiences. Zie noted, “I exposed myself to a lot of variables that made me distracted and pulled me away from education, but I don’t regret it. I don’t regret getting suspended at all.” For Milan, the change was a good thing because zie had become stagnant, complacent, and bored with life. It was in the tension of conflict that Milan was afforded the opportunity to become who zie was always meant to be in this life. Zie stated, “I’ve . . . been exposed to so many great people and things that taught me so much and changed my life. This one variable in the mix led me in an entirely different direction where there was something better for me.”
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience of academic suspension and to gain understanding of the deep perspective shifts and learning that may have occurred as a result of that experience. Furthermore, the study was designed to uncover and illuminate how students’ new frames of reference may have contributed to their subsequent academic resilience at the same institution from which they were academically suspended. Constructionism provided the epistemological foundation for the interpretivist perspective that was employed. Phenomenology was utilized as the methodology for this study. Data were collected via in-depth, semistructured, individual interviews with each participant during which the participants offered their perspectives and insight with regard to their academic suspension both retrospectively and in the present day. They also discussed the circumstances that led to their placement on academic suspension, what affect the academic suspension had on them, and recommendations and/or advice they had for students like themselves. Data were coded using a combination of Emotion coding and In Vivo coding. The theoretical framework for this study included Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) theory of individual student departure and Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory. That being said, I fully acknowledge that such “lenses simultaneously allow us to see things and limit our view” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 131).

The findings of this study are intended to provide valuable information that will serve to increase the academic resilience of students who have been academically suspended. This discussion comprises conclusions, a discussion of the results, an explanation of the study’s
limitations, an analysis of implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a reflexivity statement.

**Conclusions**

This study fills a void in the literature on the academic achievement and persistence of academically at-risk college students. Specifically, it contributes to the dearth of qualitative research that explores the experience and academic resilience of academically suspended college students who are later reinstated to the same institution; it gives voice to their perspectives and insight into their lifeworlds. The following research question guided this phenomenological study: How do students describe the experience of academic suspension both retrospectively and in the present day, and what meaning and/or learning do they attach to their experience?

Conclusions were drawn based upon an analysis of the data, and they are embedded within the theoretical lens used to frame this study. Data analysis revealed the following findings:

- Being placed on academic suspension rose to the level of a disorienting dilemma as described in Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory, and it served as a trigger event for the critical reflection phase.

- Students built competence and self-confidence/self-belief, and they experienced an increased will to persist in the face of adversity, as they moved through the experience and, in turn, as they moved through the phases described in Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory.
• Students’ academic suspension and subsequent academic resilience at the institution led to perspective transformation/transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), which shifted their understanding of themselves and/or their worldviews.

**Discussion**

**Academic Suspension as a Disorienting Dilemma**

Mezirow (2000) emphasized that transformational learning focuses on “how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (p. 8). Therefore, transformational learning requires a fundamental shift in meaning making and/or the construction of knowledge. That evolution of mind/personal transformation is preceded by an event, or series of events—referred to as a disorienting dilemma—that significantly challenges one’s current understanding (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Disorienting dilemmas usually occur when individuals have experiences that do not fit their expectations or make sense to them and that they cannot resolve cognitively. It is an incident or experience outside of a person’s control that serves as a catalyst for perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b). It is important to note, however, that just having the experience is not enough. “The learner must critically self-examine the assumptions and beliefs that have structured how the experience has been interpreted” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 134). This sets into motion a revision of “specific assumptions about oneself and others until the very structure of assumptions becomes transformed” (Mezirow, 1981, p. 8). For the students in this study, that triggering event was being placed on academic suspension. That is, an analysis of the data suggests that placement on academic suspension rose to the level of a disorienting dilemma as described in
Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory, and it served as a trigger event for the critical reflection phase.

Critical reflection and transformation can happen all at once (i.e., “epochal” transformation) or gradually over time (i.e., “incremental” transformation; Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (1991) explained that disorienting dilemmas can be externally imposed, such as a “death, illness, separation or divorce, children leaving home, being passed over for promotion or gaining a promotion, failing an important examination, or retirement” (p. 168). A disorienting dilemma can also result from “an eye-opening discussion, book, poem, or painting or from efforts to understand a different culture with customs that contradict our own previously accepted presuppositions” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). Any challenge to an established perspective can begin the process of perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991) went on to note that “these challenges are painful; they often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self” (p. 168). In this particular study, the disorienting dilemma was externally imposed. It was an urgent crisis and period of critical change that necessitated reflection, difficult navigation, and action in order to effectively cope with the circumstances of the academic suspension.

When the students were immersed in the retrospective exploration of their academic suspension—when they were painting a picture of the academic suspension at that moment in time—the words they used to describe the experience were visceral and powerful: devastation, fear, worthless, shut down, disappointment, shame, shock, wake-up call. Interestingly, the emotions from that jarring experience in their lives were still very real—very raw. Their pain and embarrassment were completely evident, even at the time of the study, after some time had passed. Throughout chapter 5, particularly within the
Retrospective Exploration of Academic Suspension section, distress and pain were shown to be clearly present in their words.

My description of Micah at one point during our interview is a prime example of the raw emotion present:

Micah paused for a long while. Zie started wringing hir hands and would not look at me; instead, zie kept staring at the floor. From my line of vision, I could see tears welling up in the corners of hir eyes. I waited quietly, giving Micah the time zie needed to process hir emotions and compose hir thoughts.

Similarly, my reflection on the interview with Sasha is ripe with the revelation of hir deep-seated pain:

Sasha’s depression casts a long shadow over hir life; it colors how zie pictures hirself and, furthermore, how zie interprets the ways in which others view hir. Zie describes hir depression as causing hir to “be sad or to not really feel anything at all.” In those dark and lonely days when zie is devoid of any real emotion and/or feeling, Sasha engages in physical self-harm just so zie can “feel something.” As zie was disclosing this information to me, I noticed that zie was gently rubbing hir left forearm with hir right hand; hir eyes were almost glazed over, as if zie were someplace else—far away from our room—watching hirself try to find a sense of connectedness and control through cutting. It was in that moment I came to understand why zie was wearing long sleeves and pants despite it being the dead of summer and at the height of humidity.

The interview with Shea elicited similar feelings of discomfort and grief. At one point, as Shea was reflecting on all of the lies zie had spun just so zie could avoid academic
suspension, zie remarked, “I’ll probably never forgive myself. . . . It’s hard to swallow what I did. . . . I was in a pretty bad place.” I wrote the following about this portion of our interview:

As Shea began sharing the following story with me, I could see tears welling up in hir eyes, and it was evident there was a lump in hir throat. Hir entire demeanor changed before me; the confidence and spark in hir eyes were quickly replaced with a heavy burden.

Despite the fact that some of the students knew and/or expected the academic suspension, the shock they experienced was no less real or significant; its potential for damage was not diminished. Kai noted that it was “one of the darkest days. . . . I . . . shut down and didn’t even leave my room. . . . I didn’t talk to anyone. I . . . kept the lights off and . . . laid in bed with a blanket over me. . . . Feeling that rejection was harmful.” Zie went on to share, “I was just so overwhelmed that it actually hurt when I got kicked out of school. . . . I was a failure; I just let everyone down. This is how I should feel, I assumed. It should hurt to fail someone.

In addition to the very real pain many of the students described, the experience of academic suspension, in and of itself, was truly “disorienting”; it challenged their established perspective. It caused a state of disequilibrium for the students that needed to be resolved if they were going to move forward with their lives. For Amari, that disorientation came in the form of challenging what zie had come to expect and/or know by effectively destroying hir plans for the future. To some extent, Amari’s disorientation manifested itself in the form of fear. Zie shared:
It was kind of scary, I guess, because I was thinking . . . ‘cause this suspension was a whole . . . academic or calendar year, or something—a whole year. So I was wondering what I would do for a whole year. Like, what would I be doing during the year? So that was kind of scary to think about.

Carter’s cognitive dissonance came in the form of shock. Zie was completely taken aback upon learning zie had been placed on academic suspension because zie earnestly believed zie had been doing better. Carter thought that the changes zie made between first and second semesters would be enough to achieve academic success, but zie was wrong. Zie explained, “It was . . . a surprise when I found out. I wasn’t expecting it at all. . . . I was just shocked. It’s not what I expected. I thought I had worked out . . . my issues—as far as my academic issues.”

Rosario’s disorientation was much more personal in nature. Zie reflected, “I . . . wanted to inspire people. . . . Once I got suspended, I felt like I lost that opportunity to be able to inspire other people, and . . . influence their lives in some way. . . . I remember feeling like I didn’t matter anymore.” Almost immediately, Rosario was thrust into a critical reflection phase, during which zie began attempting to resolve the cognitive dissonance. Zie remembered thinking, “What am I doing? Where am I at with my life? . . . [Now I won’t be] able to achieve my potential.”

Mezirow (2000) wrote about three types of reflection: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. When individuals engage in content reflection, they are thinking about the experience itself. Similarly, and often as a result of content reflection, individuals begin thinking about how to deal with and/or work through the experience, akin to problem solving, and this type of reflection is considered process reflection. Finally, there
is the concept of premise reflection, which is when individuals carefully examine long-standing, socially constructed, uncritically assimilated beliefs, values, and assumptions about the experience or problem and the issues and decisions that resulted in the related experience.

As Criticos (1993) pointed out, “effective learning does not follow from a positive experience but from effective reflection” (p. 162). Transformational learning theory emphasizes that individuals intentionally work to resolve these contradictions—”to move to developmentally advanced conceptual structures by transforming meaning schemes and perspectives through critical reflection” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 147). Like Rosario, Auden was also engaging in the beginning phases of critical reflection as zie reflected thinking:

“What am I going to do? . . . How am I going to continue a life for myself as an individual if I can’t go to college? . . . What in the world am I going to do?” . . .

[Academic suspension] really forced me to sit down and think about the rest of my life, and a 5-year plan, and where I wanted to establish myself, and what I wanted to do after college.

Reflection is a cognitive process. “We can think about our experience—muse, review, and so on—but to reflect critically, we must also examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that affect how we make sense of the experience” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 145). As part of the critical reflection phase described in Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory, we know that participants actively engage in and/or explore options, roles, relationships, and actions; it is phase five of the 10 phases of perspective transformation. This process helps individuals create and/or test new meanings. As Merriam et al. (2007) explained, “people weigh evidence for and against the argument and critically assess assumptions. Clearer understanding is achieved through talking with others. . . . It is a
conscientious effort to . . . build a new understanding” (p. 134). Micah was engaging in this behavior as zie described hir reaction/response to hir poor academic standing. In an attempt to better understand and assimilate the value of higher education, Micah reached out to some trusted family members who had made the intentional decision to depart from higher education prior to earning a degree or certificate. Zie was attempting to understand what, if anything, they had learned from that decision—to determine if the struggle was truly worth the effort. Micah remembered thinking, “What if I can’t do this? What if college isn’t for me?” He continued, “I started out thinking that it wasn’t for me, and at first, I was okay with that. . . . I was like, ‘it’s not for a lot of people.’” Micah began reaching out to several of hir older cousins who had gone to college but hadn’t finished. Zie noted,

They all told me how much they wish they would have stayed in school because it would have benefitted them. Each cousin provided their individual insight about how important it was to have a college degree and about how they were disappointed in themselves for not having toughed it out.”

Several other students engaged in a similar discourse with friends and loved ones. Amari spoke with hir grandmother. Rosario and Lennon turned to their significant others. Shea and Tristan sought advice from their bosses. Kai and Sasha spoke with their parents. All of these students were trying to arrive at the best decision and, as such, they were seeking the opinions of others, including those who challenged the social norm/status quo. For example, Shea referenced knowing several individuals who had been academically suspended. I did not include specific quotations from that portion of our interview within chapters 4 and 5, but Shea noted that zie talked with them about their academic suspensions; zie wanted to hear from them about their experience and why they decided not to return to
higher education. Even though these conversations were not immediately transformational for Shea, they were part of her active exploration and incremental transformation.

It is important to note that, in the transformational learning process, “it is not enough to understand intellectually the need to change the way one acts; one requires emotional strength and an act of will in order to move forward” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 171). Therefore, this is one reason that not all students who are placed on academic suspension decide to seek reinstatement; moreover, it is one reason why not all students who are readmitted to the institution experience subsequent academic resilience. What is more, not all experiences—even if they are identical experiences—trigger learning or a fundamental change in one’s perspective (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). However, for the students in this study, it was “at this point of disjuncture” that they were “forced to ask why this had occurred to them or what it means. These questions are located at the start and at the core of human learning” (Jarvis, 1992, p. 15). Although the experience of academic suspension was difficult for all of the students, it was a very powerful and meaningful experience for them, too, and it set them on a path of critical reflection and self-assessment.

**Building Competence, Self-Confidence, and Persistence**

Data analysis revealed that the students built competence and self-confidence/self-belief and that they experienced an increased will to persist in the face of adversity as they moved through the experience or, one could assert, as they moved through the phases described in Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory. Central to this increased competence and self-confidence are critical reflection and self-examination of one’s experiences and connecting and communicating with others (Mezirow, 2000). It is through such interactions that “one can validate personal meanings and question deeply help
assumptions about one’s self-identity and relationship to the world” (Reisinger, 2015, p. 7). More than that though, it requires that an individual believes he/she needs to change and, therefore, that he/she takes action for that change (Mezirow, 1991).

In his theory, Mezirow (1991, 2000) described a provisional trying of new roles, or phase eight. One can surmise that when Carter, Channing, Lennon, Rowan, and Sasha enrolled at the community colleges before attempting to be reinstated at Achieve University, they were provisionally trying on their new roles in an effort to build their competence. That is, they were ready to put their new knowledge, skills, and plans to the “test” and, moreover, to prove to themselves that they could be successful at an institution of higher education. However, they were not entirely ready to “take on” Achieve University, so they built up their competence by attending a different institution first. These students, in particular, had overcome the imminent crisis/disorienting dilemma, and they were working toward satisfaction with the changes they had made by gradually integrating into their new lives.

Once the students returned to a higher education setting—be it a community college or Achieve University—and began experiencing subsequent academic success, they started to experience increased self-confidence/self-belief. For example, Kai shared, “I have improved myself, and I’ve proved to myself that I can do what needs to be done to succeed. I also know now that I’m not a failure . . . and . . . I do believe in myself now, too.” Similarly, Rosario said, “It made me feel better about myself. It made me feel smart, and I like when I feel smart.” With an innocent, and yet a knowing, confident smile, Amari remarked, “I know what I’m capable of now.” Rowan reflected, “That first semester back was overwhelming; it felt like I had a weight on my chest the entire time. But when grades
came out, it was, like, ‘Wow! Look, I really can do this – I’m going to do this!’” Reisinger (2015) summarized the growth of this self-confidence well:

The individual . . . explores new roles, relationships and actions. He or she plans a new course of action, acquires new knowledge and skills for implementing new plans, renegotiates new relationships and reintegrates them into his or her own life, building competence and self-confidence. A new attitude and identity begin to emerge . . . ultimately building self-esteem and common understanding. (p. 7)

Although all of the students experienced increased self-confidence/self-belief after being reinstated to Achieve University and experiencing subsequent academic success, some of the students had to gain self-confidence before they attempted to seek readmission. That is, some of the students had so little self-confidence after being placed on academic suspension that the thought of returning to Achieve University eluded them all together.

Phases five and six of Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory—exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions and planning a course of action, respectively—were particularly important for these students and promoted their critical reflection phase.

For example, Lennon started working at Kmart stocking shelves and, through the physicality of the job, zie lost 65 pounds, which contributed to a boost in confidence and motivation. Similarly, Channing worked as a security officer at a casino for nearly 10 years, and zie earned several promotions and managed others while in the position. Milan lived and worked in New York City for a while, and it was through hir conversations with students from Columbia University that zie realized zie could earn a degree and that having one was necessary. Rowan worked several odd jobs before joining the Air Force, where zie gained
the focus, persistence, and self-belief needed to finish a degree. Shea and Tristan both found full-time positions in organizations in which the leadership was supportive of earning advanced degrees. These students needed to grow their self-confidence in other ways before they believed enough in themselves to return to Achieve University. It was through these other outlets that they were able to plan a longer term course of action for themselves, acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement their plans, and be in the presence of others who supported and encouraged them in ways that allowed them to visualize themselves as successful college students.

Lennon remarked, “It’s made me more motivated and determined. It’s made me appreciate challenges more. It’s made me appreciate the journey more. It’s made me realize not to take anything for granted—to work hard at everything.” In addition to building competence and self-confidence/self-belief, data analysis revealed that the students also experienced an increased will to persist in the face of adversity, which is a testament to their transformational learning. Such resolve can be detected in the following remark from Channing: “You get knocked down sometimes, and you just get back up. . . . You only lose if you quit trying. As long as you keep fighting for what you want, you can get it.” Likewise, Tristan shared, “Now that I’ve overcome this, I know I can overcome anything, as long as I put my mind to it.”

Similar remarks were echoed throughout the interviews with students, and although this was an unexpected finding, it is one that, ultimately, aligns with Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory in that the students created new meaning and understanding as a result of the disorienting dilemma. Namely, when these students initially experienced adversity, they gave up and stopped trying. Subsequently, though, they recognized the need
to persevere and push through the trials and tribulations if they were to be successful. This is truly a paradigm shift. A key proposition of transformational learning theory is the distinction between instrumental and transformational learning (Mezirow, 2003). Instrumental learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills; knowledge and skills, although an important part of learning, will not by themselves facilitate real change, though. In contrast, transformational learning is actual perspective transformation—a paradigm shift—whereby individuals examine themselves and their beliefs as a result of the disorienting dilemma, form new meaning through critical reflection and rational dialogue, and act upon the new self-understanding.

**Perspective Transformation/Transformational Learning**

Transformational learning is the process by which individuals “transform [their] taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective, so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). According to Mezirow (1991, 2000), a disorienting dilemma serves as the catalyst for this process. For the students in this study, the experience of academic suspension and their subsequent academic resilience at the institution led to perspective transformation/transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), which shifted their understanding of themselves and their worldviews. To clearly demonstrate how this conclusion was derived from the data analysis, I provide several direct quotations from the students that support this assertion. Additionally, I have selected one of the 13 students (i.e., Shea) to use as an example, and I explain how hir individual journey aligns with the 10 phases of transformational learning as outlined by Mezirow (1991, 2000).
Shea’s placement on academic suspension rose to the level of a disorienting dilemma, which is the first phase in the 10-phase process of transformational learning. In the next phase, the individual engages in self-examination, which is often accompanied by “feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). Shea felt shame and guilt at being placed on Academic Suspension. Zie worried about what others would say and think about hir. That can be identified coming through in the following excerpt: “It’s embarrassing to be a failure. . . . I’ve known people who have been suspended, and it’s just like, ‘God, what an idiot for throwing that all away. He’s so stupid’ . . . I didn’t want people to say that about me.” Hence Shea’s decision to continue concocting lies and engaging in deceit, even after hir placement on academic suspension, was the mechanism by which zie protected hirself.

Self-examination is embedded in the third phase, during which the learner engages in a critical assessment of assumptions. Initially, Shea felt shame and embarrassment as a result of hir placement on academic suspension. After the initial shock, though, zie began to understand that the academic suspension did not mean zie was “dumb” or “stupid” but, instead, that zie needed to refocus and reprioritize—that zie needed to critically re-evaluate the value of education and earning a degree. This larger assessment leads to the fourth phase of recognizing that others have gone through a similar process. Shea sought out some acquaintances who had been academically suspended and, despite never revealing that zie, hirself, had been suspended, zie began to realize zie was not alone. Interestingly, in response to those who would ask why zie was not at Achieve University, Shea would respond that zie was “taking a break from school to pay down loans.” Again, this was in an effort to “save face” and to avoid the negative label society places on “drop outs.” Step five consists of exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions, which leads to planning a course
of action. The plan of action comprises four steps: acquiring knowledge and skills, trying out new roles, renegotiating relationships, and building competence and self-confidence in those new roles and relationships. In this example, after being academically suspended, Shea’s parents no longer provided financial support, so zie had to find stable employment to ensure a source of reliable income. Zie bounced around between a few different jobs before landing a position at a company that employed “level-headed, well-educated people.” As Shea explained, “I kind of, just, matured and found my balance.” It was through employment that Shea learned the self-discipline, time-management skills, and the value of education that zie was previously missing. Moreover, zie was surrounded by individuals who were well-educated and placed a high value on earning a degree. In fact Shea’s supervisor was one of the primary reasons zie decided to seek readmission from academic suspension. Shea described hir supervisor as a younger guy who “had it all going” and who was incredibly supportive of Shea returning to Achieve University. The final step or phase of the process is a reintegration back into one’s life based on the new, transformed perspective (Mezirow, 2000). Shea shared,

I . . . did a 180 in my mindset. . . . Before, it was like, “I don’t care about school; I just want to do everything else.” Now, it’s like, “I don’t care about anything else; I just want to do good in school.”

It is important to note that even though “a perspective transformation appears to follow” the process of creating new meaning, as outlined in the 10 phases, it does not necessarily have to happen “in this exact sequence” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 50). Each person’s journey can take him or her down a slightly different path and, yet, each individual will end up at the same place—changed, transformed, and new.
This study was very powerful for me on a several levels. It concretely revealed what I have always known in my heart to be true as a practitioner in the field of higher education; it clearly demonstrated to me that hope and opportunity can come from the experiences that students would much rather forget. It showed me that beauty can rise from the ashes; that individuals can be restored and renewed; and that people can continue to grow, learn, and change. Additionally, as an educator, it reminded me that meaning making is purposeful activity as opposed to being accidental, which means I must approach my own conversations with students with a certain level of intentionality and thoughtfulness.

Near the conclusion of each interview, I asked each student a fairly straightforward question: “If you could go back in time and take away the academic suspension—do it all over again—would you or wouldn’t you, and why?” For me, this part of the conversation was intensely revealing, insightful, and illuminating, as it required the students to deeply reflect on the entirety of the experience from their current vantage point and it necessitated they clearly articulate and justify their decision. Surprisingly, all of the students—every single one—indicated that they would keep their academic suspension and the culminating and subsequent experiences. All of the students recognized their perspective transformation, learning, and new understanding of themselves and/or their worldviews. Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) theory focuses on how adults make sense of their life experience, and he defined learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). A change in meaning perspective did relate significantly to change in behavior and worldview for the students in this study.

In response to the aforementioned question, Shea said:
The first thing you’d want to say is yes. I’m sure everybody wants to say yes. But after what I just said about if it had not happened, then, no, I would not take it back. I mean, it sucks, yeah, but from what I know now, I wouldn’t take it back. . . . I don’t know; I could have ended up a lot worse. . . . It’s always the first instinct to say yes . . . but if you really think deeply about it, then, no, I wouldn’t take it back.

Likewise, Amari shared, “No . . . I am in a better place now. . . . I wouldn’t have learned all of the different things that I learned.” Micah reflected, “Honestly, I don’t think I would. . . . I would almost be cheating myself. . . . I was just doing the minimal to pass, but now I’m definitely not doing the minimal. I’m actually doing and trying.” Similarly, Tristan responded:

I don’t think I would because, I think, it has made me work harder. . . . Obviously, it would be nice not to have that in my transcript, but I think I like the way things turned out. I’m not sure if I would have tried so hard. . . . I would have just breezed by. . . . I don’t know that I would be pushing myself as hard as I am now to get those [good grades]. I’m disappointed when I get a B. That upsets me. I’m striving to get A’s in every class that I have. I want . . . to show that I’m capable for getting an A. . . . I want to actually learn it. I want to apply what I learned in the class to the real world, to the working world, and to my personal life. I don’t know if I would be that way if I hadn’t been suspended.

Akin to Tristan, Lennon thought removal of the academic suspension would result in a loss of learning and a different perspective. Zie said:

I think for me, personally, I don’t think I would. I think just the way that everything in my life has played out to this point has helped make me who I am. And I think
without some of the other things happening to me, I’m not sure I would have learned some of the lessons that I needed to learn to get to where I’m at right now.

Channing believed, “It had to happen. . . . No, I wouldn’t change the suspension. If I could just wipe it off, no, I wouldn’t. . . . It was good for me.” Rosario shared a similar philosophy: “Everything does happen for a reason. . . . Maybe someday down the road somebody is suspended that I run into, and . . . I can comfort them and tell them it’s going to be okay. . . . Sometimes . . . bad things happen, so better things can happen.” Sasha recognized that the experience of academic suspension brought hir underlying issues to the surface, and it helped hir further clarify important relationships. Zie noted, “It helped me realize what my issues were and how to deal with them. I’d keep it . . . it made me closer friends with the people I’m friends with now.”

It is important to note that not all learning is transformational. Mezirow (1991) stated, “We can learn simply by adding knowledge to our meaning schemes or learning new meaning schemes” (p. 223). Transformational learning, though, occurs when there is a transformation in one belief or attitude, or a transformation of one’s entire perspective (Mezirow, 2000). It is about change—”dynamic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 130). Baxter Magolda, Abes, and Torres (2009) reminded us that “a key task of young adulthood, and learning in college, is to liberate oneself from meanings uncritically assimilated from others to construct new meanings for oneself” (p. 184), which is exactly what the students in this study did. Dynamic, fundamental change—a transformation in beliefs and attitude—can be unmistakably detected in Shea’s remarks:
I know before I said [that the academic suspension] means nothing. That’s because I don’t want it to mean anything because I’m so embarrassed by it. I don’t even want other people to know about it. But if I’m just being honest with myself, I guess it probably means more than what I want it to because it means, sort of like, everything that I don’t want to do again. It means it’s an embarrassment. It’s a failure. It’s all the stuff that I used to be while I was in school before, anyways—stuff that I don’t ever want to repeat. So, it’s a past I don’t want to go back to. So that part about it makes me want to think that it means nothing because I want it to not exist, really. At the same time, it’s hard to say that because I also don’t think I would be where I’m at today if it wasn’t for it. If I was to go through college without that suspension, just flying . . . under the radar, who knows what life would be like after graduation. . . . I could have just skimmed by and got C’s and then struggled getting a job because I didn’t ever change. But with that suspension happening, it just, sort of, changed me—made me grow up during this time and, I guess, it made me a better student really. I want it to mean nothing. I don’t want it to exist. But, at the same time, it’s hypocritical to say that because it means pretty much where I’m at today—it is everything.

“Transformational learning refers to ‘chang[ing]…what we know’” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 130). Although reflection is a daily occurrence, it does not always incorporate self-reflection, which is a core component of transformational learning. When reflecting, we often merely correct our interpretations. On the other hand, the transformation of a meaning perspective . . . is more likely to involve our sense of self and always
involves critical reflection upon the distorted premises sustaining our structure of
expectation. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

Additionally, it is not enough to merely become critically aware of how and why one’s
understanding was incorrect; one must make decisions and act upon the new understanding

The students in this study did just that. They all took the active step to seek
readmission to Achieve University. They developed better and more intentional ways to
cope with academic difficulty and stress. They addressed the issues that kept them from
initially being academically successful. They learned to ask for help and, moreover, to
accept a helping hand when it is given. They reframed their academic suspensions, re-
authored their stories, and gave new meaning to the tragedy. For many of these students,
their journey of healing had only just begun because, for the first time, they were able to talk
openly about the academic suspension with someone who cared and would not judge them.

I am proud of each and every one of the students because they allowed themselves to
participate in this study. They were able to tell their entire stories in their own words and in
their own ways. What I truly respect is that the students saw the purpose of this study as
contributing to something “bigger” than themselves and that they were able to understand
how their difficult journey could “save” someone else. I hope I have honored each of the
students appropriately. I hope I gave voice to their experiences, illuminated the common
themes that emerged, and emphasized the significance of their learning—their
transformational learning.
Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have implications for educational stakeholders in similar institutions who want to increase the number of students who seek readmission from academic suspension and who want to increase the likelihood that such students will achieve academic success upon reinstatement. Furthermore, these findings are intended for use at similar colleges and universities, and it is hoped that they increase the persistence and academic resilience of students who have been academically suspended. Collaborative, intentional, and thoughtful efforts and interventions are appropriate and, indeed, necessary for college student success.

Regrettably, that is a task that is easier said than done. Research suggests that nearly 80 percent of academically suspended college students never return to any institution of higher education and, of those who do return, approximately 20 percent achieve academic success (McDermott, 2008). Furthermore, research has shown that college students who were academically suspended are less likely to graduate than those who were not (Berkovitz & O’Quin, 2006). Correspondingly, it was found that “only 31% of students who had earned probation (ever) graduated within 6 years or less compared to 83% of students who never earned probation” (Mathies et al., 2006, pp. 10–11).

College student attrition is an important issue for higher education administrators. Tinto (1996) reported that 30–35 percent of student attrition is attributable to poor academic performance. However, “less than 25 percent of all institutional departures, nationally, take the form of academic dismissal” (Tinto, 2012, p. 49), a statistic that is further supported by research from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (Spradlin et al., 2010).
According to research conducted by Bellandese (1990), academic deans, chief academic officers, or academic reinstatement committees have the primary responsibility for hearing and deciding academic reinstatements at institutions of higher education. Although many colleges and universities assign this responsibility to the aforementioned parties, the responsibility varies greatly between institutions and the procedures surrounding reinstatement itself are not always clearly defined. Houle (2013) suggested that universities “designate a person or committee for students to reach out to while on academic suspension to seek guidance or assistance with questions regarding the reinstatement process” (p. 97). I echo Houle’s recommendation, as several of the participants in this study mentioned that the readmission procedures were unclear, difficult to navigate, and at times, intimidating and overwhelming; in fact, many of students did not know where, or how, to even start the process of seeking readmission from academic suspension.

It is further suggested that Houle’s (2013) recommendation be extended in the following ways: (a) Colleges and universities should be required to clearly define their readmission policies and procedures and to make them easily accessible via technology and readily available in a variety of formats and (b) colleges and universities should make active, intentional efforts to contact academically suspended students—after a predetermined length of time that aligns with the institution’s readmission policy—to clearly outline the procedures for readmission. These suggestions emanate from the recognition that it is one thing to designate an individual, or individuals, who can answer questions about the readmission process, as Houle recommended, and it is quite another thing to have the procedures clearly defined and easily accessible. Colleges and universities have a responsibility to meet their
students where they are, so the avenues by which this information is made readily available and/or disseminated should be regularly revisited and adjusted if appropriate and necessary.

Additionally, educators and practitioners in institutions of higher education have a responsibility to their students—to help them succeed and, ultimately, earn their degree. By virtue of having initially admitted the student to the institution, educators and practitioners have, in essence, entered into a “social and moral contract” with them. Therefore, they should be proactively and strategically communicating with the students who have departed from the institution—for whatever reason—and encouraging them to return to a college or university to earn a credential. Doing so decreases college student attrition, increases retention and completion rates and, ultimately, contributes to a more economically stable and productive society.

Currently at Achieve University, procedures for who reviews Applications for Readmission from Academic Suspension are in place. Depending upon the student’s length of departure from the institution, their performance at other institutions during their academic suspension (if applicable), and the number of academic suspensions on their record, an application may be reviewed and decided upon individually by a member of the Office of the Registrar or by the entire CARR, which comprises 14 institutional officials who represent different functional areas and academic colleges across campus. Based on the findings from this study, it is suggested that a framework for reviewing and deciding upon these applications be established. Such a framework could guide those institutional officials who have the responsibility for reviewing applications and deciding which students will be granted readmission from academic reinstatements at their institutions of higher education.
and, ultimately, it would enhance their decision-making process by (potentially) reducing opportunities for bias to enter into the process.

“The dilemma that many college administrators and/or reinstatement committees face is that of deciding which students should be reinstated” (Cobble & Hohengarten, 1998, p. 2). The decision to readmit students who have been dismissed due to poor academic performance “is made more often than not on the basis of inspired guesswork” (Giesecke & Hancock, 1950, p. 72). It is imperative that such a framework or guidelines extend beyond quantitative factors (e.g., length of departure, age, GPA prior to departure, earned credit hours, etc.) to incorporate and/or explore “qualitative” factors, too. As was discussed in chapter 2, much of the research on the predictive (i.e., quantitative) variables of academic success is inconclusive and inconsistent (Hall & Gahn, 1994), resulting in the recognition that it is extremely difficult to predict exactly what variables and/or factors lead to academic success for such students (Brady, 2008). Therefore, a framework that incorporates a more holistic perspective may prove to be more successful. For example, the conclusions of this study were drawn based upon an analysis of the data and are embedded within Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory. All of the students had a shared experience of academic suspension and subsequent academic resilience at Achieve University after reinstatement. These are the mere 20 percent of students who go on to achieve academic success upon readmission (McDermott, 2008); their academic resilience is truly a somewhat rare phenomenon. The conclusions of this study suggest that being placed on academic suspension rose to the level of a disorienting dilemma, and it served as a trigger event for the critical reflection phase. Perhaps more importantly, though, it was found that this experience led to perspective transformational/transformative learning, which ultimately shifted their
understanding of themselves and/or their worldviews. Looking for this sort of experience in a student’s written and/or spoken word may round out the Application for Readmission from Academic Suspension and provide a stronger and more accurate picture of the student’s ability to succeed at the institution.

The aforementioned framework for reviewing and deciding upon Applications for Readmission from Academic Suspension could incorporate aspects that try to ascertain what level of learning and development have taken place by attempting to identify whether the student engaged in critical reflection, leading to perspective transformation and action as a result of the academic suspension. One way to achieve this would be to require a student to respond (in writing and/or verbally) to key prompts and questions—akin to the series of questions that were asked during the semistructured, individual interviews with participants for the present study. Their responses rendered a deepness, richness, and fullness that transcended statistical analysis and gave insight into their experience, critical reflection, learning, and development. This would be an ideal avenue for practitioners to allow theory to guide their practice. The framework could be grounded in adult learning and development theory and further augmented by professional experience and quantitative data, which could alleviate some of the “inspired guesswork” (Giesecke & Hancock, 1950, p. 72) and lead to greater academic success for the students who are reinstated.

McDermott (2008) asserted that the practice of academic suspension is inconsistent with retention theory and that it has a direct, negative impact on student retention because it fails to foster a mindset that positively contributes to persistence and completion. Yet, the results of this study do not fully support that assertion. In fact, for these students, academic suspension did, indeed, foster a mindset that positively contributed to their ultimate
persistence and completion at the institution. Educators who intend to affect student success may wish to reflect on the findings of this study in order to better and more intentionally respond to the experiences of academically suspended college students. The results of this study could help facilitate and structure academic suspension discussions in a way that reframes the experience and, in turn, allows a student to view the academic suspension from a different vantage point. Additionally, the results could be used to refine the language that is used in dismissal communications as well as foster the development and/or enhancement of reinstatement programs.

For instance, many of the students in the present study experienced a sense of “healing” as a result of talking through their experience with me. For some, it was the start of the healing process; for others, it brought a sense of closure; and yet, for other students, our conversation allowed them to actively reflect upon and examine the experience of academic suspension holistically, and through that process, they were able to make sense of and articulate their personal learning and development. Creating an intentional space for students to engage in this level of critical reflection—to begin to ascribe meaning to such a powerful experience—could aid in healing for some and, perhaps, even academic resilience and success for others.

Research has revealed that not all students who are academically suspended and later reinstated are successful; in fact, the percentage of those students who do experience academic resilience upon readmission is very small. However, the results of this study give hope that this could be changed—that the needle could be moved in such a way that the students in this study become the “rule” as opposed to the “exception.” These results gave me pause and made me realize that there is a substantial amount of work left to do, and
although I understood that intellectually and, to some degree, emotionally as well, the gravity of that simple statement is so much more real now.

According to data from the NSC Research Center (2014), more than 31 million individuals enrolled in an institution of higher education during the last two decades left without ever earning a degree or certificate. When considering this information alongside Tinto’s (1996) research—which suggests that 30–35 percent of student attrition is attributable to poor academic performance, with “less than 25 percent of all institutional departures . . . [taking] the form of academic dismissal” (Tinto, 2012, p. 49)—of the 31 million individuals, around 9.3–10.85 million (i.e., 30–35 percent) departed as a result of poor academic performance, with approximately 7.75 million (i.e., 25 percent) having been academically suspended. It is known that, of those who are academically suspended, around 80 percent never return to the institution, and of the 20 percent of students who do return, approximately 20 percent achieve subsequent academic success (McDermott, 2008). Therefore, if only 20 percent of the 7.75 million students were reinstated, that would equate to 1.55 million students and, of those, 310,000 students would achieve subsequent academic success. Consider, for a moment, the economic and societal impact of changing the narrative—of having the students in this study be the rule and not the exception.

It is suggested that institutions develop programs and/or requirements for students who are readmitted from academic suspension. At the time of this writing, Achieve University did not have any such program for these students; in fact, there were no “requirements” of any kind for students who are reinstated from academic suspension—no one they needed to regularly meet with to discuss their academic and social reintegration, no required academic recovery class, nothing. That is a definite gap in the necessary service and
support that these students need and deserve. The empirical literature is clear that academically at-risk college students can be successful when provided with the right support structure(s) (Boyd et al., 1994; Brooks-Harris et al., 1999; Cherry & Coleman, 2010; Cobble & Hohengarten, 1998; Dill et al., 2010–2011; Heiman, 2010; Humphrey, 2005–2006; Lipsky & Ender, 1990; Lucas & Hunt, 2002; Mann et al., 2003; Sanders & Hutson, 2012; Trombley, 2000). Therefore, it is critical that retention plans be both redesigned and expanded to focus on serving multiple populations of students, including those students who are readmitted from academic suspension.

The findings of this study further suggest that a reinstatement program should incorporate a creative component intended to elicit critical reflection, meaning making, learning, development, and healing. The creative component could look different at different institutions, and it could even differ by student. What is important is that these students be given an intentional space to express their emotions, explore their feelings, critically examine their experience, and retell their story—to give it new meaning and purpose in their lives. Doing so may provide closure for some students and healing for others, and it may even allow students who would not have otherwise achieved academic success an opportunity to be successful; if that were the case, this reinstatement program would double as an academic intervention. Remember, only 20 percent of students who are readmitted from academic suspension achieve subsequent academic success (McDermott, 2008), which equates to around 80 percent of students who do not experience academic resilience. This intervention could be the tipping point between failure and success because it gives the students a structured outlet to tell their story and to ensure that their academic suspension does not hold power over them any longer. One important aspect of transformational learning is that it is
about the journey, too, and the destination; therefore, it is necessary that the reinstatement program be structured in such a way that it allows students to see the broader picture—the forest through the trees or the journey.

It is important that this type of program be intentional, well-informed, and grounded in theory. There is voluminous literature on adult learning, so educators have many theories and models that can be used as a framework for the reinstatement program, including but not limited to: Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) transformational learning theory; Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993, 2012) theory of individual student departure; Baxter Magolda and King’s (2004) learning partnerships model, whereby they “identified conditions that promote self-authorship” (p. 41); Washburn’s (2000) transpersonal cognition model, in which he stresses, “wisdom cannot be taught; we must awaken to it, a transformation of our whole being” (p. 207); or King and Kitchener’s (1994, 2002) reflective judgment model, which includes seven stages with the final two stages encompassing the more mature thinking patterns/reflective thinking. Finally, the program should also take into account who the learners are and the social context that shapes their experience(s). It should also be flexible enough to cater to each student’s unique and individual needs because “learning in adulthood is an intensely personal activity” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. ix).

Limitations

Unlike this study’s delimitations, which were specific choices made by the researcher during the design phase that outlined the boundaries of the study, the limitations were not predetermined. Limitations influenced this study’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations. These limitations resulted from the design of the study, availability of the
research site, the data collections techniques employed, and the time available to analyze the data and write this report.

There are numerous practical implications for the findings of this study for educators and practitioners in institutions of higher education. However, individuals are encouraged to consider replicating this study at their own institution. When interpreting the findings as well as the potential implications for practice within a given institution, higher education officials should exercise a degree of caution and bear in mind that several limitations of the current study must be taken into consideration.

**Researcher Subjectivity**

Qualitative methods, by their very nature, require a researcher to subjectively approach the topic at hand (Seidman, 1998). As such, it is important to disclose the background and potential biases of the researcher. As a practitioner and educator in higher education and, specifically, in one of my previous positions, I was responsible for administering the Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy at the institution. I regularly met with students who were experiencing academic difficulty, who had been academically suspended, and/or who were seeking readmission. Additionally, I reviewed Applications for Readmission from Academic Suspension, and in turn, I worked with the members of the CARR to determine appeal decisions and to administer the ruling. I regularly educated professional staff and faculty on campus about the institution’s Undergraduate Academic Standing Policy, and I coached them on how to effectively have those “difficult academic conversations” with students.

As a result, I was quite familiar with this student population. For me, these were not just some “study participants” who had experienced academic difficulty and subsequent
academic resilience; on the contrary, these were students—*my* students. They were the students with whom—and for whom—I worked closely every day. They were the students who ignited my passion both personally and professionally because they brought deep meaning to my work. During the study, I was touched by their stories and courage, and likewise, I know our relationship transformed them, too. While I existed as the primary investigator and author for this study, I simultaneously served as the students’ sounding board, confidante, and fellow meaning maker. Therefore, this study was colored by my role(s), perception, and subjectivity.

**Researcher Effect**

In addition to the aforementioned limitation of researcher subjectivity, there were also limitations resulting from the nature of the methodology employed. Few limitations are identifiable when implementing a phenomenological research design. Breakwell, Hammond, Fife-Shaw, and Smith (2006) noted that, because phenomenological methodology requires the researcher to be the primary instrument of data collection, researcher effect can become a limitation. A researcher’s “demeanor, accent, dress, gender, age, and power” (p. 248) are all characteristics that may influence a participant’s willingness to participate. These characteristics may also influence the quality and depth of participant responses. According to Moustakas (1994), a researcher cannot expect participants to adopt a phenomenological attitude, and as such, the participants may have (conscious or unconscious) biases against the researcher’s characteristics.

**Self-Selection Bias**

Even though all students who were eligible to participate in the present study at Achieve University were invited to participate, not all of them responded to the solicitation.
Consequently, self-selection bias was an issue. Those students who opted into the study may have had experiences that differed from those who chose not to participate, resulting in data that were less representative of the larger population as a whole. Additionally, despite a fairly representative sample in and of itself (i.e., the study participants closely mirroring the eligible participants in terms of specific characteristics), self-selection bias diminishes the broad applicability of findings. That is, self-selection bias does not diminish the authenticity of the data, but it must be taken into account when considering the nature and potential applicability of this study’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

**Participant Responses**

The use of semistructured individual interviews as the data collection method rendered a deepness, richness, and fullness to the students’ experiences that may not have otherwise been captured. However, the data collected were contingent upon the students’ willingness and ability to respond both candidly and articulately. As a result, the goodness and trustworthiness of the data is limited to the narrative responses provided by the students. It is important to note that research suggests that participants desire to give responses to questions that are perceived to be more “socially acceptable” (Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Summerskill, 1962). Additionally, the students were asked to reflect retrospectively upon the experience of academic suspension and the meaning it had for them; thus, they were removed from the experience itself, and as such, they may have “edited” it over time. As a result, a retrospective exploration of academic suspension may not provide as accurate and vivid a description as it would had the data been collected while the participants were living the experience in real time. Finally, it is important to reiterate that qualitative research with this
population as it pertains to this topic is minimally represented in the literature, so there are few studies to use as comparison points.

**Low Level of Generalizability**

Qualitative studies offer findings, conclusions, and recommendations that are informative as opposed to being generalizable, which is but one of the many distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research findings as opposed to findings resulting from quantitative inquiry. Therefore, it should be stated that this study’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations are limited, insofar as they were not intended to be completely applicable, even in similar situations at like institutions. The sample for this study consisted of 13 undergraduate, degree-seeking, college students from a single institution. Therefore, as previously indicated, one must be cautious in generalizing the findings to similar students at a different institution. Furthermore, the sample comprised only those students who took the initiative to apply for readmission from academic suspension and, more specifically, those students who were able to achieve academic success in the semesters following their reinstatement. However, the research methodology, methods, and data analysis utilized in this study may prove helpful for other researchers, practitioners, and educators who are interested in conducting research on and providing assistance to this particular population of college students. Additionally, despite the low level of generalizability, the result of this study are transferrable to other institutions; readers should consider how these results make sense within the context of their institutions and transfer the lessons learned accordingly.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Further investigation on this topic is warranted. Despite the significant amount of research that exists on college student experiences and, in particular, college student attrition
and retention, there is a dearth of research on students who have been academically suspended and later reinstated. There is even less empirical research on students who have experienced both ends of the academic continuum: academic suspension and subsequent academic success. Furthermore, within that small area of the literature, qualitative studies are even less well represented, with the students’ experiences—their voices—being largely silent. More research that explores the experience and academic resilience of academically suspended college students from a qualitative standpoint must be conducted—giving voice to these students’ perspectives and insight into their lifeworlds.

The present study was, in part, a retrospective, descriptive, exploratory study of the experience of academic suspension. However, there is value in exploring the experience of academic suspension—the emotions, feelings, and thought processes—as it is happening/in real time. When a retrospective exploration occurs, the researcher runs the risk that certain experiences could be forgotten or edited over time, resulting in an incomplete or inaccurate description of the experience. Yet, exploring the experience of academic suspension in real time could present some ethical concerns. As common sense would dictate, and as this study confirmed, the experience of academic suspension has strong potential to be a very emotional experience for the student and there is the possibility that the depth of those emotions could be exacerbated depending upon the methodology employed. Additionally, the researcher being present as the experience is being “lived” may alter the experience, in and of itself, resulting in inaccurate data.

As has already been reported, I ended up interviewing Shea twice because, unbeknownst to me, the recording equipment stopped working during our interview. Although I felt bad asking Shea to go through the entire interview again, zie was very
gracious and more than happy to do so. Although the overall structure and content of our interviews were not different, Shea recalled the experience of academic suspension with greater clarity during our second interview; hir stories were much more rich and descriptive and, in some ways, more from the heart. Zie disclosed some things during our second interview that did not surface during our initial interview. I believe that was due, in part, to the greater amount of time zie had to reflect upon the experience, but I also believe we had built a stronger rapport, and as such, zie disclosed the more intimate and personal details that were originally omitted because zie felt safe doing so. I cannot help but wonder if I would have gotten even more detail had I interviewed all of my participants more than once? For the present study, I did not employ Seidman’s (2005) constructed guidelines for what has come to be called in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing, in which the researcher conducts a series of three interviews. According to Seidman (2005), the interviews should be conducted in a 90-minute format, which allows ample time for participants to reconstruct their experience, put it in the context of their lives, and reflect on its meaning. Future research could incorporate use of Seidman’s (2005) in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing as opposed to the one-time, semistructured, individual interviews that were employed as the method for this study.

One of the aspects I struggled with was how emotionally overwhelming some of the interviews were. For example, listening to Auden, Kai, Shea, and Sasha tell their stories was heartbreaking, and it had a powerful impact on me. Although I was aware, at some level, of the emotional and intellectual challenges of conducting such a study, I was not fully equipped to work through the emotional expense. Interviews were conducted over a seven-and-a-half week period (from June 11 to August 4, 2014). In hindsight, though, I should
have spaced the interviews further apart to reduce the overwhelming intensity, and I should have had a better way to work through my emotions. Fortunately, I had the benefit of Ruth Behar’s (1996) testimony that it is only worthwhile doing research that breaks your heart, but I had not internalized what that truly meant. Rager (2005) summed up my thoughts on this particular issue nicely:

As I look back, I have no regrets about conducting the study. It was a life-changing experience. I am much stronger and less fearful today because of my interactions with the participants in my study. However, I think more formal safeguards should be a part of the process when a researcher takes on an emotionally laden topic. . . . Self-care during such research should not be left to chance, as it was in my case. Novice researchers should be better prepared . . . for the personal impact of conducting research of this type. (p. 24)

Although this is not necessarily a recommendation for future research, it serves more as a caution and counsel to researchers who may employ qualitative inquiry to explore a similar topic. I believe the topic of self-care strategies necessitates further attention, and additional training and education must be given to new and current researchers.

The participants in this study represented those students who chose to seek readmission following academic suspension and, moreover, only those students who experienced subsequent academic resilience at Achieve University. Unfortunately, research suggests that nearly 80% of academically suspended students never return to an institution of higher education, and of those who do return, only approximately 20% achieve academic success (McDermott, 2008). Therefore, further exploration of students who did not return to higher education after their academic suspension is recommended. Perhaps their experience
and learning is quite different than that of the participants in the present study. Furthermore, their insights could help colleges and universities better understand why such a high percentage of students become what Tinto (2012) called system departures. Exploring this population in greater detail could aid institutions in determining ways to move more students from system departures to institutional departures, stopouts, or transfers (i.e., institutional or delayed).

As the primary investigator, I made a very conscious decision at the outset of the study—a delimitation—whereby I did not investigate and/or delve into whether there were differences between first-generation and non-first-generation students, resident and non-resident students, male and female students, native and international students, majority and minority students, and traditional-age and nontraditional-age students. Instead, all of the students were viewed the same, so much so that I even made active efforts to de-identify the data in a way that did not easily afford the reader an opportunity to ascribe certain characteristics to any of the participants. Future research could explore whether or not differences exist between these subpopulations of students regarding their shared experience of academic suspension.

It was suggested in the Implications for Practice section in this chapter that institutions develop programs and/or requirements for students who are readmitted from academic suspension that incorporate a creative component intended to elicit critical reflection, meaning making, learning, development, and healing. Integrating this type of component may, ultimately, contribute to subsequent academic success for students who may not have otherwise achieved it. If this were true, the program would also function as an academic intervention for the institution. This presupposition is based upon the findings of
the present study, and it is further supported by much of the literature on adult learning and college student retention. “Learning is a personal process—but a process that is shaped by the context of adult life and the society in which one lives” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 1).

Successfully designing and implementing intentional support structures and practices will help these students bring meaning and focus to their college experience and, hopefully, will result in academic recovery, which in turn, increases the likelihood for persistence, retention, and completion. The empirical literature is clear that academically at-risk college students and, in particular, students readmitted from academic suspension, can be successful when provided with the right support structures. However, the recommended program warrants further exploration.

Finally, this study was conducted at a state-supported, midsized, comprehensive, 4-year university in the Midwest with a total enrollment of around 12,200 students. It seems prudent to replicate this study at different types of institutions across the country, as each institution has its own unique culture, academic standing policy, definition for good academic standing, readmission practices, and student populations. Doing so could further strengthen and refine the findings and implications, and it could allow institutions to draw more definitive, universally applicable conclusions from these students’ experiences. Likewise, using other theoretical lenses to frame the study could prove to be interesting and illuminating. Perhaps research could also be conducted that explores the emotional toll related to “failure,” academic-specific coping strategies, and the decision-making process for these students (all of which are topics that could have been explored in greater depth in the present study).
Reflexivity Statement

I am a naturally reflective person, so this particular section of the dissertation should have been fairly straightforward to write; however, I found myself agonizing over every word. I continued typing words into coherent thoughts, reading what was just written, and then deleting the entire section and starting over again.

What could I say that would be of value? What was said that needed to be clarified, or what was left unsaid that would give greater meaning to the shared experiences of the students who participated in this study? What insight did I have that could be of assistance to a scholar like myself—someone who is analyzing empirical studies—so they may understand the current state of literature and determine what holes exist in the research so they, too, could contribute to greater understanding and better practice? What could I share that would help bring the study to a logical conclusion and leave me with a sense of true closure?

As I stared out the window into the gray expanse of sky and damp, spring, midwestern landscape, I was struck by a sense of longing, uncertainty, and self-doubt. I smiled as I realized that this was likely what many of the students felt when they returned to Achieve University after having been suspended. I wanted so badly to be done with this—to defend my dissertation and put this part of my journey to rest. Would this be good enough, though; would it be worthy of the credential? What if it were not? What if my committee did not accept it? What if I never finished what I started? What if? But what if I did finish, defend, and graduate; then what? I felt betwixt and between where I was and where I longed to be, and I was equal parts nervous and excited with anticipation. My gaze landed on the inspirational quote on the wall, a quote I had read many times before, but only now did the
full gravity of the idea come bearing down upon me. The quote is by Lao Tzu, and it reads: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” It was time to step forward.

I engaged in a continuous process of reflection throughout the entire study—examining myself as an educator, practitioner, and researcher and considering my relationship with the students. I thought about my professional role, my preconceptions, ideas, and assumptions. I considered the many different roles and social, cultural, and relational contexts the students were in and how those may have shaped the constructed meaning of their experiences. I recognized that there is not one true meaning to be discovered—not one singular reality—but, instead, that meaning is interactively and culturally constructed and/or deconstructed over time. As such, my role/goal throughout this study was to share the understanding I had arrived at based upon what was collectively shared with me in this time period.

As I considered the stories the students had shared with me, I was, and still am, deeply moved, humbled, and inspired by each and every one of them. I am incredibly blessed to have been invited into their lives and private worlds, particularly when the tangible benefits for them were fairly insignificant—an early registration appointment or the waiver of the application for graduation fee is seemingly nothing when compared to the investment they had made. Interestingly, though, the students never saw it as such; for them, the opportunity to give of themselves in this manner provided them with an avenue to reinvent themselves and, moreover, to heal.

Although the conversations were emotionally difficult at times, several of the students remarked that our conversation was the first time they ever considered the academic suspension in its entirety, and for them, that was powerful in and of itself. So many of the
students were still “concealing” their academic suspension; living with a sense of shame and dread that their “transgression(s)” would be discovered or revealed. Being able to talk openly about the experience, to process through their emotions, to reflect upon how the experience fundamentally changed them, to recognize how something so “bad” contributed to something truly “beautiful” in their lives was freeing for them. I did not cast judgment on them. I did not make them feel like a failure. I did not speak of the academic suspension as a negative thing. That was not my approach. Instead, I listened quietly. I asked questions that made them think more deeply about the experience as a whole. I sympathized, displayed empathy, and demonstrated understanding as they navigated the complex emotions of the entire experience. More importantly, though, I cared for them, and in turn, they cared for me, too. In giving of themselves so unreservedly to our relationship, they gave me something—passion, insight, and the will to finish. I needed to tell their stories . . . to give voice to the voiceless, and that is what I am doing here.

As I shared in the Positionality/Role of the Researcher section in chapter 3, my brother and brother-in-law served as the inspiration for the present study. I was intrigued by how they were able to achieve academic success—to alter their trajectories so drastically—after having been academically suspended. I wondered what made them different as compared to those individuals who never returned to the institution. They both humble and inspire me, much like each student in this study did. One of the students in my cohort, Mark, and I would meet regularly for “dissertation writing fun time.” Once a week we would get together and report on what we had accomplished since our last meeting, and then we would sit and write for several hours. One day, I was reporting my findings and data analysis to Mark, and he smiled at me with this sheepish yet knowing smile. He said:
I’ve never told you this, but I was kicked out of school. And all of what you are saying—the shame, fear, disappointment, and feelings of worthlessness—resonates so deeply with me. I was that kid. What’s more, the student’s explanation of their suspension now—the growth, maturation, and appreciation—is exactly what I feel, too.

Mark proceeded to tell me his story—to take me through his own journey, critical self-reflection, learning, and transformation—and it mirrored so much of what I had heard from my participants. That interaction meant a great deal to me. I love that Mark trusted me enough to share his own story—one he had not shared with many individuals—and I was delighted to hear that his experience was like that of my participants; it gave greater credibility to my findings. Although I have not yet shared the findings and conclusions of this study with my brother and brother-in-law, I find that I am now even more excited to do so. I wonder if the students’ experiences and stories will resonate with them, too.

The doctoral student experience has been a long road, and I am extraordinarily thankful it has been my journey. As I consider all that has happened from start to finish, I am a bit overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of it all. I walked alongside my mother as she battled aggressive cancer, and I fully embraced each aspect of that . . . including her loss. As a result, my family is closer today than ever before. Both my husband and I were offered and accepted new positions. We packed up our family and moved halfway across the state. Our children started new schools. We lost two pets to cancer. I made new, lifelong friends as a result of my classes. I came to deeply admire a few key faculty members. I tragically lost two of my classmates, and although they are gone, their presence and spirits are with me as I write. I could go on and on about all that transpired, but I am going to keep some of the
journey to myself. Through it all, though, I kept working for this. I kept making progress because I owed it to both myself and to the students who participated in this study. Although the progress was not always as fast as I thought it should have been, it was progress nonetheless.

Again, I found myself smiling because this was likely what many of the students felt and thought as they traversed their own journeys; more and more, I have found similarities between their experiences and my own. Although the experience was challenging and long, ultimately it was inspiring, humbling, and transformational on so many different levels. Thank you, students, for giving of yourselves so freely and for teaching me. Thank you for caring about me as much as I care about each and every one of you. Thank you for being beautiful you.
REFERENCES


Yoder, F. A. (1962). *A follow-up of students readmitted by the Purdue Committee on Scholastic Delinquencies and Readmissions* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.

APPENDIX. IRB APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2307
515-294-4566
FAX 515-294-4267

Date: 11/13/2013
To: Jennifer J Suchan
1746 Thrush Dr
Waterloo, IA 50701

CC: Dr. Larry Ebbers
N256 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Achieving Academic Success: The Academic Resilience of Academically At-Risk College Students

IRB ID: 13-464

Approval Date: 11/12/2013
Date for Continuing Review: 11/4/2015
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.

- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.

- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.

- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.