DISINVITED STUDENTS: SOCIAL WORK, COMMUNITY COLLEGES, AND THE
PROCESS OF MANDATORY WITHDRAWAL

TANYA SHUTE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN EDUCATION
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

August 2018

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Abstract

Persistence is a serious concern for colleges, typically accepting a higher share of marginalized students than their university counterparts. Unfortunately, many students are expelled from their professional programs for poor performance in a process called mandatory withdrawal. The experiences and knowledge that community college students hold are vital to social justice-oriented professions such as social services work. Large numbers of mandatory withdrawals in social services programs means that the social work profession suffers for their lack of ability to complete their programs and enter the field. This mixed methods study explores the process of failure and mandatory withdrawal of Social Services Work community college students, implications for social work education, and the social justice orientation of social work. Students reported significant personal and emotional burdens at the time of college-going that interfered with their ability to make the crucial social and academic integration necessary for success in post-secondary education. Students reported having very little faculty or support services interaction, and often left their programs without much intervention from the institution at all. Involuntarily withdrawn from their programs, most had very poor recall of their academic life, which speaks to poor academic integration. The failure process is examined and implicated in that most of the withdrawn students did not access help once the failure process began, symbolic of a kind of "auto-pilot" the students experienced once they began to fail classes. A lack of personal agency was found in several dimensions of the student experience as students seemed to follow the failure trajectory out of the program but are surprised by the withdrawal. Implications for transformative vocational education in community college social services programs and the social work profession are discussed.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the many Social Services Worker program students all over Ontario, especially those who leave their programs early and move on to other things. I honour your knowledge, work, experience, and expertise. It has inspired this work, and I hope some meaningful change that allows others to take up the profession that I have loved and tried to live up to my whole career.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not be possible without the support of my husband, Bryan Dalla Rosa. I thank him first because of the many hours, months, and years he spent sacrificing for and supporting my graduate studies.

I am very thankful to my doctoral committee for their contributions, support, and mentorship. Professor Don Dippo, my supervisor, and committee members, Professor Theresa Shanahan and Professor Susan McGrath, all spent many hours sharing their expertise with me. Their thoroughness and diligence is very much appreciated.

Thanks are also due to Seneca College's Office of Institutional Research for their support and assistance, as well as my Academic Chair, Biljana Bruce, who wholeheartedly supported my work from the beginning. Finally, thank you to all of the students who participated in the survey and the interviews that made this research possible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAAT	College of Applied Arts and Technology
CASW	Canadian Association of Social Workers
CASWE	Canadian Association of Social Work Educators
GAP	General Arts Program, Seneca College
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
OCSWSSW	Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Services Workers
PSE	Post-Secondary Education
SW	Social Work
SSW	Social Services Workers/Social Services Worker Program
YITS	Youth in Transition Survey

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The discipline of social work struggles to maintain its social justice orientation in the face of relentless neo-liberal forces that undo domestic and global social welfare programs in the name of economic growth and stability. A primarily market orientation and austerity orientation to social welfare policies over the past two decades have led to significant reductions in Canada's social safety net, restricting both eligibility and funding for social services and programs while simultaneously increasing the need for social welfare protections due to poor labour market conditions and other regressive social policy changes (Carniol, 2010, Jones, 2009; Mulally, 2007; Raphael, 2016; Wagner & Ying Lee, 2011). Social programs are vanishing, and eligibility is becoming increasingly restricted at a time when severe and persistent income inequality is growing in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, the bottom 60 per cent of Canadians' incomes have remained static or dropped year-over-year, but the top 10 per cent of Canadians continue to make gains, and their market incomes accounted for 47.9 per cent of all wealth in 2012 (Broadbent Institute, 2014, p.3 & Curry-Stevens, 2016, p.64). The bottom 30 per cent of Canadians accounted for less than 1 per cent of all wealth in Canada (Broadbent Institute, 2014, p.3). In addition to severe income disparities, these conditions are also related to persistent earning gaps across genders, chronic high rates of youth unemployment, and continued economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples and other ethno-cultural communities (Broadbent Institute, 2014). It is this context that weighs heavily on social work as an antidote to these conditions, yet neo-liberalism's forces undermine social work's progressive promise of social change by justifying pervasive service cuts, targeting minimal intervention to only those most in need, and destabilizing community organizations while eradicating social work functions in organizations such as advocacy, community development and organizing, and prevention efforts.

Teaching post-secondary social work not only reflects this difficult practice context but also embodies its own complexities. Post-secondary education (PSE) also struggles in the current neo-liberal corporatist and market-oriented social context. Concern for the growing influence of market forces in post-secondary institutions is often juxtaposed against the less-prioritized liberal or civic goals of higher education, as evidenced through pressures for institutional accountability, better labour market performance of graduates, and increasing pressure for private/corporate sector partnerships (Axelrod, 2002; Boggs, 2004; Giroux, 2014; Jones, 2004). In Canada, participation in higher education also remains stubbornly socio-economically stratified, with students from lower income groups participating less and having more difficulties persisting through to program completion (de Brouker, 2005; Finnie, 2011; Finnie, Childs & Wismer, 2011; Finnie, Frenette, Mueller, & Sweetman, 2010; Finnie, Mueller, Sweetman, & Usher, 2008). Indeed, both social work and higher education are facing challenging contexts under the influence of the forces of neo-liberalism.

Post-secondary education in Ontario is also struggling with issues of institutional identity as the lines become increasingly blurred between universities and community colleges in light of recent legislative changes in Ontario that allow for degree granting at the community college level (Canadian Council on Learning, 2010; Clark, Moran, Skolnick & Trick, 2009). The distinction between social work as a university-credentialed field and its para-profession—social services work, the domain of community colleges—is emblematic of this relationship in that the differences may be indistinguishable to most except those within the profession themselves.

Caught up in this context, and the focus of this study, is the community college Social Services program student. Community college students typically embody multiple complexities. Community college students are characterized as less academically prepared (Daiek, Dixon, &

Talbert, 2012; Daley, 2010), more ethnically and racially diverse, and typically of lower income status than their university counterparts (Boggs, 2004; Carnevale, 2009; Deil-Amen, 2011; Frenette, 2008; Harbour & Ebie, 2011; Shannon & Smith, 2006; Wells, 2008). In essence, community colleges are positioned as institutions largely comprised of the disproportionately marginalized and financially disadvantaged social groups compared to universities (Sullivan, 2008). However, the most marginalized and disaffected groups are hardly represented in post-secondary education at all (Finnie, Mueller, Sweetman, & Usher, 2008). The literature on postsecondary student persistence suggests that persistence is significantly influenced by student characteristics such as age, socio-economic status, and prior academic achievement levels (Meuller, 2008; Vaccaro, 2012). Students' demographic profiles and other personal characteristics such as level of maturity and quality of social networks all contribute to their ability to persist, to continue and thrive in post-secondary education (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013). Students who embody social capital characteristics such as middle to higher socio-economic status, positive secondary school achievement, and strong family support are thought to be more likely to persist and graduate in post-secondary education (Frennette, 2008; Tinto, 1997). Taken together—the community college student composition and the relevance of social capital to persistence—the typical community college student is often portrayed as potentially lacking the qualities required to persist in higher education (Boggs, 2004; Daiek, Dixon, & Talbert, 2012; Daley, 2010; de Broucker, 2005; Drolet, 2005; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). They are typified often as "at-risk" as a result of the academic, social, and economic barriers that pose a potential threat to their success such as greater work and family responsibilities, a greater likelihood of economic insecurity or low-income status, and being first-generation post-secondary students and therefore lacking academic mentors (Rouche & Rouche, 2006).

Community college students, especially those in colleges in large and diverse metropolitan settings, are constructed as less prepared and with fewer assets to draw on to succeed. Students who choose the community college route to the social work field then could be thought of as otherwise unable to pursue the social work professional designation in its university setting. Often community college is the only post-secondary option for many students, as matters of low income and poor academic performance in secondary school preclude the more selective, lengthy and therefore more expensive, university option (Davies, 2008).

As a result of the original intent of the vocational focus typical of community colleges (Skolnik, 2002; Skolnik 2004), these students focus their education on preparing for a para-professional designation at the lower end of a professional hierarchy for which they can typically expect different labour market outcomes. Although many community college students attend their colleges as steppingstones hoping to obtain the educational experiences or sufficient grades to transition to university, their transfer rates remain low from community college to university programs (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Dowd, Cheslock & Melguizo, 2008; Porchea, Allen, Robbins & Phelps, 2010). In general community college students, at the lower end of the higher education hierarchy, are characterized as those who typically are non-traditional higher education students moving through the hurdles of their programs in order to gain entry into better jobs than their current employment options. They are not typically viewed by educators and institutions as the well-rounded student pursuing the aims of higher education (McEldowney-Jensen & Worth, 2014).

Post-secondary institutions are increasingly concerned with matters of student persistence and program completion as a result of greater governmental scrutiny and pressure to improve graduation rates. As post-secondary completion is portrayed as a means to combat

unemployment (OECD, 2015), post-secondary participation also provides a holding tank function—delaying students from entering a labour market characterized by high unemployment (Driscoll, 2013). Invited into post-secondary education via the relatively open door of community college enrollment policies and the need to populate programs for revenue generation, the persistence of community college students in Canada and Ontario is considered to be problematic, with high numbers of leaving the institution before completion of their program or a diploma (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013). Many students voluntarily leave or are involuntarily withdrawn from their professional programs for poor academic performance (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2012), despite having been deemed eligible by the relatively open admissions standards. For students in Ontario's community colleges (referred to as Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology or CAATs) admission criteria reflect to some degree the founding principles of community colleges in that these institutions were in part designed to serve the function of providing post-secondary opportunities for any secondary graduate "apart from those wishing to attend university" (Skolnik, 2002, p.6). For those without the grades and aspirations for university, the lower admissions threshold at community colleges provide post-secondary opportunities for students who for a variety of reasons have lower grade point average performance and who find academic life challenging. For the purposes of this paper, CAATs are considered as community colleges; a broader term referring to institutions to a broader category of institutions providing specific post-secondary functions distinct from their university counterparts (Skolnik, 2002).

Central Problem

Community college students are higher education's "third-class citizens" (Shor, 1987. p.34) characterized as largely non-traditional in terms of post-secondary student characteristics

and relatedly, as under-prepared for the rigours of post-secondary education even at the community college level. Shor (1987) characterizes two-year career college students as "worker-students", part of a working class being subjected to a distorted form of post-secondary education in preparation for their continued service as working class labourers while simultaneously having to work hard at difficult jobs just to be in school. The reality of the worker-student interferes with their ability to take on the critical learning process of genuine transformational education sacrificed over to the careerism of vocationally focused institutions. For Shor (1987) vocational education is in direct contradiction to critical thought and the pedagogical development of critical consciousness in mass education.

Students who take advantage of relatively open admissions criteria and who find themselves struggling academically in community college are precarious students in that their poor academic performance keeps them on the thin line of failing courses, possibly failing out of their programs, and without many other post-secondary options. Social work educators have social justice responsibilities in the classroom to not marginalize or marginalize further precarious students. Precarious students are potential wells of knowledge and information on oppression and social justice matters. The central problem that prompted further investigation is the tension presented for social work education. The tension is the dilemma posed by a social work educator's commitment to supporting students in achieving a post-secondary education and their vocational pursuit of social work practice, and our commitment to the social work profession itself. Our commitment to our profession problematically involves gatekeeping and the necessary participation in the dismissal of unsuitable candidates through the training/vocational education process. Professional/vocational educators perform a critical gatekeeping role for their professions by upholding professional standards in the credentialing

process, a challenging role in terms of failing or dismissing unsuccessful students but important in maintaining a profession's rigour (Grady, 2009). Thus, both our commitment to the student's academic journey and our commitment to our profession are involved in relation to our role as social workers-turned educators. Complexities of the community college context exacerbate this tension, where students represent great diversity of social identity while experiencing barriers to access and persistence as well as barriers posed by the traditional rigours associated with post-secondary education. Further, significant rates of non-completion dog community colleges, meaning that a great number of students in our classrooms will not achieve their goal. As this study demonstrates, a significant number of students do not make it through their first semester or year of study, failing so many courses that they are kicked out of their programs in a process called mandatory withdrawal.

Mandatory withdrawal. Mandatory withdrawal refers to the institutional process used to remove a student for poor GPA performance, usually for failing a set number of their course load in a given semester. At Seneca College a student cannot have the GPA equivalent of more than three Ds in a given semester. Those that do may be put on academic probation. The pre-condition of academic probation is not necessary in some institutions, as many students are removed in their first semester when their overall performance has been unsuccessful. However if a student fails four or all of their five courses in a given semester, they are automatically eligible for withdrawal. The process and its parameters differ by institution; however, students are usually only dismissed from their program and sometimes the institution allows a student a remedial opportunity to enroll in a general arts program. Upon successful completion of a semester or two, students may re-apply to a professional program.

Withdrawal is an automated institutional procedure, with no obligation or procedural allowance for involvement of the student in the decision. With automated promotions processes at most Ontario colleges, faculty are not aware of which students were kicked out and may only notice when they do not return in the following semester, if at all. This means that students are removed involuntarily, and often with any explanation to help contextualize the decision, and often without follow-up. As an instructor, this disturbing process can become routine and justified by common sense logic that the student was not capable and failed themselves out, or perhaps should try again at a later time when they are more ready. Social work education requires a more reflexive and liberatory response to this institutional process in order to remain in line with our social change and justice orientation. As a social worker-turned educator though, one has to question our role in this institutionally unquestioned process, especially in light of the professional closure and gatekeeping function it serves.

Objective

This study explores the distinction between the social work practice relationship and the professional teaching/student relationship as a context for investigating the practice of withdrawing failing adult students out of their Social Services Worker (SSW) para-professional programs. Academically precarious students are of unique concern to the community college social services work educator. For those students who are academically unsuccessful and who fail out of their professional program, faculty perch on a professionalized line drawn between practicing social work and teaching social work. It is this space that differentiates teaching about social work from practicing social work that is considered relevant to this study. The goals of social work practice are to help people to reach their maximum potential and to work with groups, families, and communities to ensure equitable access to the tools and resources needed to

thrive in their lives according to their own definition (Mullaly, 2007). Teaching about social work means nurturing the skills, values, and attitudes of social work that facilitate the goals of our profession; however, we are not likely to employ a similar actively supportive orientation to our social work education practice with students.

The tension arises when we teach about social justice work and the systems that prevent people from living their lives fully but work in institutional ways that we may disagree with as justice-oriented practitioners. "An educational practice in which there is no coherent relationship between what educators say and what they do is a disaster" (Freire, 2005, p.97). The need for congruence between theory and practice, or between teaching and action, is especially relevant to social work education. Social work education is primarily focused on social work professional values and principles, such as: empowerment and self-determination, a structural focus on holding responsible the systems and processes that contribute to individual and community precarity instead of focusing on individual pathology or deficiency, unconditional high regard, a client's inherent right to try to achieve what might not seem possible without custodial interference, and a focus on developing hope and agency as social work practice skills. All seem to contradict what happens when things start to go wrong for a student as educators remain strictly in a traditional educator role, supporting the student insofar as offering accommodation and advising, leaving most of the work up to the student under the rationale of adult education and leaving our social work practice behind. Indeed Freire would see this contradiction as hypocrisy—a contradiction between our words and deeds, between doing social justice social work and teaching transformative social work without the same commitment to transformational practice.

The automatic withdrawal process selects out a great number of marginalized students who were not able to prove themselves academically for their professional pursuits, but it is the knowledge and experience of this marginality and lack of academic social capital that may be the very spirit of anti-oppressive social work practice. Simply put, there are things that a social worker does to actively support the autonomy and personal success of the people they serve in their professional practice that are not considered within the professional or ethical scope or sanction of the social work educator, such as listening deeply to and responding in pragmatic ways to the troubles students experience as barriers to their success. Professional boundaries are invoked to prevent problem-solving with the student that could drift into counselling or doing case management with our students; the institutional realities of large teaching loads and packed classrooms prevent us from this level of individualized support. These boundaries are drawn starkly into light when we recognize a struggling student but are limited in our ability to respond and engage in a way that might reach beyond the classroom and standard interventions of the pedagogical relationship or encounter. This limitation in role and support is even more evident when the marginalized nature of their social identity is a factor, or when students appear to lack the agency to control their circumstances and intervene in their own college/academic success.

Community college students in social services programs at large, urban/metropolitan institutions are typically students marginalized by their non-traditional post-secondary student identities (i.e. disproportionately racialized, from lower-income households, less tenure living in Canada than their university counterparts). These identities contribute to a just and responsive field of social work professionals, often representing the voices of their families, peers, and communities inside social work spheres still dominated by traditionally white, cys, straight, middle class identity practitioners. However as demonstrated in this study, it is their community

college identities, and the profound hurdles and barriers they experience in their attempt at higher education as post-secondary's "third class citizens" (Shor, 1987, p.34), that provides the foundation for genuine ally-ship with its service users. Keeping the "unlikely" is not just an institutional concern as a matter of persistence and retention but the potential contribution of their knowledge and experiences to the field of practice—knowledge from the margins and the people who bring it are often overlooked or structurally omitted in both social work pedagogy and professional practice.

Situating the Self

At the time this study was undertaken, I was a full-time faculty and program coordinator in Seneca College's SSW program, having left front-line social work after 20 years of clinical and administrative work in the community. Seneca College was the site of this study and its SSW program was the target of study. This study was undertaken in order to resolve deep personal questions about my pedagogy in light of the tension between what I had learned was my responsibility as a social worker, that is to be an ally to people, and a new responsibility as a practitioner-turned-professor—that is to be an ally to my profession. I signed on to help support people in a way that is sensitive, attuned to the institutional and systemic barriers that interfere with self-determination with appropriate effectiveness to genuinely help people achieve what they want to accomplish in a way that is generous, genuine, and facilitated the conditions of social justice. This agenda is compromised as a community college social services professor, exemplified most profoundly in the process of mandatory withdrawal of failing students. This split allegiance is only one aspect of exploring mandatory withdrawal, but more importantly, the consequences of the mandatory withdrawal process have significant implications for the field of

social work and its practitioners because of who is cast out in the process of failure and withdrawal.

Theoretical Framing of the Problem: Freire & Critical Pedagogy

In order to achieve social justice in social work, it is necessary that its practice be based on the struggles and needs of those who are oppressed and marginalized. So too must education be based on social justice principles, and therefore a theory or practice about failure in adult education must be based on the struggles and needs of those who have been perhaps marginalized by its very process.

Critical pedagogy is instructive in this regard and is the position from which I strive to ground my pedagogical praxis. Paulo Freire's theories of transformational education praxis offer insight specific to progressive adult education and social justice that ground the understanding of adult academic failure in the context of community colleges and non-traditional higher education students.

> The problems of teaching imply educating and, furthermore, educating involves a passion to know that should engage us in a loving search for knowledge that is—to say the least—not an easy task. It is for this reason that I stress that those wanting to teach must be able to dare, that is, to have the predisposition to fight for justice and to be lucid in defense of the need to create conditions conducive to pedagogy in school; though this may be a joyful task, it must also be intellectually rigorous. The two should never be viewed as mutually exclusive (Freire, 1998, p.4).

Much has been written by Freire and about his work on the political project of progressive education. According to Freire, progressive education is necessary in order to respond to and transform oppressive forces and social relations that support dominant interests served by traditional education and training. Traditional education and its methods subordinate subaltern knowledge in order to maintain social relations in support of a status quo that renders marginalized groups unable to participate in political and economic life in a meaningful way.

Freire believed genuine education was a vehicle for cultivating critical consciousness and rendering students subjects in their own lives as part of a larger democratic project for social justice. Education that is not progressive is domesticating, subjugating students to the labour and political realities of the status quo and its maintenance.

For Freire, educators are cultural workers engaged in the political project of education. The starting point for his philosophy of critical pedagogy is that there can be no neutral education; all education projects are inherently political. By extension then, all educators—whether elementary or higher education, in formal institutions or in informal community settings—are political agents, either working for or against a system of domination, oppression, and marginalization of the masses for the benefit of political and economic elites. Freire believed that educators need not only recognize this fact, but also embrace this reality and work toward critical praxis—the process of reflection and action that exposes the political and dehumanizing agenda in dominant pedagogical methods, curriculum, and purpose (Freire, 2005). Freire's philosophical approach to education and pedagogical praxis is often looked as an antidote to educational practices and systems increasingly coopted by or attempting to respond to corporatist and neoliberal ideological forces (Macedo & Freire, 2005). The usual banking model of education (Freire, 1970), where the teacher is seen as the expert and depositor of knowledge into the empty un-knowing vessels of students, is a result of these powerful forces. Ultimately much formal education not only disempowers its students in both the educational and larger democratic project, but produces significant levels of student failure (Macedo & Freire, 2005). What is most concerning about this "landscape of failure" (Macedo & Freire, 2005, p.iix) is that it maintains the social and economic status quo, creating what Freire would conceive of as a dehumanizing and oppressive cycle.

Freire focused on the idea of praxis: the act of knowing as requiring a dialogical and dynamic process of action to reflection, and to new action to new reflection. The knower engages in a process of abstraction where the student reflects on his own position or orientation in the world presented to him as "objects of critique" in the process of knowing (Freire, 2000, p. 21). This opportunity is presented to the student by the teacher in the form of codification. Codifications, as conceived of by Freire, are loaded images aimed directly at students' political, economic, and social reality, depicting contradictions and problems based on their daily lives and used as instructive devices by the problem-posing educator to open up dialogue. This dialogue engages students as knowers, providing the opportunity to question the structural forces that shape their circumstances in an effort to improve literacy (Freire's instructive goal) and critical consciousness. Here one could easily see a codification for failure: an image of the traditional classroom with one educator (usually representing dominant identities such as whiteness and middle class) at the front of the room, standing over fifty hopefuls (usually representing racialized and othered identities in the metropolitan/urban community college context) seated humbly at their desks attempting to move through the invisible hoops the instructor lays out for them on behalf of their collective profession and the post-secondary institution—a codification rich with themes to be unpacked and troubled.

Especially relevant to this project is Freire's idea of conscientization as a process of the liberatory educational project. The dialogical nature of this process would establish both the students and the teacher as critical thinkers, capable of reading the world in a way as to believe in their capacity and right to do such. Capable and competent are not typical ways of conceiving of community college students, most often constructed as under-prepared for higher education.

Ultimately, the goal of critical pedagogy and genuine learning/education is an act of freedom for Freire, and this liberatory quality is not only transformative of persistent social relations of marginalization/dominance but also transformative on an individual level as the student engages in the freedom of conscientization, seeing clearly the forces that serve to oppress and marginalize in one's own daily life. One could translate then that the process of developing critical consciousness also applies to the person in the role of teaching. The teacher is not the only knower in the relationship of conscientization and therefore must question and trouble the forces acting upon them that constrain their pedagogy of liberation.

Freire explicitly recognized the pedagogical dimension of social work as a teaching and learning process based on the importance of relationship and as political in nature as education (Freire & Moch, 1987). He questioned this professionalized higher education in terms of its ability to foster critical thinking and contribute to a narrow focus merely on the professional specialization, and not to a greater reading of the world (Freire, 2005). Freire did not take up professional education specifically, but did question competencies-based skills training and specialization at the level of higher education. Freire also questioned the "arrogant postures" of professionals that seem to follow the process of professionalization or "theoretical elitism" (Freire, 1998, p.93), whether it be educators or social workers or any other profession. This arrogance based on professionalization is in direct opposition to the humility that is required for critical pedagogical praxis. This exploratory study of the process of failure (when failing assignments begins to lead to failure of courses) and withdrawal is a choice to close the distance between discourse and practice "…if the distance between their discourse and their practice becomes even smaller, then in their scholarly daily lives, which they constantly subject to critical

analysis, they live the difficult but possible and pleasurable experience of speaking to and with learners" (Freire, 2005, p.114).

Critical pedagogy provides the theoretical orientation of this study, taking up the work of Paulo Freire as well as other work that troubles education from a critical pedagogy perspective: the concept of the funds of knowledge orientation to pedagogy (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), and questioning the institutional realities of failure (Varenne & McDermott, 1998), and interrogating the gatekeeping process of professional education in light of a critical pedagogy orientation to what could be transformative vocational education.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experience of withdrawn students in one Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT), using a mixed methods approach, in order to understand the process of early withdrawal. The focus of the study is on withdrawn students from Seneca College's Social Service Worker (SSW) program between the years 2011-2015. The study is framed with Tinto's theory of early departure (1993, 1997, 2012) whilst the findings and their implications are analyzed against Freire's critical pedagogy specifically, and critical theory more generally.

The central research questions underpinning this study are:

1) How do withdrawn students understand and make meaning of their failure and withdrawal experience in the social services program?

2) What factors do withdrawn students point to as causing their failure? What did failing students do during the failure process to prevent withdrawal?

3) What does the loss of these students in their programs mean for the social work profession in general?

This study was motivated by the concern for the loss of knowledge and voice to the profession and practice of social work that these withdrawn students hold and embody, and the important pedagogical transformation they may inspire. This study questions the process of mandatory withdrawal through the failure and dismissal experiences of withdrawn students and offers an analysis that rationalizes a more transformative approach to vocational/professional education in order to preserve and enhance the inclusive and participatory nature of the social services sector and the profession of social work itself. Students who face barriers to academic success hold unique knowledge and value to a profession and discipline that struggles with its social justice orientation. The transformative turn herein is that a social work commitment to academically precarious (students who rely on open admissions processes to enter programs and who do not do well academically while in programs) or otherwise failing community college students is actually a commitment to keeping alive a dynamic social work profession that must balance its treatment and support function with its broader, systems-level activism and structural change functions (Lundy, 2011; Mulally, 2007) and is inclusive of all levels of academic preparation. As will be discussed, social services workers are limited from doing clinical or diagnostic functions in social work practice, such as psychosocial assessments in a clinical setting such as a hospital. This functional sanction then ensures that there are professional workers prepared to work at the less treatment-oriented social services roles that are reflective of social work's activist legacy in addition to social workers sanctioned for all aspects of social work, including the clinical functions, and often are active in both aspects of social work. Ensuring the importance and the centrality of these students' perspectives is critical to the profession as it maintains the dialectic space between its clinical and its structural orientations, discussed in Chapter Two.

In order to address the tensions that motivated this study, I decided to talk with withdrawn students directly about their experience of failure and mandatory withdrawal. This study contributes to a significant gap in the academic literature regarding failure in post-secondary vocational education and mandatorily withdrawal of post-secondary students.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE POST-SECONDARY PERSISTENCE LITERATURES

It is an overall commitment to social justice work that sanctions social work's legitimacy (Sewpaul, 2014). It is this emphasis on the social justice potential of all social work that provides the context for concern regarding the social justice considerations of social work education and matters of academic and professional persistence. Student success in social work education is of particular focus here but the persistence of lower-income and otherwise marginalized non-traditional students in PSE is an important matter. Many who might be considered precarious students come to community college to take a chance at upward social mobility through professional education in the para-professional field of social work, but ultimately are not successful at either post-secondary education or in social work education.

The term community college, as noted, is problematic in terms of equating American and Canadian institutions colloquially referred to as community colleges. In fact, there is even greater variation inter-provincially among what are referred to as community colleges. For the purposes of this literature review, care was taken to select sources that dealt with community college in the manner of its common characteristics whether Canadian or American, that is, sources that used the term to refer to two- or three-year diploma-granting institutions with a primarily vocational and remedial focus and universally practiced open admissions nature.

Persistence is a complex and dynamic process and outcome that involves demographic variables, institutional factors, and student behaviours and characteristics. For example, Liao, Edlin, & Ferdenzi (2014) found that students' belief in their control over their achievement significantly predicted persistence. They found that self-regulated learning efficacy (the belief and behavior related to playing an active role in their learning process) directly influenced year-to-year persistence. Self-efficacy for academic achievement indirectly influenced persistence,

modified by the financial or social recognition rewards of completing a college education. Self-efficacy is a factor prominent in the qualitative aspect of this study. Early leaving in terms of institutional dimensions is the focus of the quantitative aspect of this study.

The Seneca College Context

Most students in community colleges leave without a completed diploma or certificate (Zeidenberg, Scott, & Belfield, 2015). It is estimated that between 50-60 per cent (Martinello, 2008) or almost two-thirds (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013; Zeidenberg, Scott, & Belfield, 2015) of post-secondary students in Canada and the United States complete their first post-secondary programs. Recent studies reveal that five-year university graduation rates in Canada are 52 per cent and five-year college graduation rates are 56.5 per cent. Including students who switch programs and those who "stop-out" (take time off but return) increases the rate to 69.4 per cent for universities and to 73.1 per cent for colleges (Norrie & Zhao, 2011, p.11). Seneca College, the setting of interest that inspired this exploration, has the lowest graduation rate among all six Greater Toronto Area community colleges (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013).

Seneca is a College of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) and a degree-granting Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning (ITAL) offering a full range of programs and functions typical of community college including professional and para-professional programs, full-time and part-time options, remedial and developmental education programs, and with general and liberal arts requirements for most diplomas and degrees. The Social Services Worker program under study is one of several programs in Seneca's School of Community Services offered on a full-time basis on three of Seneca's five campuses. It is a relatively large program with 9-10 continuous cohorts of students each year, with approximately 350 to 400 full-time students in a given semester.

Under Seneca's 2012-17 Academic Plan, several significant policy changes occurred in an effort to increase student retention but so too did overall teaching and learning quality, such as: reduced teaching hours for core subjects, permitting class sizes up to 70 students, field placement instruction and support is now exclusively done by part-time support staff and faculty, a five per cent reduction in the passing grade, the elimination of a literature-based general education requirement, the elimination of a maximum number of Ds permitted for successful graduation, and finally, some programs being entirely staffed by non-full-time faculty. In 2012, Seneca saw its overall graduate satisfaction rate fall by 1.6 per cent, and the overall student satisfaction rate fall by 3.9 per cent, placing Seneca last among the five GTA colleges in terms of graduate satisfaction. In terms of student satisfaction, Seneca College is last among the 24 Ontario community colleges. The five per cent reduction in Seneca's passing grade (from 55 per cent to 50 per cent) in 2015 led to a 5.7 per cent increase in the graduation rates from 2011-12 to 2015-16 (Singer, 2016, p.6). Seneca College is very concerned about their low completion ranking compared to its GTA competitors, and has taken institutional steps to address their attrition rates; however, these steps may be insufficient or even misguided given what we now know about early student departure, discussed herein.

A significant body of literature is devoted to understanding post-secondary attrition and improving student success rates. The past two decades have yielded a significant portion of this research and literature, a time of great economic and social change which provides the backdrop for both the postsecondary education attainment imperative as well as the concern about what has been established in the literature as the disparity in persistence and graduation rates of students from historically underrepresented and lower-income groups. Post-secondary persistence and attrition comprise the context of this study, with a specific focus on mandatorily

withdrawn students. Overall, there is a paucity of research and literature about mandatory leavers as a subset of those who leave their post-secondary journeys prior to completion (or early leavers). The continued strength of Tinto's (1993) revised model of student persistence has continued relevance for understanding persistence and early leaving and will be taken up in this study to help understand academic success, failure, and early departure.

The Institutional Persistence Landscape

There is significant interest in improving what is deemed as problematically low completion rates in PSE in Ontario and Canada, with much attention to retention efforts in PSE in general (Zeidenberg et al., 2015). Access and persistence in post-secondary education (PSE) is critical not only to students, educators and PSE institutions, but also benefits the Canadian economy and society. The universal benefits of mass PSE are not solely economic, but also inclusive of the civic, social, political and democratic benefits associated with the public good of higher education. However, the economic benefits of mass PSE tend to dominate the literature, and heavily influence both the concern over the problem of persistence, and the imperative to increase postsecondary education attainment (Clark, Moran, Skolnick & Trick, 2009).

A high school diploma alone is no longer considered sufficient for success in today's "new economy" (HRDC, 2000, p.1; Finnie, 2005). A PSE is increasingly a requirement for labour market participation as the percentage of available jobs will require a PSE, while at the same time jobs that require only a high school diploma have declined (Canadian Council of Learning, 2010). Canadian employment statistics show a significant increase in the number of jobs that require PSE and a significant drop in jobs not requiring a PSE between 1990 and 2006 (AUCC, 2008). Access to PSE is framed then as a tool to address issues of socioeconomic equity and acting as a driver of the "engine of the knowledge economy" (Finnie, Sweetman, & Usher,

2008, p.4) where students can obtain the competitive labour market advantage PSE confers (McEldowney Jensen & Worth, 2014).

Post-secondary education is a highly prized commodity. Having a postsecondary education not only increases lifetime earnings (over those who only have high school completion) (Boothby & Drewes, 2006); it allows for more stable employment status and experiences, often results in better job satisfaction, as well as higher productivity and increased civic engagement and lowers the chances that one may have to rely on social assistance for contingencies (Shainks, Gluszynski, & Bayard, 2008). These benefits are not reserved only for PSE graduates, as those with some PSE fare better than those with no PSE experience in terms of labour market outcomes; however, they do not enjoy the same labour market outcomes or earnings payoff as those who graduate (Shainks, Gluszynski & Bayard, 2008; Zeidenberg et al., 2015).

The Role and Mission of Community Colleges

Community college is the context for this study, and the term used to categorize colleges in Ontario and other parts of Canada is somewhat inaccurate and requires some specific explanation. Often used as a broad umbrella term, "community colleges" refer to post-secondary institutions with certain characteristics that differentiate them from universities. They are typically vocation-oriented, providing education and training for various disciplines and preparing students for work in the middle of the occupational structure, and have with a strong focus on developmental education. They typically offer career education, apprenticeship and trades training and are characterized often by open admissions and strong ties to industry, the local labour market, and government priorities. Community colleges in Canada were originally intended to suit the training and education needs of students not eligible for, and thus serving as

an alternative to, universities (Skolnik, 2002; Skolnik, 2004, Skolnik, 2005). Originally

developed in the United States, the term community college refers to similar institutions in

Canada and the United States and the term is often used interchangeably, however there is

significant variation within these types of institutions depending on country and state/province

For example, Canadian versions of community colleges are characterized generally by a stronger

vocational focus than their American counterparts (Skolnik, 2004). For the purposes of this

paper, institutions offering diploma-level programs, usually 2-3 years in duration, open

admissions, and with a primarily vocational and developmental education and training focus are

considered community colleges. For the purposes of the review of the literature, care was taken

to only include sources that pertained to these types of institutions, whether American or

Canadian. As noted earlier, Seneca College is a CAAT, but is referred to internally and

externally as one of the Greater Toronto Area's many community colleges. What is unique about

these Ontario versions of community colleges, according to Skolnick (2002), is the central

purposes of training students for professions and vocations at the middle of the occupational

structure, for example para-professionals, and vocations such as human resources, flight services,

and practical nursing. Two unifying threads unite these institutions despite their contextual

variety and that is their traditional vocational focus and relatively open admissions principle

(Skolnik, 2004).

As approachable post-secondary institutions with the "greatest reach" to Canadian adults

(Dennison & Gallagher, 1986), many researchers and authors cite the democratizing effect of

colleges as providing an egalitarian function for PSE (for example, Boggs, 2004; Brydon, 1978;

Griffith & Connor, 1994; Smith & Smith, 2006). Of course, there are critical perspectives on this

vocational focus of community colleges, or their function in the system of higher education.

Because of their affordability and relatively shorter time commitment, community colleges provide a "cooling out" function for some students, thereby lowering their educational attainment by diverting students from university level studies (Roksa, 2006). Community college programs also offer a cheaper, faster route to the current workforce where credentials are highly valued, diverting students who are not able to attend university to more technical or vocational academic credentials that typically command lesser earnings (McEldowney & Worth, 2014). Students at community colleges are considered to be disproportionately constitutive of such non-traditional groups, being more representative of lower-income families/households than their university counterparts, reflecting greater ethno-cultural and minority immigration or citizenship status, and being more likely to enroll part-time than their university counterparts as they have work and family obligations that effect their commitment to college (Morest & Bailey, 2005; Wells, 2008; Carnevale, 2009).

This greater socio-cultural and socio-economic mix is largely attributed to the relatively low cost and open eligibility criteria characteristic of most community colleges. Much of the literature positions the community college mission as vital to egalitarian ideals in that community colleges serve a disproportionate number of racialized or otherwise diverse students (McGrath & Spears, 1991; Griffith & Connor, 1994; Boggs, 2004), and that "so many of these students come from low-income or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds" (Shannon & Smith, 2006, p.16) to take advantage of the relative affordability of community colleges (Boggs, 2004). If it were not for community colleges fundamentally providing relatively open access to non-traditional students for whom university is not perceived as a viable option yet or at all, the overall PSE system would enroll fewer racial and ethnic minorities, fewer lower income students

and fewer immigrant or first generation students in both Canada and the United States (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

It is to these multiple functions that researchers have attributed the relatively low completion rates of two-year or community colleges in contrast to universities in Canada (Porchea, Allen, Robbins & Phelps, 2010), such as the lower academic preparation of college students (Jacoby, Bailey & Alfonso, 2005) in addition to socio-demographic factors typical of community college students versus their more traditional university counterparts (Porchea, Allen, Robbins & Phelps, 2010). Despite relatively open access, a significant portion of college students do not complete any credential of any kind (Summers, 2003; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzel & Leinbach, 2006; Liao, Edlin & Ferdenzi, 2014). In Ontario, less than two-thirds of college students complete their program within twice the prescribed program length (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013, p.2). For the most part, early leavers reported discontinuing in their current programs for institutional reasons such as dissatisfaction with program or academic performance, but many also for external reasons such as personal pressures. Some of this attrition is positive (such as students who enter university before completion of college program) however this only accounts for about 5 per cent of early leavers (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013, p. 8). Attrition rates at community colleges are especially troubling given that community colleges typically enroll greater numbers of minoritized and low-income students (Wells, 2008; Carnevale, 2009). From an anti-oppression lens, the disproportionate non-completion rates of socio-economically and minoritized students over-represented in community colleges present social justice and equity concern for post-secondary education.

In Canada, PSE participation rates are strongly correlated with family income levels, a fact more pronounced for university participation, as higher incomes level students attend

university at higher rates than those from lower income groups (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2010; Childs, Finnie & Meuller, 2010; Finnie & Pavlic, 2013). However, a 2013 study of longitudinal tax-filer data found that Ontario has been able to make some gains in access among those at the lowest three income levels (Finnie & Pavlic, 2013). The literature reviewed to date offers little in terms of understanding the persistence of non-traditional students, especially at the community college level (whether Canadian or American), however much work, especially the studies based on the rich longitudinal and multi-institution data from the local Youth in Transition survey (YITS), were concerned with the outcomes for students from lower income families. The gap between PSE participation for students from low-income families compared to higher income families persists (Morest & Bailey, 2005; Debroucker, 2005) and continues to drive much of the PSE persistence literature reviewed.

The proportion of low-income minority students who persist to obtain a postsecondary credential in community colleges has remained consistently low despite improved access (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). Completion rates for minority and low-income students are lower than for non-minority and higher income community college students (Morest & Bailey, 2005). Students from low-income families are less likely to attend PSE in general than students from higher income households (Drolet, 2005; De broucker, 2005; Morest & Bailey, 2005; Frenette, 2007), although Ontario university participation seems to be less income-dependent than the rest of Canada (Finnie & Pavlic, 2013). Another interesting finding has been the result of recent research using provincial tax-filer data to establish that community college access rates are lowest from students who are at the two opposite income extremes: those whose households who earned less than $25,000 and those whose households earned over $100,000 (Finnie & Plavic, 2013). Females from lower income families have significantly decreased

participation in Ontario and Canadian universities than their male counterparts (Finnie & Plavic, 2013).

Although low-income and working students are disproportionately at higher risk of dropping out (Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson & Le, 2006), the literature reviewed concludes that it is not merely finances or financial aid that influence this disparity in participation. Canadian students from low-income families are not able to participate in PSE because they face other non-financial barriers or disadvantages such as lack of early preparation, the effects of high school streaming, or other "cultural factors" (Finnie, Sweetman & Usher, 2008) that are highly correlated with family income and will be discussed later in this review.

The fact remains that students from low-income families are less likely to attend either institution, especially university (Drolet, 2005; Finnie & Plavic, 2013). Access and persistence is complex, as the following review of the general (not specific to non-traditional student groups) picture of access and persistence demonstrates. Understanding access and persistence has been the focus of much academic and institutional research, as demand and enrollments continue to grow yet the access and participation gap of low-income students remains and low completion rates dog post-secondary institutions.

Factors of Persistence

Although academic achievement is a powerful determinant of whether students persist in postsecondary education in Ontario (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013), there are other more significant determining factors of access and persistence that have been found to depend heavily on family background and early school experiences. Based on the material reviewed, access and persistence have been demonstrated to be complex processes influenced by various interrelated factors: some institutional, some demographic, some academic, and some social. Some of these

influential factors, such as family income and parental education, often begin early in a person's life, long before postsecondary education would be considered, and are external to the student's or institution's ability to control or influence directly (Vaccaro, 2012; Meuller, 2008). Many of these interrelated factors are non-financial and are thought to determine access more significantly than financial factors; however, non-financial factors are often correlated with income and financial factors that do have a direct influence (Finnie, Sweetman & Usher, 2008), such as preparation for PSE or parental attitudes towards PSE. Grades are linked to persistence at both community college and university; however, grades do not appear to have a direct or causal relationship with persistence (Finnie & Meuller, 2008) with other factors exerting far more influence. Mertes and Hoover (2014) did find that high school grade point average was a strong predictor of first-year retention of community college students, suggesting academic preparation prior to post-secondary participation is a significant variable.

To illustrate the complexity of understanding persistence, Canadian research has established that parental factors are by far the most influential determinants of PSE access and participation. There is much consensus in the literature that parental education is a more significant predictor of PSE participation than parental income (Lambert, Zeman, Allen & Bussière, 2004; Finnie & Meuller, 2008; Meuller, 2008; Finnie & Qui, 2008), as complex family-based influences affect a student's attitude and preparation for PSE (Finnie, 2005; Finnie & Plavic, 2013). Frenette (2007) found that parental education accounts for approximately 20 per cent of the gap in access between lower and higher income groups. Higher levels of parental education increase the probability of university attendance and decrease the probability of college attendance (Finnie & Meuller, 2008).

Using the Ontario YIT-S dataset, Finnie and Qui (2008) found that most students leave their programs early because they judge the schooling to not be "the right thing" for them or that they want to do other things such as work or take a break. Of particular interest is a finding from the college sample: individuals from single parent families tended to have substantially higher switching and leaving rates. The data reveal a negative relationship between leaving rates and parental educational attainment (these relationships are weaker in the university sample). Therefore, the researchers pose that family background characteristics play a significant role in both access and persistence, but especially so for college students, which seems to contradict previous findings about the null influence of parental income and education on college participation (Finnie & Mueller, 2008). The researchers attribute this to the selection effect of the university system (once eligible and enrolled in university, background effects are nullified and the more selective group is able to overcome future challenges as they advance); however, college students from less advantaged families begin and continue "at the margin" (Finnie & Mueller, 2008, p.201) even as they advance through their studies.

Early Leavers

A review of the literature reveals that relatively little is known about early leavers. Early leavers are a complex category, inclusive of a mix of students who switch programs or institutions, temporarily leave but return, those who drop out, and those who are asked to leave. Despite reviewing most of the current persistence literature, there is one group of early leavers that receive little to no attention or concern in the literature: mandatory leavers or those required to withdraw from their programs or institutions for poor academic performance, behaviours, or attendance problems. Despite one alarming reference, "As reported by each college, the estimated percentage of academic/mandatory leavers ranged from 20-50% "(Lopez-Rabson &

McCloy, 2013, p.7), there was no discussion or research dedicated to understanding who mandatory leavers were or the factors that contributed to their circumstances or decision, despite the concern for low completion rates/persistence problems established both in the literature and confirmed by the mere existence of this large body of research and analysis. Those at-risk of academic suspension (students with 0.00-0.99 GPA) at six GTA colleges, representing 69.9 per cent of early leavers, reported a parent had attended PSE (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013, p .7). Therefore, this group of students is perhaps least understood in terms of persistence and deserves much more research attention.

This review of the literatures confirms that there is genuine cause for concern for the participation gap of low-income students, as access and the opportunity to participate in PSE is related more significantly to family background than desire or ability (Finnie, 2005; Finnie, Meuller, Sweetman & Usher, 2008). Most research to date reflects that the factors that influence access and persistence are broader than merely financial factors, but more significantly reveal direct and indirect variables that begin early in life and are correlated with family background such as family income and parental education levels, with parental education exerting a stronger independent influence than income. Overall, persistence is thought to be dependent upon students' incoming personal characteristics (i.e. age, socio-economic status, and academic achievement prior to enrollment). Concerned with social justice education as this project is, it should be noted that some of these personal characteristics, such as socio-economic status, are irrevocably related to systems of power that systematically devalue and marginalize under-represented groups in post-secondary education. Beyond their demographic profile though, commitment to career/educational goal, and their support network at home all contribute to their persistence toward their academic goals. Academic and social connections/engagement,

especially in the first year (Thomas, 2000; Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013), are crucial. However, to the extent that this remains true of community college access and persistence is difficult to determine overall, as some studies suggest that the effect of parental income is null on community college access and participation (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2010; Childs, Finnie & Meuller, 2010). Also, there seems to be no consensus on the influence, if any, of parental education or income on community college access and persistence. The literature itself is dominated by university-driven and therefore university-focused research, making it difficult to understand issues of access and persistence at the community college level. Also, the paucity in persistence research to address non-traditional student success in PSE is enhanced by the lack of significant study at the community college level, where non-traditional students tend to be disproportionately represented relative to university student composition. Where researchers have begun to focus more on understanding early leaving, fuelled in part by date from the provincial annual Early Leavers Surveys, mandatory leavers are almost entirely overlooked.

Explaining Early Departure

Vincent Tinto's body of work on college student attribution and departure, spanning more than 25 years, is regularly taken up by contemporary retention scholars and institutional actors concerned with problematic student attrition rates. What is influential about Tinto's work is that it problematizes the idea of students who leave early as somehow deficient or deviant— the pathology perspective that still finds traction in persistence theory and practice. Instead of focusing on student characteristics or academic ability alone, Tinto (1993, 1997, 2012) reminds us of the highly individual and contextual circumstances of early student departure and that both actors, student and the institution, in the persistence relationship share in the dynamic process of early departure. Maintaining recognition that academic ability and difficulty are significant

forces of departure and persistence, Tinto posed that at the individual level, student intention, motivation, commitment, and goals influence persistence and reasons for departure.

Institutional level factors influencing departure include matters of adjustment to the academic and social demands of college life, incongruence or a poor fit between the individual student and their program/institution, and social integration of students into post-secondary life—whether a student experiences sufficient contact to integrate socially and reduce or prevent isolation. Tinto (1993. 1997, 2012) reminds us that there are institutional and individual factors that prevent the successful academic and social integration of students into college life. External determinants influence the capacity for academic and social integration at the student level, including employment burdens, family obligations, etc. All factors interact with one another to create the uniquely individual nature of student departure.

Tinto's theory of postsecondary student attrition (1993) includes five primary student-related factors that predict a student's decision to drop out of an institution, including goals, commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and high school outcome. His work is considered significant in that it prominently asserts that academic preparation is not the only determinant of college success, which has been confirmed repeatedly in the literature reviewed. Although academic preparation is generally regarded as a strong predictor of performance and persistence, psycho-social factors and other non-cognitive factors also have important effects on college outcomes, and some factors may even be as significant as preparation. When employed by researchers as a framework, dimensions of integration and membership, both academic and social, are examined in relation to attrition; however, the literature varies on what proxies are used for academic and social integration.

Tinto's findings were that pre-postsecondary education attributes (such as family/household dimensions), integration attributes, and membership attributes were the primary predictors of persistence. One limitation of this early model, based on subsequent persistence research, is that institutional characteristics seemed to have gained prominence in terms of our understanding of influences on persistence. As well, it is not understood if this model is relevant for all student groups, such as non-traditional students. Social and academic integration as a theory of persistence maintains its relevance both as direct determinants of persistence but also indirect moderators of relationships between other variables such as grades.

Tinto's (1993) model highlights the importance of social and academic integration (which involves more than just academic progress and in-class activities, but also out-of-class academic activities), as they interact with student dimensions of persistence such as academic achievement and socio-economic status. As student's progress and adjust to higher education and their particular institution, they move through three distinct stages: separation (from family or household ties), transitions (such as moving from dependence to independence as an adult learner), and incorporation (how well they socially integrate into the academic and social life of the institution) all of which are impacted uniquely by their individual background characteristics. These phases and the resulting integration into the academic and social life of the institution influence their commitment to the institution and ultimately, their persistence in it. However, this model has limits when applied to the two-year community college—with less time to proceed through these phases and fewer opportunities to engage and integrate academically and socially (partially as a result of their background characteristics, such as their socio-economic status and the need to work long hours or care for a family) but also partially because of the opportunities presented by the characteristics of the institution. Metropolitan community colleges are larger,

and have very limited student life that is purely social (for example, there are no bars or restaurants on most Seneca campuses and most clubs are vocationally focused) but again, students are there only for a short-time and therefore have little time to adjust let alone integrate by the very nature of a two-year institution. The applicability to two-year community colleges may be limited, as the two-year community college is usually larger, less residential, more diverse, and of course, brief (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). They simply do not have the time to make significant social connections with their peers as they are more likely to commute, have part-time jobs, and spend less time on campus. Expected to graduate in only four semesters, they have little time to make long-meaningful connections.

Social integration, as conceptualized in Tinto's work, involves the social relationships and interactions students are able to make and maintain outside the classroom and not necessarily solely academically focused. Mertes (2015) empirically demonstrated the construct validity of Tinto's social integration involving primarily 4-year universities to two-year community college occupationally focused social integration. Maxwell (2000) found that most social integration in large and ethno-racially diverse community colleges involved activities related to sharing their studies or work (for example, informal interactions between classes or working on assignments together), than purely social or interest-based interactions (for example attending extra-curricular activities such as sports, social or cultural events on campus). Deil-Amen (2011) found that purely social activities were not the primary drivers of social integration for community college students, but rather focused more on peer groups and relationships based on getting work done as well as the faculty and peer interactions inside the classroom.

Much of the persistence literature that examined determinants either directly employed Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration and attrition as a conceptual framework, or the

findings supported the importance of social and academic integration to student persistence in general. For example, social adjustment is often cited as a predictive factor of PSE outcomes; formal on-campus ties (e.g. volunteering, having peer groups) had positive relationships to grades, satisfaction, and persistence (Fischer, 2007). Psychosocial factors such as social support, self-esteem and social competence, in addition to academic performance, directly and indirectly influenced persistence in a study of two-year institutions (Napoli& Wortman, 1998) and four-year institutions (Wolniak, Mayhew & Engberg, 2012). A 2013 study of early leavers in GTA colleges confirmed that 72 per cent of leavers had weak social engagement dimensions, yet strong academic performance levels (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013), which also confirms findings from a Quebec study that social engagement was more significant than academic engagement as a factor of non-completion (Ma & Frempong, 2008) and that integration is a powerful enough dimension that it can offset pre-postsecondary condition (such as preparation). Sorey & Duggan (2008) found that the strength of the relationship between integration and community college persistence varied by student age: social integration was more strongly related to persistence in adult students but academic integration was more strongly related to persistence in more traditional aged students. It should be noted however that Tinto's theory of student departure was based primarily on students from 4-year institutions where students would have met stronger eligibility requirements and selection screening, and may not be as applicable given the relatively open door admission process of the typical community college.

Much of the literature concerned with post-secondary retention and attrition poses the problem of the "under-prepared" community college student, constructed as differing in significant ways from students who attend four-year institutions:

> Community college students tend to have lower academic achievement while in high school and are more likely to be female, working class, and non-White. They are also

more likely to have dependents, be single parents, work full-time, be enrolled in school part-time, delay entry into postsecondary education after high school and disrupt their enrollment (Roksa, 2006, p.501).

Citing a 2003 National Education Centre for Statistics (USA), Roksa (2006) noted that approximately 50 per cent of community college students share one or more of these "persistence risk factors" (p.501). Some researchers note the concerning rate of participation of students unprepared for the rigours of academic life in post-secondary institutions (Daiek, Dixon & Talbert, 2012) as explanation for the disproportionately high rates of attrition and lack of success at community college. Others pose their at-risk situated-ness, speculating a greater risk of failure due to the social, academic, and economic problems that more readily apply to community college students than their university counterparts. They are more likely to have greater family and job responsibilities, more likely to be first generation students who therefore lack a mentor for post-secondary education, and with greater financial need as they are more likely to be from lower income households (Roueche & Roueche, 2006). The problem, or in this case the problem student, is a matter with which the institution must effectively contend in order to improve retention rates, as retention rates are often the measure of accountability of the effectiveness of the institution. Constructing a problematized student category effectively displaces responsibility and accountability from the institutions to the student and their personal attributes and circumstances. The student is constructed as the problem to which the institution must endeavor to solve.

> "…because of the open door policy, community colleges do admit students who are less prepared for college and who might also have a more simplistic view about a college education. In other words, less prepared students might desire a college degree but might not realize the level of work or academic preparedness involved in getting that degree. As a result, it is even more important for community colleges to implement an effective support system to help students in reaching their goals" (Liao, Edlin, & Ferdenzi, 2014, p.607).

Tinto's (1993, 1997, 2012) work on understanding student departure reflects this critical perspective on deficit orientations by reminding us that some students entering higher education just do not have the circumstances to undertake the academic and social demands it requires in order to be successful. Those who leave early, whether voluntarily or otherwise, can also be understood as unwilling or unable to take on that commitment, choosing to apply their assets and resources to other tasks, goals, or priorities (Tinto, 1993, 2012).

Large numbers of students are also forced to exit community college programs for low academic performance. Given that community colleges attract a more diverse student body, colleges are also seen to attract a disproportionate share of "unprepared" and therefore "at-risk" (of failure) students. In this way, "under-prepared" in many ways functions as a proxy for "at-risk", just as "at-risk" functions as a proxy for low-income/poor students and those from marginalized social locations (Shannon, 1998) in the literature. These two constructions are bound together in ways that are often left unexamined in professional persistence literature and a critical perspective is much needed in order to respond to this construction.

Roksa (2006) argues that the vocational training focus of community colleges contributes to some degree to the lower educational attainment of community college students compared to their 4-year institution counterparts. She poses that in addition to the community college's mandate and focus on workforce preparation, remedial education, continuing and general education functions (characteristics confirmed by Skolnik, 2002, 2004, and 2005 to apply to Ontario colleges), the vocational training function has overshadowed the academic function of community colleges as post-secondary higher education, keeping students at the lower rungs of the post-secondary ladder and focused more on jobs after graduation than the broader, more democratic higher education functions of knowledge and civil society participation.

Community colleges and their vocational emphasis also promote an ideological message of meritocracy that hard work at professional education/training will lead to secure employment and satisfaction for all (Valadez, 2000) and the promise of social mobility. High attrition and low graduation rates at community colleges appear to provide evidence of the illusion of meritocracy, where the participation and hard work of disproportionately working class and otherwise marginalized students ends early, without the security and social mobility ticket of a completed credential and perhaps worse off in terms of finances related to tuition expense and diverted labour market participation.

Under-Prepared College Students and Maintaining the Hierarchy

The at-risk or under-prepared college student is constructed as a social category, and thus rationalizing institutional practice and policies that serve to reinforce academic and social marginalization. Literature constructs these students as "at-risk" students (the risk is assumed to be of non-completion) who are often over-looked (Deil-Amen, 2011, p.64). For example, "…race, class and gender have been associated with lower completion rates or greater attrition of those who enroll in developmental classes in college" (Barbadis, 2010, p.17). As stated, the literature on postsecondary student persistence suggests that persistence is significantly influenced by students' characteristics such as age, socio-economic status, and prior academic achievement. Students' "demographic profile" and other characteristics such as level of maturity and support networks at home all contribute to their ability to persist (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013.p.8). Students who have access to "precollege characteristics" such as middle to high socio-economic status, positive secondary school achievement, and strong family support are thought to be more likely to persist and graduate (Tinto, 1997, 2012). Therefore, students who are considered under-prepared for college-level education could be seen as lacking the necessary

social class capital for success. Relatively open access, as it is positioned in the literature, may help students get to college, but they lack the social, cultural, and academic resources in order to be successful (Wells, 2008).

The literature reviewed for the purposes of this chapter relate persistence with higher socio-economic status levels and parental education levels (another component of social class) however some suggest the effects of socio-economic status on persistence differs based on a student's race or ethnicity (Paulson & St. John, 2002). Barbadis (2010) situated and therefore constructed a problematic identity by conflating two variables in one identity, addressing matters of persistence for "underprepared, culturally diverse students" (p.17).

The "progressive" notion of the open-door policy rationale, when examined more closely, becomes distorted in practice. If students fail to persist once the door has been flung open, the problem must lie with the student thus reflecting the meritocracy myth of formal higher education, which obscures oppressive social forces and relations (Freire, 1970).

Open Admissions

The "open door" policy of community colleges refers to admissions eligibility requirements that some consider relatively low compared to other post-secondary institutions such as universities. In Ontario, admission to general programs at community colleges is based on a 60 per cent or 65 per cent secondary school or equivalent average. Although some programs establish a higher threshold for admission, most general arts diplomas follow the general admission threshold, for example social services, veterinary technicians, library technicians, law enforcement, and variety of other professional programs. Some literature poses open door access policies as "universal access"; however, 65 per cent is hardly universal given the rigours of standardized testing and other challenges through which students must persist prior

to entering PSE. Certainly in the case of CAATs, these colleges were meant as open-armed institutions for all who desired post-secondary training and education short of the university level and from any level of secondary preparation (Ontario Department of Education, 1967; Skolnik, 2004).

The literature frames open access as part of the mission of community colleges (Ontario Department of Education, 1967; Skolnik, 2002; Skolnik, 2004), referring to it as a democratic (Brydon, 1978) or egalitarian mission (Shannon & Smith, 2006) juxtaposed against the more selective and traditionally elite-serving nature of universities. Community college faculty are thereby positioned differently by the original intent of the community college to focus on teaching, rather than other scholarly pursuits (Skolnik, 2002; Skolnik, 2004; Skolnik, 2005) and as a result, their ability to help diverse and often non-traditional students learn (Shannon & Smith, 2006) and improve their chances at the social mobility that access to education is said to provide (Ingram & Morrissey, 2009). In this way community college faculty are implicated in developing the local workforce and serving local economies and revealing the heavily applied rhetoric of meritocracy.

> Community colleges offer all kinds of students—and especially nontraditional students and students from the most marginalized and financially disadvantaged sectors of our society—what no other college or university has ever offered them before: opportunity, hope, and the chance to build more prosperous and satisfying futures for themselves (Sullivan, 2008, p.620).

Much of the literature positions this mission as vital in that community colleges serve a disproportionate number of racialized or "diverse" students (Boggs, 2004), and that "so many of these students come from low-income or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds" (Shannon & Smith, 2006, p.16).

From a functional perspective, community colleges are positioned as a pathway to social mobility, a stepping stone to university education (Carnevale, 2009; Wells, 2008), or to deliver the minimum post-secondary education to populations such as low-income groups who are typically underserved in post-secondary education (Wells, 2008). A more critical analysis of the function of community colleges situates them as handmaidens of a distorted labour market, commodifying and legitimizing para-professions that earn lower relative wages to their more professional counterparts (for example, social work versus social services work), and allowing university access to remain more selective thereby protecting the preferred socio-economic status quo. Thus a paradox is presented by the open door policy. Based on a principle of non-exclusion, community colleges were originally envisioned in Ontario as institutions that would accept students prepared by any form of secondary education who were not candidates for university but wanting vocational education and training (Ontario Department of Education, 1967), yet in practice many students are forced out of their programs and these institutions for low academic performance.

The Open Revolving Door

The open access admissions policies of community colleges coupled with the large number of students who fail their courses and out of their programs, means a revolving open door (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008) for less prepared students as they attempt to remediate, re-affliliate, and upgrade. Although there are no current studies that speak to how many times students attempt to re-affiliate into professional programs after having left early, it is problematic to consider that students continue to pay tuitions for multiple attempts. Therefore the harder they try actually supports the institutions further. Of note though is the recent provincial initiative of

student grants approximating free tuition for low-income post-secondary students in Ontario. This may widen the open door but it is yet to be seen if this will have an impact on persistence.

This chapter reviewed the persistence literatures in light of the community college context and mission and established that we know very little about post-secondary/community college students who fail out of their programs. The social justice dimension of persistence, specifically questioning who is leaving early, is the foundation of the problem being studied herein. Critical pedagogy and critical perspectives on academic failure are the focus of the review of the theoretical literature employed in this study in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF THEORETICAL LITERATURES

The literatures reviewed in Chapter Two establish the context for this study and highlight the reality that marginalization is both the educational landscape of many community college students as well as a significant factor in non-completion. While Tinto's theory of early departure (1993) frames the early leaving aspects of this study, the findings and their implications are analyzed against Freire's critical pedagogy specifically and critical pedagogy more generally. Chapter Three reviews Freirean critical pedagogy as well as the other theoretical literatures employed to conceptualize failure, namely Varenne and McDermott's (1998) concept of institutionalized failure, and González, Moll, & Amanti's (2005) concept of the funds of knowledge, employed as an antidote to the deficit or at-risk orientations to academic failure established in Chapter Two. Taken together, failure is understood as a process done to learners and which reflects a distorted deficit model of teaching and learning that works against transformational pedagogy. The chapter concludes with a brief review of the professionalization theoretical literature as it relates to gatekeeping in professional education. This gatekeeping function makes failure as an institutional process necessary and creates a professional tension the professional educator must reckon with and one that faculty who work from a critical pedagogy perspective must reconcile in an open access institution.

Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy

Freire's work must be understood in its particular social and historical context. Primarily concerned with education and literacy as a human right, Freire's theories developed in the context of a colonial mid-century Brazil. Freire was outspoken in his writing and educational practice about the social construction of marginalization by director societies (both the elite society of Brazil and western/developing nations in general) of the object societies—the illiterate

and Indigenous poor—toiling under the economic and social conditions created for them by the director societies but outside of their critical awareness due to their lack of literacy and meaningful engagement with the world that critical literacy facilitates. For Freire, education and literacy were universal human rights and his work in literacy campaigns and education projects in Brazil, Chile, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau in the 50s, 60s, and 70s was part of his lifetime commitment to joining in people's struggle against oppression (Freire, 2000).

Freire, Critical Pedagogy, and the Community College

Based on what he learned from his students, Paulo Freire established that hope should be a central pedagogical outcome of all forms of education, as well as the development of a reflective and critical stance in both teachers and students in order to facilitate critical consciousness (Freire, 1970, 1978, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Irwin, 2012; Florence, 1998). Hope was critical in terms of students believing in their own abilities to succeed at their efforts but also for larger social transformation that would improve the well-being of their families and communities. Freire connected education to self-actualization and collective liberation struggles (Freire, 1970, 2007a) especially relevant in that there are groups of students who by their very membership in dominated identity groups are at-risk of being at-risk. Freire's work and approach centred on the possibility for marginalized groups to acknowledge and seek to confront their socio-political marginality and collective oppression (Friere, 1970, 2007a). In terms of pedagogical devices to that end, Freire posed a pedagogical model for conscientization (1970, 2007a, 1978, 2006). Critical pedagogy as envisioned by Friere calls for a closer link between the academic and the lived reality of students. Applied to the community college vocational setting, his work could be considered a pedagogy of the at-risk; the unprepared student labeled and marginalized by the very dominant structures in which they must engage in order to realize the

promise of improving their socio-economic circumstances and that ignores the preparedness and knowledge assets in their lives outside of formal academics.

Experiential knowledge is central to liberatory education. Freirian pedagogy, exemplified in Freire's seminal work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970), can be seen as a form of resistance to broad oppressive social relations. Critical pedagogy is employed as a response to the traditional claims of the neutrality and instrumental nature of education. Claims about the objective neutrality of pedagogy and curriculum obscure the oppressive social, economic, and political realities or as a denial of the power and privilege of dominant interests and their role in formal education. From a critical pedagogical perspective as exemplified by the work of Freire, the inability to persist in college is due in part to the emotional and social harm that results from marginalization and oppression, especially profound as they are embedded in an institution tied to their future socio-economic circumstances and social mobility, or the myth of higher education and meritocracy (Freire, 1970, 2007a).

Friere also argued that the relationship between student and teacher is ideally egalitarian. Freire recognized the authority of the teacher over the education process, but reminded teachers that this authority is a responsibility to provide the opportunities for genuine learning as a pathway to liberation, and to do so from a loving place. Freire felt it critical that transformative education for critical consciousness involved teacher-student synthesis, where the knowledge of the student was researched and recognized by the educator first, and then synthesized with the knowledge specialty of the educator. This orientation is the antithesis of the banking model of traditional forms of education in that it reverses the traditional knower-learner dichotomy. Educators must learn what the student knows, and have the pedagogical skills to engage that knowledge in a mutual educational project—the very skills that are the source of the educator's

authority—not the knowledge itself, but the ability to synthesize it with the acknowledged richness of knowledge the student brings to the relationship (Freire, 2005). In this endeavor, the student's lived reality and context is the starting point, or as Freire names it, "common sense". This common sense is to be the foundation of education that serves critical consciousness purposes and creates pedagogical opportunities for marginalized and oppressed students to empower themselves (Freire, 2005).

Critical Pedagogy and Failure

Critical pedagogy is about educators questioning how we produce/reproduce subject-object relations with students and other problems while being reflective about our practices, ideology, and our pedagogy in service of social justice. Social work educators in the community colleges engage in the ritual of judging success and failure, unconcerned with the effect on students and their liberatory promise that higher education and involved in our field would facilitate. Outside of anecdotal theories, we know nothing about who they are, what happens to them, or how they make meaning of it. We just keep doing it because it is what we are supposed to do. If we don't, how do we gate-keep? If we don't, what value is the diploma?

As Friere and other critical pedagogy theorists assert, part of the process and responsibility of teaching is to critically examine all aspects of the pedagogical project in the process of praxis. Giroux, a contemporary critical pedagogy theorist, notes critical pedagogy offers an educational response to the inequities that play out or get reinforced through the dominant power relations and social processes that occur within the institution and practice of education (Giroux, 1997).

Examining a Pedagogy of Failure

This research was taken on to respond to what the researcher-practitioner experienced as a pedagogy of failure. Much energy has been expended in trying to understand and explain academic failure. Much of this work focuses on the early education of children and young adults, and the pursuit has followed a dubious path in terms of identifying certain students as inherently lacking in intellectual capacity, academic preparedness, or by deficiencies in their cultural backgrounds or social identities. Thus the gaze for several decades of educational research has been on "at-risk" students and how to best intervene on their student selves to promote their success (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The consequence for this pedagogy of failure ultimately is their expulsion and the loss of their expertise and voices, creating a significant knowledge gap for both the classroom and the discipline.

In social work, the act of blaming or placing full responsibility on individuals for their circumstances reflects a faulty conservative and individualistic ideological orientation. Blaming those who experience the consequences of structural inequality and violence is rooted in particular ideas about morality and those who deserve their circumstances because of choices they made, faultily and conveniently assuming a level playing field. In education, a student is fully responsible for their performance in that they alone face the consequences of institutional decisions in a structure that we impose on them and work very hard daily to maintain (Varene & McDermott, 1998), and compounded by the professional gatekeeping functions embedded in vocational post-secondary education.

Failure as Domestication

Freire was critical of "linguistic manipulations" that allowed the dominant class to construct identity categories that veiled certain realities as a result of their "ideological fog" (Freire, 2005, p.10) These manipulations hide certain ideologies, intentionally or otherwise. For

example, a "dropout" or someone who does not participate in education disguises concrete situations where conditions are created to push students out of school or keep them away altogether. For Freire, the power of dominant ideology is domesticating, seeking to distort both the perspective of the domesticated (the dropouts, the failures, those who are kept out altogether) and those who benefit from the construction (instructors, institutions) by not taking accountability for the construction (such as "I didn't fail you, you failed yourself", to be discussed later). It is this domesticating role that Freire calls all educators to resist and reject (Friere, 2005). Part of how this becomes possible is to listen to and value other knowledges, especially ones that are relegated to the margins or silenced by dominant structures.

Freire recognized and validated the knowledge that comes from lived and community experience as legitimate knowledge and necessary for the liberatory educational process. He recognized that learning begins with experience, and in this way, no student comes without knowledge; it is how this is valued and operationalized in the educational process for freedom that is the work of the educator. Education is an ongoing process of formation for both the educator and the student, and Freire's ideas pose that with the genuine approach to knowing, both the student and the teacher are intellectuals. Teachers are different only in that they have the responsibility to prepare pedagogical opportunities, to know their material soundly, to provide the structure and guidance of the educational process in which they have trained, to foster critical dialogue, but in the practice of teaching, also relearn and extend their pedagogical knowledge and practice through the teacher-student relationship (Roberts, 2013).

Valuing Others' Funds of Knowledge

A pedagogical approach based on the concept of the funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) allows us to acknowledge that indeed some students can be considered

at-risk of educational, social, and economic forces and systems that serve to maintain and perpetuate their marginality—such as the case of "non-traditional" students or learners at the lower rungs of the higher education ladder. However it also reminds us that students can't possibly be inherently un-prepared for any learning, including at a higher education level—they carry this subaltern knowledge. Freire refers to this as "innocent knowledge" that is then met with the "systematic knowledge" or critical reading and reasoning acquired through progressive education and pedagogy (Freire, 1998, p.93).

Explanations for poor educational outcomes as a result of a student's cultural identity or income class/poverty had a strong hold in the latter half of the century, serving to legitimize the marginalization and poor educational outcomes of low-income and linguistically/ethnically minoritized students, and its legacy continues today (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Deficit models of explaining disproportionately poor outcomes for marginalized students compared to their dominant counterparts are tenacious and persist in many forms, and as a result, render poor students and students of colour responsible for their own poorer educational outcomes (Valencia, 2010). Deficit models of explaining failure are particularly popular and have longevity because focusing on the internal deficiencies of the student (such as cognitive limitations or problems of motivation) or familial deficits (such as poverty or lack of educational culture) means that systemic factors are rendered benign in explaining why students fail (Valencia, 2010).

Currently, as part of this evolution and as earlier chapters demonstrate, our explanation for their over-representation in poorer pedagogical outcomes is that students considered at-risk are necessarily in need of remediation and intervention—thereby reifying their vulnerability but proposing a solution that relies on our professional intervention in their lives. This is an extension of this passive object rationale that results in calls for increased support for

marginalized students in the form of reduced academic workloads, mandatory basic skills training and orientation, and improved financial aid (Roueche & Roueche, 2006). The focus remains on the characteristics of social identity groups and individual deficits to explain failure.

Although applied to young learners, the premise of the funds of knowledge approach to teaching and learning is that linguistic and ethnic minority families possess and are a valuable source of social and intellectual resources that should be operationalized pedagogically by classroom teachers to compensate for serious gaps in the traditional western education system that produce disparate outcomes for marginalized identity students. As a community-based pedagogy, reflective teachers engage in reciprocal relations) with student families and households in the pedagogical project (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) which is a limitation in this context. In the adult education context we are not engaging with people's families directly and have no business entering their households, and to the extent that we might, we do so only by extension and proxy. The particular projects on which the concept was built involved a community comprised largely by one social identity community (Mexicano households in Tucson, Arizona), which is not reflective of the great social identity diversity of urban/metropolitan college settings. College instructors cannot practically come to know most student families, communities, or stories deeply. However, it is possible to learn more about students' everyday lives, especially what makes non-traditional students non-traditional: their work, their burdens, their strengths, their resources, their priorities, and their concerns. This concept calls for a reorienting of the assumed priorities and resources of the student: the classroom is just another part of their social network (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), not necessarily the most important one or the most consequential. Their daily lives and their classroom experiences are funds of anti-oppression knowledge that their instructors more often

do not possess. As such, perhaps it is the educators and administrators that are under-prepared

for them, and it is us that lack the appropriate academic and social integration skills necessary for

their success.

Failure/Success as Institutional Constructs

For Varenne & McDermott (1998) success and failure are flip sides of the same coin—

once cannot be without the other. Success and failure are properties of the institution though, not

the student herself; however, these properties are applied to a student by the institution's

structures of norms and values (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Success and failure are

omnipresent and ubiquitous, there before the student arrives, and remaining with the student after

she leaves, despite the circumstances under which she leaves—graduate, drop-out, or fail out.

Success and failure are made for the student by the institution and educators and set out who a

student is supposed to be, what they are to do, and how they are to do it—both in subtle and

overt ways—and assume a level playing field (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Institutions go to

great lengths to create programs, services, and policies that help to level the playing field for

those with head starts in terms of resources or skills. These programs and services also become

part of the institutional fabric requiring staffing, administration, and other resources. Institutional

daily life becomes organized around it. Failing students are identified, targeted, and constructed

as somehow different from those who are demonstrating institutionally recognized success, or

persisting on to completion. Everyone in the institution becomes involved as actors in the routine

life of success and failure (Varenne, Goldman & McDermott, 1998) in what McDermott (1987)

describes as caught up in the "industry" of studying, explaining, and remediating the habits,

values, and skills of minority groups that are over-represented among those who fail (p. 361).

Because we are invested in believing that we have good pedagogy, good policies and practices,

and good intentions it is easy to assume then that something must be wrong with those who fail, and right about those who succeed. Those who succeed legitimize the institutional practice, and those who fail rationalize gatekeeping logic.

Failure then is not a personal attribute but rather an institutional one, complete with formal properties such as grade levels, thresholds, and dismissal procedures, and a necessary evil in light of the need for gatekeeping in terms of institutional standards and reputation but also professional gatekeeping that is the very function of vocationally-focused community colleges. For Varenne & McDermott (1998), failure then is prescribed and maintained by the institution, and is fundamentally constructed as an inability to perform well with the tools and conditions prescribed (e.g. traditional authority of the instructor and the lack of professional knowledge of the student—or in Freire's conceptualization, the banking method of education and the social relations it reflects and reproduces) and therefore is "relentlessly individualized" (p.157).

This research was taken on to respond to what might be called a pedagogy of failure. This study is an effort to justify resisting pressures from the institution to eradicate students who interfere with completion performance statistics and standard timelines that do not reflect an understanding of the complexities of some students' lives and their pathways through post-secondary education. This must be done not from a perspective of creating conditions for "success" (read as passing courses), but rather a serious commitment to the intellectual and social development of students who are about to engage explicitly in an educational process that has the critical potential to prepare them to intervene in the world of others toward liberation and transformation. This study was undertaken to understand better how students experience and make meaning of the failure and withdrawal practice, and explore what the phenomenon means for social work and social work education. Simply put, the dynamic tension between a

commitment to students and a commitment to the professional field of social work is a rich

opportunity for transformative education and examined in order to protect the social justice

promise of social work practice.

For the purposes of this study, Freire's critical pedagogy justifies and informs a

framework fundamentally opposed to any form of student marginalization, specifically the

creation, conceptualization, and problematizing of students as under-prepared for education.

Tinto's (1993, 2012) largely accepted persistence theory notes that student persistence is

influenced by the ability of the student to integrate into the academic and campus life,

necessarily severing to some degree the important family and community affiliations on which

they most likely depend emotionally, materially, or spiritually (in turn, their families also likely

depend on the student as well). Tinto's theory is largely based on assimilation; he argues that the

more students integrate into the institution's culture, leading to greater feelings of belonging and

being valued, the more likely they are to persist to graduation. He also notes that for a

disengagement from past relationships and family cultures seem to facilitate this assimilation.

This theory reveals what social and cultural capital is and is not valued within the institution.

Therefore Tinto's theory constitutes a cultural invasion (Freire, 1978), devaluing and replacing

subaltern knowledge and valued relationships and community with dominant institutions and

their imperialist ways of knowing.

Freire was explicit in his critique of such professional education:

> We therefore don't have to continue to propose a pedagogy of the oppressed that unveils
> the reasons behind the facts of what provokes the oppressed to take up critical knowledge
> and transformative action. We no longer need a pedagogy that questions technical
> training or is indispensable to the development of a professional comprehension of how
> and why society functions. What we need to do now, according to this astute ideology, is
> focus on production without any preoccupation about what we are producing, who it
> benefits, or who it hurts (Freire, 1996, p. 84).

Community colleges depend on disadvantaged students, recognized for enrolling disproportionate numbers of first-generation students, low-income students, women, and students of color, significant numbers of queer students, and students labeled as disabled (Harbour & Ebie, 2011). Many college students may have been marginalized in previous education and employment settings by these structural and social identity markers, thus reinforcing middle- and upper-class norms and values reflective of a white supremacist/racist and patriarchal norms and values system reinforced in higher education settings through teacher/student interactions (hooks, 1994). Imposing these norms and values in the education encounter and relationship constrains the transformative dialogical potential of education in which the learner educates the teacher, transgressing all traditional social relations (Freire, 1970, 2007a).

Gatekeeping

The gatekeeping role of professional/vocational educators also prevents the possibility of this transgression. For some, they take the selecting out of "unsuitable" candidates for the profession through academic means—and the rationale here is quite common sense. If a program is well-developed to prepare a student for a particular field—in this case social services—then it seems to fit that if a student is unsuccessful in those courses or programs, they are either unsuitable for the profession or at least not yet suitable. The educator though is not one that benignly or objectively applies a program of learning and training to each student for them to demonstrate their preparedness and fit. The quality of our pedagogy and teaching skills as well as our own discretion and subjectivities are involved and therefore it is not a neutral exercise of pedagogy or of gatekeeping. As Ford and Hayes (1996) recognize, professional education is a site of struggle—where the professional is socialized into her profession but also where professionals-as-educators construct and reproduce what it is to be a professional in the field.

"As educators, our basic and most fundamental commitment is to ensure the selection and education of those able to carry out the services and activities of the social work profession in response to the demands of a changing society" (Pinnick, 1968, p.101). In a transformative gatekeeping turn, it is possible then to select students we think best reflect the qualities and skills that will move our profession forward, or the best candidates to realize the social change goals of our work. Thus it is on the margins that we need to "select and educate", instead of theirs to prove they should be supported to participate. Having to prove their worth academically, while their lived knowledge of the margins remains un-integrated and under-valued, reflects perhaps an outdated way of thinking about gatekeeping, or perhaps protects and maintains the social closure of the professions to the margins.

In social services programs, the discipline of social work becomes a narrowly restricted academic field out of necessity in a two-year professional program. Often reflected in terms such as "applied", "practical" or "hands-on" programs or foci, acting as proxies for a reduced focus on the theoretical or consideration of multiple frameworks for understanding fully a discipline's complexity. This is a necessary but regrettable disservice to para-professional students, as such programs become merely vocational training sites (Ford & Hayes, 1996) as a result. Indeed,

> …the most common myth to be dispelled is the belief that college education lacks the rigour and theoretical foundation offered through university programs. This can result in the devaluing of work and the role of SSWs in the field, which can have detrimental effects resulting in marginalization and low expectations of what SSWs are capable of providing…whereby even the most competent are kept down because of hierarchical thinking (Desai & Hill, 2009, p.381).

For the students of such programs, many of them considered non-traditional and under-prepared, this narrow training focus has the dangerous potential to turn under-prepared students into under-prepared workers, lacking the depth and breadth of preparation for the growing complexities of the social work field. With such a short amount of time and a narrow focus, opportunities for the

development of critical consciousness are also restricted as instructors focus only on the bare minimum necessary, teaching to the competencies deemed required, with fewer and fewer opportunities for dialogue or academic discourse necessary to foster critical consciousness (Bizzell, 1977). Instructors must find ways to introduce transformative and liberatory possibilities inside of this technical realm, however by helping students from the margins gain entrance to the field, instructors can facilitate the development of critical consciousness and social transformation by ensuring they participate in their communities in leadership and service roles.

Social work is a relatively new occupational domain, as opposed to the more traditional professions of law, medicine, or teaching (Wilensky, 1964). Fournier (1999) notes that the modern professionalism project involves more and more occupations being professionalized. In order to receive sanction for professional status, an occupation has to establish its credibility not only with the public as potential clients, but also within the orthodoxy from which it may have been generated. Professionalism can therefore be conceived of as having great occupational value (Freidson, 2001; Parsons, 1939) or as a discursive construction with various aims such as the discipline and control of a relatively new, highly educated, and public service-minded class of labour (Evetts, 2003; Fournier, 1999).

Occupations that cannot authoritatively establish a specialized and exclusive knowledge base, as well as professions grounded in human relations skills, are challenged to establish themselves legitimately as a profession (Wilensky, 1964) and this is certainly the case for social work. The problem for occupations not recognized as professions in this way is a lack of formal recognition of both the rigour of professional standards supported by accountability mechanisms and therefore enhancing public trust of its services. Without the benefits of professionalization

and resulting legitimization, occupations may also lack the benefits of social closure where professional bodies regulate who can claim professional titles and compete with its members. Had the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Services Workers not decided to recognize and therefore include the paraprofessional designation of Social Services Worker, it is doubtful that the demand from both employers for graduates and students for community college programs would be as successful.

The Social Work Profession

The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values encoded by various professional associations at the provincial/state, national, and now global levels. Social work's tradition of working toward social change and an ethic of caring is encoded in its various professional documents, including codes of ethics, mission and values statements, and standards of practice (such as those established by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Services Workers (OCSWSSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). Established herein are concerns for humanity, human rights, self-determination, and related values and principles as well as the dual professional purpose of working both toward individual wellbeing as well as social transformation. Because SSWs are recognized by the provincial regulatory body, the OCSWSSW, these principles apply equally to social workers and SSWs practicing in Ontario. The enshrining of such principles and codes speaks to the efforts at professionalizing an activity that was once the realm of faith-based volunteers and community members mobilized by a concern for the effects of poverty in their communities, and less admirably, perceived social and moral deficits associated with living in poverty. This poverty industry and charity model approach is reflective of the era of social work's emerging professionalization (Carniol, 2010;

Lundy, 2011). The practice of mainstream social work can be characterized as divided into two broad approaches to the discipline. One is a more conventional or normative direct service approach to social work reflective of its charitable and faith-based historical origins. The other approach is a more progressive orientation that asserts social work's more activist orientation (Carniol, 2010; Hessle, 2014; Lundy 2011). This activist approach focuses on structural social change and developed as a response to the embedded normative approaches and social control functions characteristic of the practice and policies of the early period of social welfare's development in Canada (Carniol, 2010; Mulally, 2007).

These twin silos of social work approaches are exemplified by two practice movements said to have marked the beginning of mainstream social work in Canada: the settlement house movement and the charitable organization societies (Lundy, 2011). The settlement house movement recognized systemic causes for social work support and therefore advocated for institutional change as their primary focus. Charitable organization societies, on the other hand, established a normative direct service provision trend in social work whereby members of the upper class could lend charitable aid to those living in poverty (Carniol, 2010; Lundy, 2011). The legacy of this history is still evident today. Clinical or treatment methods of social work and its practitioners focus primarily on the individual or case, with less focus if any on improving structural and systemic realities that contribute to or influence personal problems. Indeed, in many ways, a less activist or decontextualized approach to social work dominates the profession. This is a logical response and consequence of the neoliberal and conservative forces compounding the social services sector, where funding cuts and resulting staffing and service reductions mean treating the growing acuity and complexity of social problems as they manifest individually instead of systemically as priority for service (Carniol, 2010). To illustrate, the

CASW Code of Ethics reminds social work professionals that one of our professional goals is to work for "social and redistributive justice" (CASW Code of Ethics, 2005). However as a practice regulated at the provincial level, the OCSWSSW Code of Ethics codifies a less transformational commitment to change in the "best interest of the client, the environment and humanity" (OCSWSSW Code of Ethics and Standard of Practice, 2008). As the body that dictates professional use of the titles social worker and social services worker, this minimized emphasis on social justice likely holds greater influence on professional social workers and social services workers in Ontario. This duality is recognized as a dilemma for social workers practicing in traditional settings such as mental health institutions, focused as they are on the internal dynamics and deficiencies of the individual (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006). Social work's "humanitarian impulse" then is to treat first (Carniol, 2010, p.46), and look to solutions when the triage allows, however the conditions of social transformation do not seem to be immediately forthcoming. One approach is not more legitimate or necessary than the other. In fact, both are necessary in order to be effective. This challenging duality presented by integrating individual need with social activism is the dynamic integration that keeps social work's historical foundations intact and maintains its transformative potential.

Social services workers. Part of the role of professional social work education and training is to provide a gatekeeping function for the profession, educating students in the rigours of social work and upholding professional standards by limiting entry to the profession to those who are able to demonstrate competency (Grady, 2009). The history of the development of the SSW para-profession in Ontario is rarely written about or studied (Desai & Hill, 2009). According to Desai & Hill (2009), social services programs were introduced at the college level

in Canada in 1966 in order to help meet a growing demand at the time for skilled workers trained to work in the developing social welfare sector.

Social service work, as a para-profession of social work, is not an independent or distinctive approach to helping professions. It is a limited form of the more exclusive domain of social work. Social services work is defined by a more practical, direct service, and non-clinical tasks as compared to its social work counterparts (Desai & Hill, 2009). The non-clinical scope of practice for social services work was codified in Ontario in the *Social Work and Social Services Work Act* (1998). The professional association, OCSWSSW, maintains the professional distinction of social work by bestowing professional status on the para-profession of Social Services Worker (SSW) yet codifying the distinction in roles. Therefore, a unique form of social closure is used to maintain the professional hierarchy and exclusivity of social work. The professional title of SSW was added to the professional ranks of the jurisdiction of the OCSWSSW out of a democratic commitment to accessibility (Bella, 1996) by "permitting admission of disadvantaged minorities to professional status" (p.158) and in order to regulate/establish monopoly over a growing number of graduates, therefore increasing its reach to also regulate the practice of certificate/diploma-entitled practitioners.

Many community college students undertake their social services diplomas in community colleges unaware of the distinction and professional limitations of the title of Social Services Worker (SSW). The social services work para-profession is constituted by a range of credentials that vary across institutions. In Ontario, social services workers can be educated to be generalist SSWs, or to specialize in specific community services areas such as settlement work. A more recent development has been the Child and Youth Care diploma (CYC), included in SSW college programs, however it is not a regulated profession or title. CYC graduates are not eligible

for membership with the regulatory body, the OCSWSSW. Some community colleges offer a Community Worker diploma program or specializations such Assaulted Women and Children's Advocate programs, and graduates of these programs are eligible to be registered as SSWs with the OCSWSSW. Private colleges in Ontario offer diploma programs for titles such as Community Support Worker and Aboriginal Outreach Worker but as they are not regulated in the same way as Social Services Workers programs, these graduates are not eligible for professional registration with the OCSWSSW. Social Services Workers and graduates from related programs at community colleges occasionally transition to schools of social work at the university level in an effort to transition to the profession of social worker, and depending on academic performance, may be eligible for some credit transfer.

The professional difference in the social work and social services work domain hinges on one dimension—the professionally sanctioned practice scope of clinical assessment and diagnosis as outlined in the OCSSWSW Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (2008). This regulated professional limitation is protective in terms of regulation of ethical and competent practice, the discipline's credentials, and may be considered a reflection of the responsibility to safeguard the public (Nerland & Karseth, 2013). The skills related to this increased scope of social work practice and responsibility are therefore gained in the depth and breadth of education made possible by the additional years of education at the degree-level, and are enhanced by the possibility of graduate education made possible be attending undergraduate university education. In essence, social services workers and social workers are distinguished by the length of education required for designation and type of institution attended—two years versus three or four years, respectively—and this distinction materializes in the labour market, where social workers can command a slightly higher salary than their para-professional counterparts.

According to Employment Ontario, the annual average employment income of a full-time social worker in 2010 in Ontario (based on Statistics Canada's National Household Survey in 2011) was $60, 608 (compared to $61,495 for all occupations). A social services worker's average salary was $45,788 (Employment Ontario, 2013, p.5).

The inclusion of SSWs in the OCSWSSW legitimates it as a professional practice category. Its distinction from the professional category of social worker should not be considered a limitation at all, but rather a promising aspect for the social work profession. Although social workers can choose not to practice in the clinical aspects of the field, SSWs are prevented by credential from doing so. This limitation ensures a significant portion of the professional field is dedicated to community-based service rather than clinical practice.

The social work/social services work professional body is growing in Ontario. In 2016, the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Services Workers registered 1,392 social work members and 402 social service work members for a total of 938 new members, which increased overall membership to 18,945 in 2016 (OCSWSSW, 2016, p.4). Interestingly, the growth of the para-professions of social work such as social service and community support workers is outpacing that of social workers, almost tripling the number of social workers entering the field (Trocmé, 2016). This is likely due to the large numbers of graduates from community colleges who command lower pay as para-professionas hired by community organizations who struggle to maintain dwindling operating budgets. Growth in the professional body is interesting to explore in light of concerns for post-secondary education completion rates. Despite overall concern for post-secondary persistence, ultimately enough social workers and social services workers complete their educational programs and are therefore eligible for membership with the OCSWSSW to claim the appropriate professionally designated title. The

dilemma then is not about a lack of sufficient number of graduates able to successfully complete their programs, but rather who persists and who is missing after the gatekeeping/selection process of post-secondary professional education, which is the focus of this exploratory mixed methods study.

Social Work and Social Services Professionalization

Typically, what separates a profession from an occupation is that professions rely on a foundation of specialized knowledge, usually attained through extensive education (usually higher education) and experiential training. The formal recognition and legitimation of occupations as professions typically involves a common set of particular activities that raise the status of the occupation to that of profession, for example, the establishment of professional schools and regulatory associations, the claim to a specialized foundation of expert knowledge, lengthy and rigorous education (usually at the level of higher education) and resulting legitimized credentials that restrict access to and therefore increase value in the labour market (Bella, 1996; Evetts, 2001; Friedson, 2001; Vollmer & Mills, 1966), notions of universal public service, codes of ethical conduct, and the articulation of competencies (Bella, 1996; Fournier, 1999; Friedson, 2001; Harris, 1993; Larson, 1977) .

The professionalism project undertaken by occupational groups serves several purposes. When pursued by an occupational group, the benefits to that group are several, such as an increase in occupational status and perhaps salary for its members, protected or exclusive employment domains (Friedson, 2001), and increased autonomy through strategies of accreditation or licensure (Fournier, 1999), or monopoly over their labour (Larson, 1977), and securing the social and economic privilege of its members (Macdonald, 1995).

Professions control their respective employment market by gaining cognitive monopoly over education, in which the state and the market become complicit as tools for building that monopoly through sanctioned professional education (Larson, 1977). Professional regulatory bodies sanction minimum education and training levels for membership, and college and universities do their part in orienting their programs to comply. Part of the professional project is to regulate and maintain occupational control over work. Authority in the realm of work control means that a profession could also designate less desirable aspects of the occupation to subordinate groups (Krause, 1999), or in Larson's (1977) conceptualization, perhaps less educated groups such as para-professionals. Reflecting the open door admission of community colleges and the location of para-professions within the vocational training mandate of community colleges, Larson (1977) notes the difficulty universalistic education provides for a profession trying to maintain some level of social closure in the labour force in order to maintain its exchange value. One response has to been the emergence of the technician with limited professional functions, or the para-professional, as the "new working class" (p.234).

Larson (1977) explains the professionalization phenomenon as one where occupations primarily held by the middle class establish a monopoly over their service, thereby securing themselves organized entry into labour markets, linking entry into the market to extensive education and thereby establishing the role of the education system complicit in the service of professional phenomenon. The benefits of professionalization then are really ideological and structural advantages resulting from social stratification and social closure. Bureaucracies become complicit through hiring practices that link competence to credentials and length of education/training, which produces the professional as a marketable commodity. Competency then depends on the state through its appropriation of credentialing education and training

systems. Such is the reality for social services workers, as the Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities sets the vocational standards for SSW graduates, not the OCSWSSW. Conferred professional status yet limited by professional jurisdiction, SSWs are limited or conditional members of the professional association, allowed to use the title in exchange for an annual registration fee, and bound by a code of ethics that keeps them within their level of competency thus legitimizing the protection of the clinical realm to those more duly educated for it. The effect of the profession's monopoly over its members' relationship to the labour market by defining competence and the acceptable/legitimate route for achieving competence can either be open or more closed. The trend toward closure ensures a limited or scarce commodity and therefore increases and guarantees its value in the labour market. Larson (1977) points out the inherent contradiction here of professions that claim the moral ideal of obligation to the public good through service and the monopoly over training/credentialing that produces a relatively high exchange value in the market to the competence it produces. Here Larson's (1977) analysis provides insight into the contradiction under study. Part of the professional project then is to convince the public that the knowledge can be obtained by any and all who care to learn it and are capable of doing so, therefore the training sites must appear to be open to all who "deserve education" (p.223). Larson (1977) notes that the differentiation becomes justified by unequal distribution of intelligence and resolve, which maintains an inevitable selection process among individuals on an assumed level playing field. The state—in favour of professional monopolies because of their sanctioned role in the commodification of the training and education—ensures a collective of students labouring toward the professional project's promises.

The ideology of professionalism creates and maintains class structures through introducing status differentials directly linked to labour market outcomes (Bella, 1996; Larson,

1977), thus also introducing status aspirations and status mobility in which the education system becomes complicit (Larson, 1977) through its professional education and training function for self-regulating professions. The professional project is largely agreed upon as intended to secure economic and social advantage for its members. The resulting social mobility therefore must be conceived of us supporting a particular hierarchical class structure and the social stratification of the socio-cultural context in which it is pursued (Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1995).

The power of the discourse of professionalism can in part serve to distract or hide this gatekeeping reality from professional practitioners. The discourse of professionalism is a strong mechanism for solidarity within a profession (Larson, 1977). Initial education, training, and initiation into the professions is a strong socialization force that reinforces the public good nature of professions, or the construction of a virtuous "calling" that reinforces compliance and consent on behalf of the individual practitioner into the professional project. Material rewards then reinforce allegiance to the profession and its professional association. Larson (1977) also notes that the authoritative relational framework of professional education between teachers (usually with elite professional status) and students is a fundamental element of socialization, where the university maintains the hierarchy of excellence and prestige within a profession. Subordination of students is justified by teachers' expertise and elite professional status, not yet in the privileged society of knowers rendered more elite by the reality that not all have the "ability" to complete the education or training and therefore not all people can become professionals. Here the extension can be made that if some students of the professions are not academically competent, then so too are they less likely to be professionally competent. There is little recognition of what the trainee/student brings to the educational or professional encounter that is not legitimated by the professional project, that is, formal education.

The Implications of Professionalism for Progressive Social Work

Bella (1996) examines the relevance of understanding professions as ideology to the practice of social work specifically. She characterizes social workers as largely ambivalent to the professional project because of the discipline's bifurcated origins and approaches: treatment of individual deficits or social activism, noted earlier. Bella (1996) conceptualizes the dilemma of professionalism centring on a professional commitment to egalitarianism and social reform. The contradiction lies in that professionalism creates, enhances, and protects a social stratification in which the professional worker is privileged, and the service user is subordinated—the very conditions which create and sustain the social problems that we profess to resolve.

Larson (1977) advocates for a solidary collective to break the ideological foundation of professionalism in pursuit of the liberation of the social inequality structures that it maintains, and in which the self-serving professionals are complicit, thereby contradicting the very public good that professionalism itself claims to serve. Here the inclusive and collective nature inherent to social work offers an antidote to some aspects of professionalism is that the OCSWSSW did not close its doors to SSWs, thereby allowing them to participate in and reap some of the rewards of the professionalization of social work project. However, for those pushed out of their programs before completion, and at the lower rungs of the professional education project, professional regulation closes their opportunities to work in their communities with the legitimacy of a professional title. The proliferation of other more generic titles is likely a result of this reality, such as the unregulated title of community support worker. Without at least a diploma that represents some training and education for the field, mandatorily withdrawn students have very little hope of working in their communities in a formal or well-remunerated way.

Social work's code of ethics. The establishment of a professional code of ethics is an inevitable task of the professional project (Wilensky, 1964). Members guarantee not only their competence but also their professional honour in codes of professional conduct (Vollmer & Mills, 1966). Part of the professionalization project is the codification or enshrinement of profession-specific professional behaviour in a code of ethics. The ideology of professions is often embedded in its ethical codes (Bella, 1996), in a moral sense such as the ideal of universal service and a prescribed work ethic as well as in a pragmatic sense in that the codes often enshrine a right to self-govern and discipline its own members and a implied or explicit claimed monopoly on competence in the field of practice. The ideological aspect of such codes is their claimed self-evident nature as values or truths (Bella, 1996). Here the purpose of a code of ethics is cementing the profession in service of the public good (Fournier, 1999). The codes of ethics involved in the regulation of the social work profession enshrine its value orientation in this service of the public good. However, two sets of codes are involved in the profession of social work—one from its professional regulatory body (OCSWSSW) and one from its national professional association (CASW), and only the OCSWSSW applies to SSWs. As noted earlier, the OCSWSSW code of ethic iss the weaker in terms of communicating a social justice orientation, but regulates it as a professional title, and therefore holds considerable influence over SSW practice.

Social work programs are expected to follow the Accreditation Standards of the Canadian Association of Social Work Education. One such standard relates to social justice. Such as standard standards 3.1 and 3.2 "i) Social work students understand their professional role in advancing human rights and responsibilities and social justice in the context of the Canadian society and internationally, ii) Social work students have knowledge of the role social structures

can play in limiting human and civil rights and employ professional practices to ensure the

fulfillment of human and civil rights and advance social justice for individuals, families, groups

and communities," and standard 4.2 "Social work students have knowledge of how

discrimination, oppression, poverty, exclusion, exploitation, and marginalization have a negative

impact on particular individuals and groups and strive to end these and other forms of social

injustice" (CASWE, 2014, pp.10-11).

Community colleges social services worker programs are expected to follow the SSW

Program Standards as set out by Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities (2007). The

preamble sets out that: "The Social Service Worker program provides students with practical,

integrated learning experiences and a body of knowledge related to the promotion of human well

being and the affirmation of strengths and capacities of people in their environments" (MCTU,

2007, p.6).

> Graduates maintain professional relationships that adhere to legal and ethical standards
> and it is expected that they will have a commitment to work for social justice and to
> promote the development and sustainability of a culture of equality. They work with
> individuals, families, groups, and communities in identifying and mobilizing resources to
> facilitate opportunities for positive change (p.6).

Only one of the nine vocational outcomes that successful graduates must demonstrate

refers to social justice: "9. Work in communities to advocate for change strategies that promote

social and economic justice and challenge patterns of oppression and discrimination" (MCTU,

2007, p.6).

The milder reference in education accreditation for colleges reflects its more practical

focus (as noted in the introduction to the preamble of the MCTU document), as well as the

shorter timeframe in which to deliver the most relevant curriculum in a 2-year versus a 3-4

program at the degree level. By necessity, it also reflects a professional orientation distinction

expectation, where the more practical skills and knowledge focused on in community colleges leaves the more theoretical and complex to the time and breadth of degree programs. By default, it is also because community colleges—as vocational institutions more practically tied to the labour market—view education as labour market preparation more strongly, and graduates may be more employable with the more practical orientation to service delivery.

Carniol (2010) notes that the forces creating tension in practice between social care (for example, the "best interests of clients and community", set out by the OSCSWSSW) and social transformation (for example, the economic redistribution and social justice of CASW code) are also being felt inside social work education and curriculum, where often conservative and progressive approaches clash inside the same program. For example, ecological approaches to social work conceive social problems and individual consequences of them as matters of adaptation, wherein the social worker's role is to address the maladaptive fit between the individual and their environment. As the environment is often unyielding, for example in the case of homelessness and a lack of affordable housing, the client is often encouraged to "adapt". The failure of this approach in terms of social justice is obvious. Progressive social work education, on the other hand, is evident where curriculum teaches students about such social control functions of social work approaches and focus on anti-oppressive approaches, focusing not only on the symptoms of social problems and oppressions but also on questioning and dismantling the colonial, racist, and patriarchal systems and institutions that create and perpetuate them. One could view this tension as both contradictory in terms of values and also complementary in the practical reality that people need to survive today while the slower process of social change is taking place.

The Social Services Professional Educator

The professional discipline of social work in its full scope is a minimum 3-4 years at the undergraduate level, and then possibly graduate level education for the more specialized roles such as clinical social work. Accreditation standards for social work degree programs are set out by the Canadian Association of Social Work Educators (CASWE). The para-profession of social services is limited to two-years, with four semesters in which the Ministry of Colleges, Training, and Universities has set vocational standards. The compressed nature means that often the historical or theoretical content, or the complexities of social problems are omitted or covered briefly, with the more clinical elements removed (as per the professional regulatory conditions) thereby compressing the higher education elements of undergraduate work into a more efficient and vocationally prioritized training package. This is a restrictive agenda to work under, as the imperative to get across only what is most necessary most efficiently means that some of the breadth, depth, and complexities are foregone out of priority for the practical minimum. This vocation-first training is not the way that most of the educators teaching these students were educated, and acts as a filter for what is covered and what is not. For example, human development courses are typical of any community college program, reduced to one semester and one textbook—where often scholars and complex theories of human development such as Freud, Jung, and Erikson are reduced to one chapter and multiple critical perspective are not covered, such as Indigenous knowledge on human development. The rationale is often that a more comprehensive treatment of human development theories is not possible in a restricted program and rationalized as not of specific value for para-professional non-clinical practice. A restrictive social work curricula, designed by default of the para-professional two-year program, in this way aims only to train, and is less capable or concerned with to educate. This tendency undermines its social justice potential (Crabtree, Husain, & Spalek, 2017) as students debate

different positions and theories, explore the evidence-base for themselves, and take time to specialize.

Freire was critical of professionalization in its technical sense, noting its preparation and accomplishment led to a "theoretical elitism" (Freire, 1998, p. 93) and arrogance that was antithetical to the humility and loving kindness needed for progressive education for critical consciousness. For him, teaching was a profession that risked the danger of professionalization, one to be carefully and militantly avoided. As with social work, professionalization involves the educator as a political agent. As a deeply political practice, a teacher could work for dominant forces, comply with dominant forces and leave them unquestioned, or work toward the empowerment and liberation of learners in the larger democratic project of education. Freire's work speaks to those who came to and prepared for the profession of teaching (1998, 2005), where SSW and community college faculty usually come to teaching by way of their profession, and not as a vocation. "Being a teacher implies the responsibility to assume the demands of a profession" (Freire, 2005, p.7). By extension and taking up Freire's view, those of us who did not train professionally for teaching have a two-fold responsibility: to assume the demands of teaching as a profession (most often without any formal education to do so) as well as teaching students to "assume the demands" of the profession for which we are training. We teach that fight for justice through an SSW lens, but must also reflect on our own pedagogy and institutional practices as choices we make professionally. For Freire, teaching must involve "a specific militancy" advocating for students (Friere, 2005, p.7).

Most community college instructors are not teachers by vocation or education:

The fact, however, that teachers learn how to teach a particular content must not in any way mean that they should venture into teaching without the necessary competence to do it. It does not give persons a license to teach what they do not know. Teachers' political, ethical, and professional responsibility puts them under an obligation to prepare and

enable themselves before engaging in their teaching practice...Such development is based on a critical analysis of their practice (Freire, 2005, p. 32).

Perhaps as social workers, we bring something to this vocational teaching practice that informs how we teach. The orientation toward social justice social work, should extend to practice teaching and pedagogy for social justice. Critical pedagogy affords an explanation in part for the tensions discussed here. The inability for marginalized individuals to "succeed" or persist in the landscapes of these tensions is a function of the social and emotional harms of marginalization and oppression, but the processes of gatekeeping—in its most extreme form, mandatory withdrawal—maintains the logic of the myth that the institutions involved are neutral and providing equal opportunity for all to demonstrate their merits. As sites of para-professional construction and selection, community colleges do not practice in a way that acknowledges their democratic function. Perhaps the real value of para-professionals in terms of social transformative purposes is who para-professionals are, and the contributions they make when they are successful in their programs and enter the field, as "…In many organizations, non-degreed workers [paraprofessionals] provide many direct services and represent community voices" (Gibelman & Furman, 2008, p.112). It is out of concern for the loss of marginalized community voices and experiences on the margins that failed SSW hopefuls embody that motivated this study.

CAATs were originally developed to be a new kind of open access institution that would provide post-secondary opportunities to students who were not suitable for university in order to respond to shifting labour market conditions that required better skills and knowledge than secondary education provided (Ontario Department of Education, 1967) preparing students for middle-management and mid-level labour market participation (Skolnik, 2004). As Varenne and McDermott (1998) point out, students who access this open door become part of a institutional

world functioning around success and failure. As established in Chapter Two, such notions are typically and stubbornly based on deficit models of understanding academic capacity. González, Moll, & Amanti (2005) and their concept of the funds of knowledge remind us that this is a faulty way to approach academic capacity, and a focus on the knowledges, experiences, and voices as rich source of academic preparation as well as knowledge capacity is a helpful antidote to these dominant and often un-examined approaches to professional education.

Students of professional programs also wittingly or unwittingly become subjects of the professional gatekeeping process, a reality that applies to both paraprofessional college students as well as their university social work counterparts. These realities present tensions in which the professional educator must contend, but for those teaching in community colleges the open door mandate of the community college means that these students may not have many other options should they be unsuccessful in their college pursuits. Here Freire's critical pedagogy resists the marginalization of any student in the process of education and development of critical consciousness, employed herein to demonstrate that transformational education is possible in vocational education and community colleges.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to interrogate the failure and mandatory withdrawal process through the experiences of students who were withdrawn from the social services program at Seneca College, a process that leads to significant numbers of students leaving the program and institution. This study is a mixed methods design that employed an online survey of all students who left the SSW program between 2011-2015 without completing their program in order to capture some quantitative data about early leaving. Eighty-one students participated in the online survey however only 48 completed the entire survey. From that sample, a purposive convenience sample was drawn from students who identified their reason for leaving early as being mandatorily withdrawn in the survey for the qualitative element of the study, which examined the process of failure and withdrawal specifically. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 withdrawn students.

Knowledge about failure and the mandatory withdrawal based on the voices and experiences of those who live the experience is critical to transformative practice. Morgan (1983) reminds us that the purpose of research is to reveal "possible knowledges" (p.13). This is an approach to research that resonates with the funds of knowledge concept (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that is invoked in the data analysis that reminds educators there is knowledge on the margins—critical knowledge—that is sometimes rendered invisible or irrelevant by mainstream approaches to research, education, and professional practice. People who experience something therefore know something in ways that offer different perspectives on what is "known" about an issue, such as post-secondary failure, and it is this perspective that is missing in what little literature addresses non-completion. Developing pedagogical and institutional practice based on the knowledge and experiences of disinvited students—students invited in by

open admissions policies but kicked out for academic failure—can critically respond to standard conceptualizations of what happened and their learner identities, and enable me as a social work educator to respond to inaccurate conceptualizations and practices that do not lead to praxis in this topic.

Theoretical Framing of Methods

This study falls within the realm of critical educational research, which is focused on addressing the traditional neglect of political and ideological contexts of much educational research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Critical education and research call for a closer link between the academic and the lived reality of students. Critical educational research serves transformational purposes as it focuses on questioning forces of oppression and interrogating power in service of social democracy (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2011) summarize the critical education research orientation in three stages. First, it describes an existing situation. Second, it examines the legitimacy of the current situation in an analysis of the interests and ideologies at work in the situation, perhaps in service of a social status quo or dominant social order that threatens democratic freedoms, equality, and empowerment. Third, it presents an agenda for altering the situation, thus its transformational paradigm. This transformative paradigm takes many forms including a concern for voice, participation, and inclusion in light of these dominant and repressive ideologies and interests at play in education contexts (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The motivation for this study is based on seeking such a transformational moment by engaging the participation and knowledge of failed and mandatorily withdrawn students, to question our practice, and inform potential change in institutional, pedagogical, and professional practice.

Experience of a phenomenon is legitimate knowledge of that phenomenon (McNiff, 1988). Appadurai (2006) conceived of research as a capacity to make inquiry into "the things we need to know, but do not know yet" (p. 167). On this matter, it is not sufficient to just understand the phenomena under study but rather to also question what we are doing as institutions and educators, why we are doing it, and ultimately to better understand if we need to reform practice.

Morgan (1983) reminds us that the purpose of research is to reveal possible knowledges through the engagement made possible by the research process. Researchers engage a subject of study by interacting with it, and what is discovered through the process of research is as much a product of the engagement as it is the procedures and frameworks chosen by the researcher. Because there are various methods and degrees to which a researcher can engage with a subject, many different kinds of knowledge are possible. The research process has the potential then to establish and value various knowledge claims. Different methodologies embody specific underlying assumptions that shape the research process and the kind of knowledge that gets recognized or created (Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2010). In research, often the concerns of the margins are interpreted as "personal or individual issues or failings", marginalizing the issues that they "know" and limiting their ability to generate or transfer knowledge that could resolve those concerns (p.6). The value is not inherent to the process of research produced by the researcher, but what the research perhaps is able to establish and value.

This engagement approach to research resonates with the funds of knowledge concept (González et al., 2005) that is important to this study. Simply put, the central premise of the funds of knowledge concept as put forth by González et al. (2005) is that marginalized linguistic and ethnic minority students inherently possess valuable knowledge as well as social and

intellectual resources that can be leveraged by educators for academic success, but that are typically under-valued in the education context. This concept is an antidote to stereotypical deficit orientations to understanding the social and educational capital of marginalized groups (González et al., 2005). Accepting this premise means to acknowledge that there is valuable knowledge on the margins that is sometimes rendered as less significant compared to professional knowledge in vocational education contexts. As academic and professional exclusion is the broader context for this study, the research method must honour participants as knowers capable of voice despite being socially and institutionally excluded from the knowledge generation or application process. In this way, by studying the experiences of adults who have failed out of a community college program, this project is reflective of Freire's belief that the goal of research is to develop critical consciousness that enables all to speak the truth, particularly oppressed people, and to contribute to praxis and reflection in everyday life (Freire & Moch, 1987). Ensuring their genuine participation fulfills this goal.

People who experience something know something in ways that offer different perspectives on what is "known" about an issue, such as post-secondary failure, and it is this perspective that is missing in what little scholarly literature that addresses non-completion in general. It is in this way that the knowledge of the margins may be the antidote to current deficit-oriented institutional and pedagogical understanding and action on the persistence of marginalized students as established in the preliminary literature review. This research project reflects an engagement with "double knowledge" (Van Den Bergh, 1995), or an exploration of the "truths" according to dominant or mainstream culture's perceptions in light of the truths of "the other", or the lived knowledge generated by an experience. Participants are considered to be knowledge-holders but with limited ability to exercise or leverage that knowledge due to

circumstances and conditions of marginalization that not only prevent their knowledge from being recognized but also restricts their fundamental right to contribute to the knowledge process (Appadurai, 2006).

Focus

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to understand the experience of the failure and mandatory withdrawal process for withdrawn community college students. The central focus is on the failure process and practice of mandatory withdrawal of unsuccessful students in the context of a social work para-professional program, consider what the loss of their unique knowledge and experience means, and make the case for the importance to retain them for the benefit of the social work field. Here the concept of "double knowledge" (Van Den Bergh, 1995) allows for examination of the dominant understanding of failure and withdrawal as a common sense response to poor grades from an awareness of the additional truths based on the experiences of marginalized students, or the lived knowledge generated by an experience. Pedagogical understanding of student failure, although complex, is not based on the knowledge generated by the people who were disinvited or failed, but rather the institutions that generate the conditions and rules that excluded them as well as the very people who succeeded in navigating them.

As an educator, I undertook this project to parse out an unquestioned institutional practice and examine it in light of concerns for social justice, namely the problematic process of mandatory withdrawal of failing social services students and subsequently preventing their participation in the social services field. In my view, this practice contributes to the many structural barriers they face in becoming agents of change within the social work field based on their unique life and educational experiences. Of particular focus are the tensions involved in the

relationship between open access colleges, academic failure of marginalized higher education students and professional hopefuls, the social work profession and what these relationships mean for social work education and pedagogy as a professional practice.

Research Methods

Very little is known about mandatorily withdrawn or failed out students, therefore this is an exploratory study using a mixed methods design. Different methodologies embody specific underlying assumptions that shape the research process and the kind of knowledge that gets created (Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2010). The quantitative aspect of this mixed methods study was a survey design that focused on factors of early leaving for those who did not complete their SSW programs between 2011-2015. A qualitative dimension was deemed important because mandatorily withdrawn students receive little to no attention in the academic and professional literature, and their voices and experiences are important to facilitate for possible institutional change in thinking or practice. The qualitative dimension of this study involves semi-structured face-to-face interviews with students who were mandatorily withdrawn from their programs and focuses on the student experience of failing their courses and being withdrawn from their social service study program.

A survey method was chosen in order to obtain some statistical data about the demographics and experiences of mandatorily withdrawn students. The survey allowed me the greatest reach into five years of ex-students who left the SSW program early, because the survey was emailed using institutional contact information records. Surveys alone have downfalls. Surveys can only capture "the obvious" (Bangura, 1992, p.8), are impersonal, and do not allow for information captured to be probed, elaborated upon, or clarified. Bangura (1992) asserted that surveys must be augmented by other approaches in order to advance knowledge and

advocates the use of interviews to address these limitations. A descriptive analysis of the data generated by the survey was undertaken; however, the decision to include a qualitative element strengthened this study's ability to understand more comprehensively the failure and withdrawal process as experienced by social services students.

In this study, the quantitative data generated by the survey as well as institutional data enhanced the more qualitative focus on the experience of failure and withdrawal made by ex-students. However, the qualitative elements of this study are considered most critical to its purpose, which is to better understand the failure and mandatory withdrawal experiences of community college professional program students and the implications for institutional practice, social work pedagogy and the profession in general. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) offer that qualitative inquiry is a research practice that highlights attempts to make sense of phenomena and the meanings people bring to them (pp.4-5). Therefore the qualitative approaches to research are contextual, located in the current historical and social moment. Particularly designed to understand and describe problematic moments in individuals' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), qualitative approaches have the potential to uncover and understand the impact and effects of an experience on the daily lives and realities of the people who live the experience of the phenomenon under study.

Interviewing as a means of data gathering has become an almost universal method of systemic inquiry and data collection. Interviewing has become a form of contemporary storytelling where individuals reveal all manner of personal life story information in response to interview prompts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1993), in a process almost so routine that it is almost unnoticeable. However, the interview process is not merely a technical exercise. Interviews are interactional sites where there are contextual, social and interpersonal factors that can serve to

either hinder or enhance the experience and the data that result. Limitations inherent in interviewing though include the assumptions that people reveal accurate, comprehensive, or well-thought out information about their inner worlds that can be conveyed in the interview encounter (Denzin & Lincoln, 1993). Another potential limitation may be that matters of language or cognitive capacity interfere or limit the understanding between interviewee and interviewer. The interview as it is conceived of here is a storytelling encounter, attempting to understand both *the what*, or the history of events, but also the discourse that reveals the highly subjective experience of the interviewee and provides *the how* that is so important to qualitative inquiry. Because of this story-telling element, the interviews proposed for this study are only partially structured to allow for a more organic process to emerge through dialogue. A deliberate focus on open-ended questions and exploratory wording was taken up in order to allow respondents the opportunity to answer the questions in their own way, respecting their frames of reference and responses as part of the data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

The survey was designed by the researcher for the purposes of this study and the qualitative interviews were semi-structured. The content of questions posed to the participants were based on what was known about early student departure from the literature review process. Categories and questions for the survey and the subsequent semi-structured interviews were based on Tinto's (1993) discussion of the roots of student departure. Based on U.S. studies of student attrition in 2-and 4-year institutions, Tinto found that early student departure takes multiple forms (such as dropping out or taking a break) and happens for a variety of reasons, and not always do students leave for reasons of academic difficulty. Broadly speaking, according to Tinto's (1993) research, the primary roots of student departure can be described as student intention and commitment when they enter higher education institutions and their subsequent

social and academic integration. Based on a student's interaction with the institution during this transition, the four broad clusters of individual experience that affect departure include adjustment, difficulty, incongruence of expectations, and isolation. The student's individual attributes interact with the institution's attributes (academic and social systems), often mirroring the student's individual attributes prior to entry and the effect of the broader external forces and choices on individual participation in the institution, such as work or family responsibilities. Simply put, a student's disposition, the character of their interactions and experiences with the institution following entry, and the external forces that influence their behavior while in the institution are the primary roots of student departure from higher education, according to Tinto's (1993) departure theory. Although not focused specifically on those who are forced out of their programs, this theory speaks to both individual and institutional influence and recognizes the critical role external forces can play on the behavior of students while in the institution therefore it is taken up as relevant for exploring the circumstances of departure for mandatory leavers. Tinto's theory informed the topics of the survey and interview questions in that they primarily focus on individual expectations, their experiences within the program, and external influences on performance, such as employment. Questions about student attributes were not included, as this aspect of Tinto's theory of student departure does not resonate with a more strengths-based, funds of knowledge orientation taken up in this study.

Research Questions

The following three questions inform the data collection process.

1) How do withdrawn students understand and make meaning of their failure and withdrawal experience in the social services program?

2) What factors do withdrawn students point to as causing their failure? What did failing students do during the failure process to prevent withdrawal?

3) What does the loss of these students in their programs mean for the social work profession in general?

Mixed Methods

Data offered by Seneca College's Institutional Research office show that 711 students left the program early between 2011-2015 and mandatorily withdrawal was the primary reason for departure, with 293 students of the 711 early leavers. Sampling for this study was purposive but also involved some snowball sampling. Seneca College's Office of Institutional Research was approached and agreed to send an email invitation to participate in this study to all 711 early leavers based on their administrative records. The researcher played no role in recruitment of the participants of the online survey nor the qualitative interviews, as participants who identified as being mandatorily withdrawn in the online survey were invited to participate in the interviews based on an invitation screen that was generated by the survey algorithm.

After ethical review and approval from both York University and Seneca College's Research Ethics Boards, all students who left the SSW-affiliated programs before completion between 2011 and 2015 were contacted by email and invited to participate. All names were removed from the survey data by the Office of Institutional Research before being given to the researcher to maintain confidentiality of participants. Only the names and contact information of students who agreed to participate in the interview were given to the researcher after completing an online form consenting to having their contact information passed on to the researcher for communication purposes. For the quantitative aspect of the project, all students who left the

SSW program early were invited to participate in a survey about persistence and their experience in the Seneca SSW program.

All interviewed participants were offered a small honourarium to compensate for transportation costs. All participants in the qualitative dimension of the project were sent their verbatim transcribed interviews for verification. A limited process of member checking was planned for the qualitative dimension of the study, and the majority of participants enthusiastically agreed to participate in this process. Four participants were sent an anonymized draft of my early codes, themes, and hunches; however, none of the students were able to return any feedback or meet with the researcher to engage in the process of member checking over the year engaged in data analysis.

The online Early Leaver survey (see Appendix A) was emailed out to all students who left the SSW-affiliated programs between 2011 and 2015. Two sessions of the survey were administered: One for the 2011-2014 group and then another round six months later to capture the 2015 early leavers. To start with the year of 2011 was important because this was the researcher's first year of teaching with Seneca College and a year where our program's withdrawal practices were yet unexamined and therefore represents a larger pool of removed students than has been characteristic of the past year. It was decided to survey all early leavers, whether they dropped out, stopped out, or were mandatorily withdrawn. This was undertaken in order to avoid the potentially stigmatizing targeting of withdrawn students and thus encourage participation. Students were asked to self-identify as to their leaver status, and when they identified as mandatorily withdrawn, an invitation to a semi-structured interview with the researcher was automatically generated within the survey. Purposive sampling was completed from the data collected from all early leavers, inviting participation in the qualitative element of

the research from those students who identified as mandatorily withdrawn from the SSW program.

Eighty-one early leavers began the survey and gave consent to participate, however only approximately 40-48 participants completed the majority of the survey. A limitation of this method of gathering recruits was that many students either did not realize they were withdrawn students or did not recognize themselves as such. This is exemplified in the interviews that were conducted, as three students identified as "dropping out" or "drop-outs" despite having been withdrawn, perhaps a distinction that is irrelevant to them given the outcomes.

For the qualitative dimension of the study, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted over 18 months involving some students recruited through the survey process (n=5) and some snowball sampling (n=5) with participants who heard about the project from peers who did the survey or from faculty who recommended them to my project once the survey window was already closed. As this was a small-scale study, data processing software was not used for data analysis.

Participants

Of the 48 early leavers who responded to the quantitative survey, their ages ranged from 18-55 years old, with the largest group of respondents between the ages of 18-21 (n=22) and second largest, 22-25 years old (n=13). The majority of the respondents were only in the SSW program for one year or less (n=23), approximately two years (n=16) before leaving, and five left after three years, four left after four years. Confirming what is known about the critical first semester/first year in terms of persistence (Tinto, 1993, 1997), most left before the end of their first semester (n=14), or just after completing the first semester (n=13), therefore 33 of the 41

respondents to this question left before the end of their first year. Six completed their first year and the remainder left in their second year or prior to graduating semester.

Survey respondents self-identified specifically and only as African/African-Canadian, white/Caucasian, Jewish/Caucasian, "Mixed", Hispanic, Bengali, West Indian, Persian, Hindu, Canadian, Pakistani, Filipina, Punjabi and Tamil. Of the 40 respondents to this question, 24 could be considered from racialized identity groups and 14 identified as Caucasian/White. Respondents were primarily single in terms of relationship status during their program and remained so at the time of the survey, however 11 of the 45 respondents were in long-term relationships and only four were responsible for parenting children.

Nine of the 10 interviewees were female; seven of the 10 interviewees were racialized. Two women were in their mid-thirties, one woman was in her 50s; the remainder were between 20-25 years old. English was the first language of all interviewees. Interviews were conducted in private offices on campus or in coffee shops of the interviewees' choice around the GTA.

Instruments

For the qualitative interviews, questions were structured around four major themes:

1) What do the disinvited students reveal about their experience?

2) What effects did the mandatory withdrawal have on their subsequent education and employment experiences?

3) What effects did the experience have on their perception of or attitude toward social work or other helping professions?

4) What could have been done to avoid the withdrawal?

Interviewed students were asked explicitly about their perceptions of their adjustment to the workload and professional orientation, their perceived fit for the program and for the social

services field, whether they sought institutional help or support, and their experiences of support as college students from family/important others.

In terms of survey design, coherent grouping was used (Krosnick & Presser, 2010) with the more sensitive topic of academic performance appearing toward the end. The survey was also relatively brief and narrowly focused in order to reduce respondent fatigue effects on the more important questions of the survey. As with all surveys collecting personal information, it was anticipated that there was some element of nonresponse error (Biemer, 2010) as participants may not have completes information they saw as inappropriate or private, such as questions about income.

Data Analysis Procedures

As an exploratory mixed methods approach, this study did not employ a specific methodology for the interpretation of data. The approach to coding of data as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008) guided the organization and analysis of data. Data collected in the interviews were analysed using open, axial, and selective coding procedures. This method of coding was chosen because it can apply to both the quantitative data generated by the survey in addition to the more traditional use on the qualitative data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Open coding is the first stage where the researcher generates categories based on the data and defines their properties (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). The process of axial coding, a more in-depth analysis, was the next stage of data analysis, exploring relationships between categories and sub-categories. Axial coding involves the recombination of open codes into groupings of similar meaning, such as causal conditions, intervening conditions, or consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 2007) in a process of connecting codes and subcategories into a large axial category. Selective coding was the final coding process whereby core categories identified in the axial coding

process were integrated to begin the formation of a theory of the phenomenon under study, moving the data into a more abstract level or deeper understanding in a linear sequence (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). The analysis at this stage explored the similarities and differences of emerging categories and themes in order to establish some theoretical knowledge using the constant comparison method characteristic of grounded theory. Constant comparison was used throughout all stages of data analysis, and involved comparing new data with existing or established codes, ensuring that the categories achieved an appropriate level of fit with the data collected, and ensuring no outlying cases in order to rise to the level of theory generation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Reflective and theoretical memos were kept at the onset of analysis, including insights, hunches, and early hypothesis but also the effect this data were having on the researcher-practitioner's learning. Selective coding was then undertaken in order to determine core codes. Once the categories were determined to be comprehensive and no new categories emerged, all interview participants were contacted who mentioned they would like to participate in member checking during their interview but none were available. However, all participants received copies of their transcripts verbatim for review before analysis began.

Verification of Findings

In terms of this study's mixed methods design, Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011) suggest that there are several benefits to research that combines both qualitative and quantitative elements. Mixed methods allow the ability to strengthen inferences and the ability to generate better validity and trustworthiness of resulting conclusions, providing a more complete picture than can be yielded from a singular approach. Methods for increasing trustworthiness of the analysis of the data included the use of rich, thick descriptions of the data incorporated in the

final writing. The findings were triangulated with the existing literature related to each category that emerged from the analysis process (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). Auditability was enhanced through the process of describing in detail and justifying all categories and findings, as well as the researcher's views in reflective memoing (Shek, Tang, & Hann, 2005). Participants were also asked to verify their transcripts and were invited to take part in validating researcher findings.

Limitations

It is not the intent of small-scale qualitative studies to achieve generalizability, therefore representative probability samples were not the priority of this study. As this is also a hard-to-reach population that may also be hesitant to participate in a study about a difficult time and process in their lives, especially involving a researcher from that institution, a small sample was anticipated. Therefore non-coverage error (Biemer, 2010) was anticipated yet is not considered problematic in that this is not a quantitative study focused on generalizability. As with all surveys collecting personal information, it was anticipated that there would be some element of nonresponse error (Biemer, 2010) as participants may not complete information they see an inappropriate or private, such as questions about income. Also, the concern that participants may have resorted to satisficing, in that they responded to questions in a biased or ambivalent manner, based on a variety of issues such as not wanting to confront their own accountability in the process or a desire to save face or out of lack of interest or motivation (Krosnick & Presser, 2010).

One major limitation of the survey aspect of this research methodology is the very real potential for significant social desirability bias, where respondents may have intentionally or unintentionally responded in ways that portray them in a positive light (Krosnick & Presser, 2010), or in this case, of little fault. For example, participants of the qualitative interviews had to

self-identify as mandatorily withdrawn in the online survey to have the invitation to be

interviewed. A limitation of this method of gathering recruits was that many students either did

not realize they were withdrawn students or did not recognize themselves as such. This is

exemplified in the interviews that were conducted, as three students identified as "dropping out"

or "drop-outs" despite having been withdrawn, perhaps a distinction that is irrelevant to them

given the outcomes. Also, some level of negative feelings toward the institution or the

researcher-as-previous-instructor may have factored into some survey responses, evidenced by

the one experience with a mandatory leaver who agreed to be interviewed but did not show up

for any of the three scheduled times, nor did she cancel—waiting for the researcher to call to

enquire if she was not going to arrive, well after the established time she set.

As a small-scale exploratory mixed methods study, the results are not generalizable to

other settings or populations. The large, metropolitan college campus context also means that the

findings of this study likely do not translate to smaller, more suburban or rural colleges where

social homogeneity may be greater. As the SSW student population is primarily female, as is the

sample in this study, the transferability may be limited in terms of understanding the failure

experiences of male students. Although the strength of the findings was enhanced by using

mixed methods and triangulating with the literatures, the process of member checking was

unsuccessful in this study. Each participant interviewed approved their completed transcript,

however none of the students who agreed to participate in member checking completed the

process.

Researcher Positioning

Explicitly locating one's self and reflection in terms of position increases the

trustworthiness of the data and its interpretation (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this project, the

researcher's views were not prioritized over the views of participants. Genuine reflection-in-action requires that the researcher-practitioner apply the same critical scrutiny to themselves and their own practice that they are applying to others in the research process (Cohen, Manion, & Morrision, 2011). The researcher in this study is also part of the examination as a faculty member in the program and therefore an active participant in the failure and withdrawal process, or a practitioner-as-researcher position. This study allowed me to peer curiously into my own educational praxis in an attempt to resolve some of the tensions I perceive in this work.

This reflective process necessarily means making transparent the social identity of the researcher, how it is involved in their pedagogical practice, and how it is involved in the research process and results. As the research was undertaken from a Freirian orientation, attempting to achieve a liberatory analytical framework for thinking about mandatory withdrawal of students must also involve an examination of the researcher identity beyond a mere confession of my membership in the dominant identity categories and the "difference" between who I am and the identity of the students with whom I work.

Indeed, it is this identity that formed part of the motivation for the study, as discussed below. To begin, the principal researcher is a white, colonial/settler identity, middle-aged, well-educated, cysgendered, straight woman whose primary language is English, married to a white, middle-aged, well-educated, cysgendered, straight man, both without children and at the time of the research was living in an upper middle-class suburban community on the outskirts of the college campuses involved in the study. I taught at all of Seneca College's campuses, but primarily at our most ethno-culturally and religiously diverse campuses: Seneca@York campus (on York University grounds) and Yorkgate campus (a mall location at the intersection of Jane Street and Finch Avenue in north Toronto). Here is where my identity presents a sharp contrast

in the classroom—I am often the only white person in the room, or one of a few. However when I return to faculty-only spaces, I am one of many white, secular, and native English-speaking faculty, and can usually be certain that I will not be the only white person in the room. When I submitted my failing grades to the promotions system, and when I approved the transcript results of the automated promotions process, I was very aware that as a dominant educator I was acting on the lives of a group of primarily racialized and working class people but had no place to question the implications of this all-too-common practice within the college system.

I am also from a predominantly white, small town surburban upbringing. All told, I have not lived in ethno-racially or linguistically diverse communities, and have not lived in those amazing cities that are migration destinations. I do not genuinely know, nor can I possibly know, about the experiences of being racialized, religiously identified, and possibly othered based on identity markers, their experiences of learning English and speaking with an accent, nor do I have knowledge or significant concerns for financial insecurity or living as part of low-income socioeconomic groups. In essence, I am very different from what the literature of community college students shows is typical—racially, linguistically, and religiously diverse with strong transnational ties and often low-income as compared to their university counterparts. This literature resonates with my experience in the classroom. I am strongly entrenched in the dominant identity group membership. However, I am not different from most of my peers—most of us teaching in the Social Services program represent the dominant markers: white, well-educated, native English speaking, and upper middle-class in terms of financial and job security.

This confession of dominance is made critically reflexive in the results section, as it is engaged in how I previously made meaning of student success and failure, and the withdrawal

process through hyper-rationalizations that left my practice competence and pedagogical orientation in tact.

Insider Research

Conducting this research as an insider presents certain challenges and opportunities. Several of the students who responded to the study invitation were students in my classes and some I knew relatively well after teaching several courses with them. In turn, this means that I also taught a few in courses they failed. As a program coordinator for one of our campuses, I was also the person responsible for talking to a few of these students about their withdrawal. I was very involved in the withdrawal conversation and subsequent re-affiliation of one of the study participants. As an actor in the institution, it was the observing and being part of the very process that ushered these students into the program and then ushered them out when they did not do well enough that motivated this study. In these ways, I am an insider researcher and implicated in the process, which brings opportunities, presents conflicts and ethical issues that had to be managed in order to not distort findings. The opportunity to know some of the students and to have been involved with them as students who were failing their courses meant that I could attest to the challenges they were facing in their personal lives at the time they were in the program. I saw first-hand that some of them did not reach out for any help from instructors or coordinators despite early indicators that their grades were becoming problematic. Because I already had some rapport with a few, the data from interviews was quite rich. In terms of findings, I have kept to the students experiences as the primary sources of data however at times I do offer reflection as a secondary source of data, integrating reflection of my role in the process of which I played a role either as coordinator or instructor. Rich and frequent use of direct quotes to

illustrate findings also ensures the findings remain grounded in the data, and not in my own experience.

The positional power of being both a researcher and previous instructor for some may have been a barrier to open communication or risked social desirability bias. For this reason, all participants were offered an alternate interviewer if they knew me and did not want to speak to me directly. None of the participants chose this option. Data collected from students I had taught was compared to data collected from students with whom I had no prior relationship, and no significant difference in themes was found.

Examining closely problematic aspects of one's practice as an insider researcher could pose challenges within the institution as well. I had the full support of Seneca College and my colleagues in conducting this research, with no interference during the process. This support meant that I was not concerned with presenting the institution or its practices in a negative light and did not interfere with the data analysis process. On a positive note, the research process highlighted the large numbers of students involuntarily leaving by mandatory withdrawal, and our program began to make changes in practice even before the research was completed.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS REGARDING EARLY DEPARTURE

This chapter summarizes the findings of the study as they relate to early leaving/persistence of SSW students, and sets up the context for the following chapter that focuses on the experience of failure and mandatory withdrawal specifically. Ex-students of Seneca's Social Services Worker program who completed the online survey were asked to identify and rank reasons they determined contributed to their early departure from the program, assess their level of fit for the program, describe what help they did or did not access while in the program, and describe what they were doing at the time of survey completion in terms of employment or education. Those who were mandatorily withdrawn and participated in the semi-structured interviews were asked questions elaborating on this data as well as questions about the experience of being withdrawn from the program. The survey tool asked early leavers descriptive questions such as their demographic information, whether and how much they worked while they were in the SSW program, their primary income source, and other such information to determine a comprehensive view of their lives and pressures while in the program. Respondents were asked to provide information about their early departure, such as timing and reasons, and if their grades had anything to do with their leaving early. Students were also asked about their awareness of the professional distinction of the SSW, as well as service use while in the program, and what they were doing in terms of school or employment in the period immediately following their departure. Those who identified as having been mandatorily withdrawn from the program and who participated in the interview were asked questions regarding how they understood and made meaning of their failure and withdrawal, why they chose the social services field, and questions asking them to expand on their understanding of the professional distinction of SSWs, their use of support services while in the program, and where they were in terms of employment or

schooling after their departure that they commented on briefly in the survey (see Appendix A).

Findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data are presented thematically following a

section on descriptive data of the survey participants and profiles of the interviewed participants.

Overall, 40-48 students participated in completing most or all of the online survey, and

10 students participated in the qualitative interviews. Eighty-one early leaver students began the

survey and gave consent to participate, however only approximately 40-48 participants

completed the majority of the survey.

Sample Description

The following sections describe the sample of ex-students who completed the

survey/quantitative portion of the study, and then the sub-sample of mandatorily withdrawn

students who provided data for the qualitative dimension of this study.

Survey participants. Of the 48 students who left their Seneca SSW program before

completion and participated in the survey, 31 had achieved high school diplomas as their highest

level of education prior to entering the SSW-affiliated programs (see Figure 1). Of these 48 early

leavers, most started the SSW program within one year of completing high school, and 15

entered directly from high school. Thirteen began their program one year or more after

graduating high school and three transferred from another post-secondary institution. Most of the

students had at least one parent who had attended college or university (n=27).
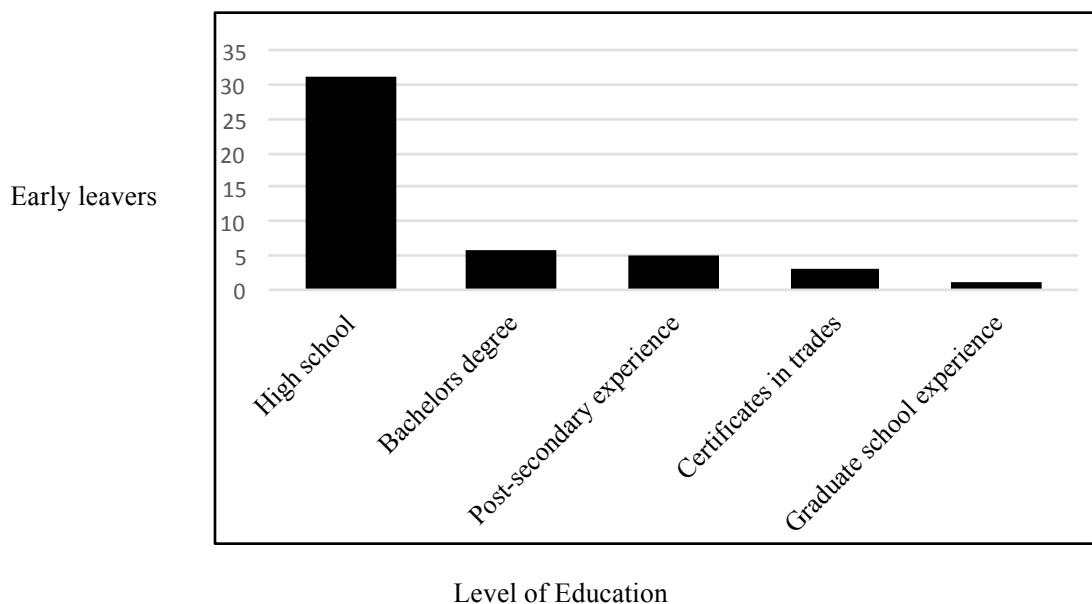
Level of Education

Figure 1. Early leavers' highest level of education

The majority of the respondents lived at home with family/parents while in the program (n=37)

(see Figure 2). Government student loans were the primary source of funds to meet school

expenses, followed by financial support from family and personal savings.

■ Lived at home
■ With partner and/or children
■ Lived on their own
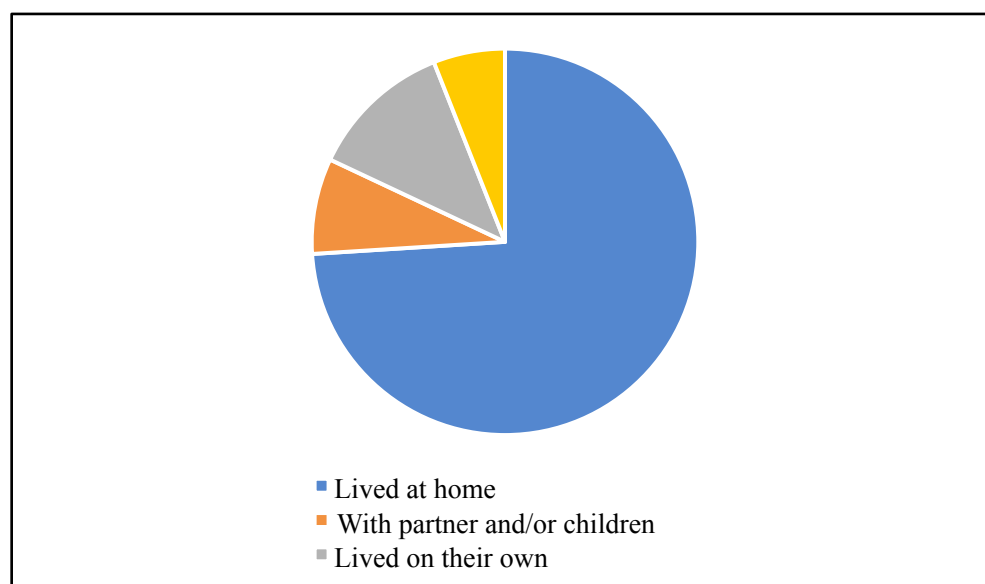
Figure 2. Respondents' living accommodations while in the SSW program.

The majority of students worked while attending the SSW program (n=48), however there was still a significant number who did not engage in paid employment during their program (n=20). Of those who worked (n=28), most worked part-time hours (on average 17.3 hours per week) and seven respondents worked full-time when they were in the program (see Figure 3). This was an important dimension of the survey, as working part-time significantly constrains the time a student has to spend on campus in either academic or social activity, and restricts their use of additional supports or services.
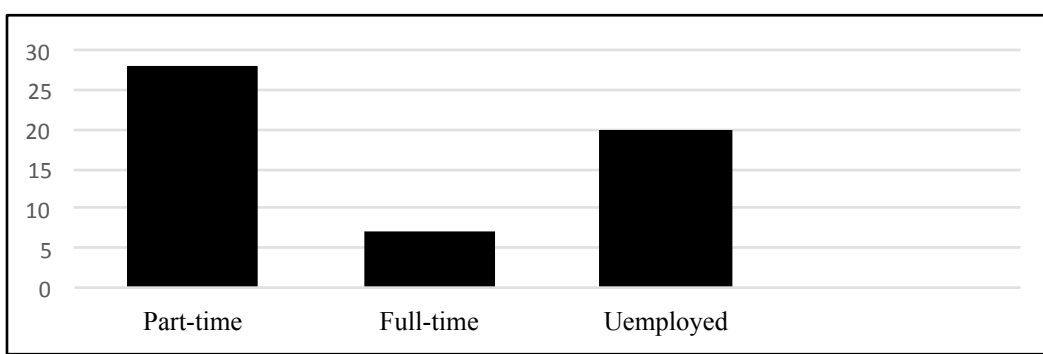
Figure 3. Early leavers' employment status while attending the SSW program.

As noted later, most of the surveyed students did not access any support services when they realized their grades were going to be unsuccessful, often citing a lack of time to access such supports. As the interview data also show, most students noted that for various reasons, they had to leave campus immediately after classes were over, with some choosing to not attend classes in order to deal with personal matters.

Interviewed participants. The following is a detailed profile of each participant in the qualitative aspect of the study. All students' names have been changed for the purposes of this report.

Shanice's goal was to finish something. Having left the program twice in two years, she just wanted finish and show her children she could do it. She was at first mandatorily withdrawn

from the program directly by the researcher, as her program coordinator at the time. She took

some time off, re-affiliated, but after a series of failing grades voluntarily withdrew herself

within the first semester back. Shanice is a Black woman without family here in Canada, and

raising her three young children (all under the age of 5) without other parental help. Shanice

lived in stable social housing, and was not able to work outside of school and family demands.

Having taught her in several courses, Shanice had a hard time attending classes, and when she

did, her active participation was rare, often falling asleep in classes. During her first time in first

semester, she was absent frequently because of a contentious custody court battle with an

abusive ex-partner. Shanice was placed on academic probation in her second semester, and then

failing too many courses, was mandatorily withdrawn at the end of her first year. Shanice took a

semester off, met with coordinators and faculty, and was permitted to re-affiliate in the next

semester. As Shanice said "life just hits you" and she found herself pregnant with her third child

a few weeks into the semester. Making matters more difficult, the father was another student in

her program and informed Shanice that he would not be involved. She tried to keep the

pregnancy a secret from her peers, but was often sick and before long her pregnancy became

obvious to others. At that point, Shanice was already missing classes due to sickness, but now

began to avoid classes because of the stresses of her peers' knowledge of her circumstances and

wanting to avoid daily classes with the father. Still being on academic probation, Shanice

formally withdrew herself from the program. At the time of the interview, Shanice had applied

for re-affiliation to the program, hoping to take a reduced course load and finish her diploma.

She noted that she did not want to leave a legacy of quitting or failing for her three young

children, and as the only person to have gone to post-secondary school in her family, she wanted

to make her family proud and "just finish". She talked about having attending classes, and when

she did, she could not keep focused. From her perspective, she was not struggling with the

academic expectations; she just could not meet the demands, which she understood well.

> But there was no reason for me to fail both [classes] but to be honest, I didn't study
> much. I didn't put my all into it, so when you don't put your all into something, you
> expect the marks you get, so seeing that I failed made me want to push myself harder but
> situation in life got in the way and I just didn't focus the way I should. I didn't
> concentrate the way I was supposed to so I just half did everything and just go along that
> way, you know (Shanice).

Shanice kept trying though and was not going to "give up". She reasoned that these failures have

taught her to appreciate it more and motivated her to complete college. "I thought it through. I

wasn't going to finish but I told myself 'why waste so much money and then have an incomplete

transcript?'"

After leaving high school at 16, Patricia spent a few years in survival jobs before

realizing she would need some schooling to get a better job; any better job. Patricia is a

Caucasian woman in her 30s that questioned her ability to learn in the traditional education

system, as well as our responsibility to teach her how to learn in adult education. She chose the

SSW program almost randomly. Once in the program though, Patricia found it "hard to be there"

and she didn't like coming to class or being on campus. She says that she had no framework for

learning. With no family members having gone to post-secondary school or being that involved

in her secondary education, she says she "never learned how to learn". Aware of the demands,

but believing she lacked the learning capacity to address them, she wrote papers at the last

minute and then eventually just stopped coming to classes altogether: "I don't know how to

explain that disconnect, but there is a disconnect. I'm not going to class, how do I expect to pass

the course? I just didn't want to be there". She laments this as a pattern "I didn't ever do the

fucking work that I needed to do to get places" (Patricia).

Jacob wanted to a job on the front lines of a helping profession as part of a religious calling. Jacob is now a spoken word performer and arts teacher whose lyrics often refer to his educational experiences as a young Black man in Toronto and as a "drop-out" in order to connect with other young Black people disenfranchised by traditional education systems. Jacob had two courses with the researcher, both of which stood out for him. In his field preparation course, Jacob attended every single class, sitting in the front rows and participating actively, yet he did not hand in a single assignment. The second course with the researcher was an introduction to anti-oppressive theory and practice. He reported this was his favourite course as it was the first time matters of social inequalities' structural causes were recognized in a classroom setting. In this course, Jacob scored in the high 90s. Allowed to present his work in spoken word performance essays,

> I was not just learning but it was actually the first time that I had conversations about racism in school. It was the first time I had talked about Aboriginal peoples in schools. It really opened my eyes to the circumstances they were in. It was the first time I was able to not just creatively display what I learned but also to find ways to speak on that in essay format. It was the first time that an essay actually asked me to display my learning versus everything else that was about saying what was already said to me (Jacob).

Jacob was also withdrawn twice from the program, returning to try again, and without success. Jacob had a lot of his plate his first time around with two younger brothers in his charge, one of whom was in conflict with the law. With so much going on in his personal life, success at school lost in the trade-off.

> So when I was in class, and I was listening, actively participating in class discussion, I was understanding all the concepts I was being taught—when I was going home and I was going to my part-time job and going to the volunteer work that I'm already doing with youth and I'm going home where I am taking care of a younger brother—a far younger brother—and I'm monitoring a a second one who was in potential trouble with the law, and [I'm having] a lot of trouble in the home—I don't care to do the work. Um, and so between that and sometimes I was missing grades and this and that…(Jacob).

After some time off and a subsequent re-affiliation, Jacob experienced significant mental health problems that he self-defined as PTSD, and therefore could not intervene on his own behalf to prevent the second withdrawal. Over his time with Seneca and in addition to the pressures he mentions above, Jacob experienced significant traumatic events: muggings, an assault, and the shooting deaths of at least three close friends and family members.

> And I was getting to the point like, I was missing classes and that was like a staple for me before. I was like exhausted, I couldn't sleep, and then when I did sleep I was over-sleeping, and um, I still had the shakes then….I couldn't stop my shakes. And there were points when my sanity was a little lucid and still so at that point I was barely functioning… and so between being at placement, being sick off the time, and then trying to make it to class and then again, dealing with my family stuff, I just can't do this (Jacob).

Lorna had hopes of attending university after her diploma. Lorna is a racialized woman in her early 20s who noted that she experienced persistent untreated depression and anxiety while in the program. Lorna knew she was failing classes which made her "anxious, horrified, worried… all those things". She said she was first placed on academic probation: "Actually I knew that I was failing. I just didn't want to confront myself about it". When she started to receive poor grades on her work,

> I just stopped working all of a sudden. I just, you know, stopped studying, stopped doing assignments, things like that…I didn't do anything, cause I said to myself 'what's the point? It's too late.' Even if I do pass, it's not going to pass all my courses (Lorna).

She experienced some serious mental health problems at that time, noting that immediately after receiving a poor grade on an assignment, she tore it to shreds, and contemplated throwing herself down an open, large stairwell in the centre of the building. Lorna was withdrawn after her first semester. Fearing her parents' reaction, Lorna hid her circumstances from family by continuing to come to campus daily for an entire semester and spending her days in the library. At the time of the interview, Lorna had sought help for anxiety

and depression, and was upgrading some courses in Seneca's continuing education programs in an attempt to be re-affiliated with the SSW program.

Lily wanted to work with older people, and joined the SSW-Gerontology program. Lily is in her early twenties, and identified as racialized when she completed her early leaver survey. She is a quiet woman who became teary while discussing her experience of failing out of her program. She said she had a hard time focusing because of a lot of burdens and obligations at home, and when she found the material too difficult, she could not focus enough to resolve it. Lily had a hard time adjusting to the demands of college life: "I actually did not expect it to be this hard. It's very different". She tried really hard, but she was worried all the time. Her family had moved in with aging and unwell grandparents, and her step-mother had just given birth to a premature baby, so Lily had to take care of everyone. During her interview though, Lily was not able to talk about what really happened to her, something distressing enough that she could not discuss it, and became teary when she tried. Lily was withdrawn after her first semester.

Tamara knew she wanted to be a social services worker, having been involved in social services most of her life. Tamara is in her early 20s and Caucasian, living at home with her mother and two younger siblings at the time. Family problems and obligations soon began to interfere with school: she was "exhausted mentally" and "disconnected from the world" while supporting her family through a loved one's palliative care and eventual death. She had to miss classes to care for her younger brother. "I missed a lot of every one of my classes. I went to every class at least a few times but I still didn't pass the exams because I didn't retain any of the information because I didn't read the book at night when I came home. I didn't have time. I'd listen and like I'd try to absorb as much as I could, but at exam time I didn't know anything". Despite communicating with instructors and getting a lot of flexibility in terms of extensions for

assignments and other help, she knew she had no chance of passing the courses, but "still wasn't ready to admit defeat". Unable to change her circumstances or her academic fate, Tamara was withdrawn after her first semester.

Justine is in her early 20s and identifies as a Black woman in her survey responses. Post-secondary school was always her next step after graduating high school. Justine embodies the process of discovery that higher education should be (Tinto, 1993). Young and unsure, she followed a vocational path based on an interesting volunteer experience she had in high school. Once in the program, she struggled. She said she was bored: "…it just wasn't as challenging to me as I thought it would be". She completed the first semester but with below-expectation grades. In her second semester she started to fail her classes. She said she wasn't sure why. She had a lot going on her personal life she said, and she kept going to classes because of the great social connections she had made. Interestingly though, this whole of group of friends "collectively failed" out of the program. She was too discouraged at the prospect of redoing her courses. Justine's leaving the program was a step toward a passion for the fashion business that she discovered after failing and eventually seeking counselling supports at Seneca. She describes "the click" when she realized she could turn this around, and by doing something else. Justine described her status having left the program after her first year, which is true in effect, however she was withdrawn from the SSW program.

Delores wanted to be a social services worker—she knew this for sure from her own experiences of being on social assistance for a lengthy period and having lived in a women's shelter before. Delores is a Black woman in her 50s living a few hours away from Seneca's campuses. Delores' failure had some obviously structural causes. Having accepted the first college offer she received as a Second Career-funded student (previously a health care aid in

long-term care homes), she didn't realize the campus she had chosen to attend was a 2.5-hour commute from her home, where she was raising her teenaged daughter. The toll of the commute was hard on her, as she described getting in her car at the end of class and crying all the way home. She couldn't spend any extra time on campus, didn't have internet or a laptop at home to work on so would have to only work on weekends at the local library, and couldn't get home to her daughter in time when the school called to say she had not shown up for school that day. She was withdrawn after her first semester. Undaunted, because she "knew I could do it", she enrolled at her local career college and graduated with a high average as a community services worker (an unregulated professional term that is not recognized by the OCSWSSW).

Selena described her identity as "mixed" and in her early 20s. Selena wanted to be in the social services program, so much so that she chose to do the remedial program to upgrade for potential re-affiliation to the program after having been withdrawn after her second semester. Disclosing she had problems with anxiety and depression and some aspects of learning disability, Selena did not pursue the academic accommodation process for these challenges while in the SSW program. Although she did acknowledge she had her fair share of personal problems as distractions, she had a hard time adjusting to the pace and the workload. Selena was withdrawn after her second semester, and offered the General Arts Program (GAP) for remediation. She took the option, not knowing what else to do, "Well, I guess mainly because I didn't want my parents to know."

Alex is an energetic and engaging young woman in her 20s, identifies as Caucasian, and is destined for front-line social services. Alex loved the edges of this work, the street-identified, harm-reduction, low threshold end of this work, but she "just stopped going to classes". She just

couldn't do it. She was getting excellent grades in classes and accolades at placement, but then "just stopped".

> I just was too tired. And even when I would, like those days when I was like 'Oh, I have class' and like my buddies will be there and it's a good class and I love the professor, stuff like that.. It was just "eh, not today. Maybe some other time' and then I'd be at home all day doing nothing and like, 'damn it, this is worse', like this is just as bad, like I should have just left… and then the next day comes and I am so depressed from that whole yesterday that I can't even get out of bed, and then I'm like 'oh man' and it just gets worse from there. 'Maybe tomorrow I'll feel a bit better. Maybe something good will happen.' or I'll, you know, motivate myself to do something, like "oh yeah, I had a shower today' like, 'I can do it' and then it just like, kept spiralling (Alex).

Despite a lot of explicit encouragement and flexibility on behalf of her instructors, Alex just stopped attending and stopped handing in any work. Alex detailed a toxic home environment where she was primarily responsible for an alcoholic mother and felt she had to spend as little time as possible at home and at work so that she could make sure her mother "didn't burn down the house". Although she did not discuss this as part of reasons she failed her courses, when I asked directly if this affected her ability to be successful at school, she said: "Oh yeah, for sure. Yeah, I didn't say it wasn't". Alex was withdrawn from her program after the third of four semesters. This is the most difficult time to be withdrawn from the program, because it means a student has to repeat her entire second year placement again. No hours are credited at placement if the integration course is failed. This is a significant hurdle for students, having to face redoing all 400 hours in addition to their course work. For students who struggled the first time round, this is a serious barrier to eventual completion.

The story that the survey data and interview data reveal about early leaving students is that they had a lot to deal while in the SSW program, much like any other post-secondary student working to pay their way and adjusting to the new demands of college. However the stories of the withdrawn students, elaborated on through the opportunity of the interview, show that

students were very committed to the profession of SW/SSW prior to entry, contended with very serious life challenges although seemed unable to access help available through the college, and had very little connection with faculty and their academic lives. These factors may not be unique to withdrawn students, however the failure and withdrawal process may have contributed to and been a consequence of both their personal pressures as well as their lack of integration socially and academically, which is a vital prerequisite for academic persistence (Tinto, 1997, 2006, 2012).

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Early Leaving Findings

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How students understood and experienced their failure and withdrawal is the focus of the findings presented herein, including their fit for the social services profession, their understanding of what happened that ultimately resulted in their departure, how they responded once the failure process began, and how they perceived the institutional response of mandatory withdrawal.

Self-reported Reasons for Departure

Figure 4 shows the self-reported reasons for departure of the surveyed students. Seven students self-reported that they failed too many courses and therefore were withdrawn from the SSW program. Students who self-reported that they were withdrawn from the program were offered an opportunity to provide some content with their answer. Two refused to comment. Some of the other responses noted a personally difficult time contributed to their withdrawal, including "a string of family tragedies", or being in an abusive relationship and just couldn't "do it", or more generic "personal struggles".
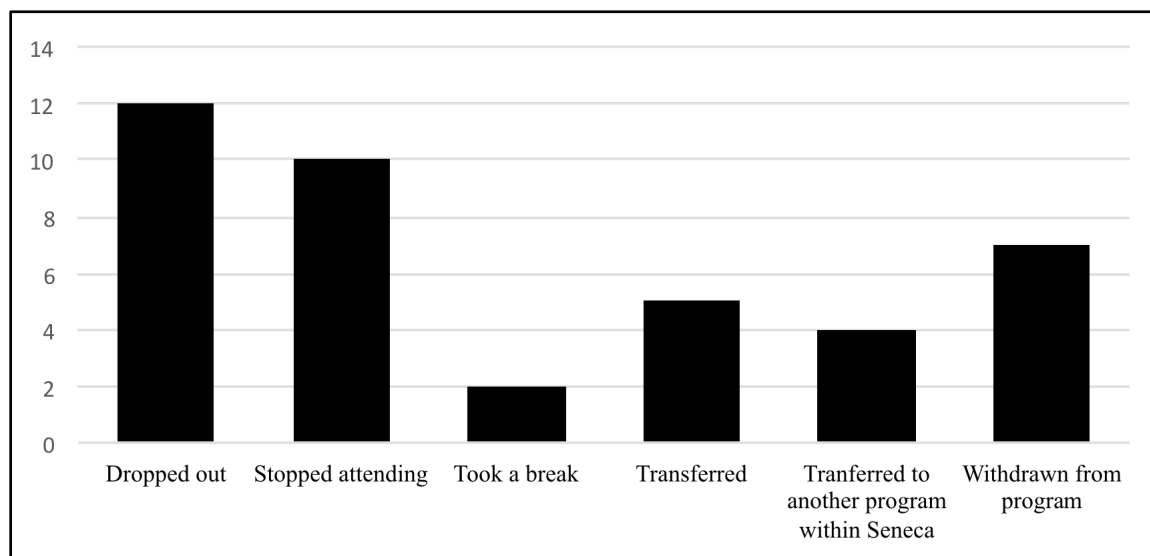
Self-reported reasons for departure

Figure 4. Respondents' self-reported reasons for departure.

For surveyed students who self-reported that they had poor grades, or that their GPA was a factor

in their early departure, those who dropped out of their program early most often cited lack of

interest in classes or the program as the primary reason for their departure. For those students

who stopped out (just stopped attending), lack of interest was the least important factor but had

more variety in their factors, such as employment pressures and lack of support services to help

achieve grades but no real consensus for stop-outs. For those who cited poor fit as the primary

reason they left early, lack of interest was the most cited reason for poor grades. For students

who were mandatorily withdrawn, the primary reason they cited for poor grades was most often

personal/family concerns, employment pressures, and lack of support services in order to achieve

better grades, and three withdrawn noted that their effort was high but that they were just not

able to achieve successful grades (as illustrated in their voices below as well as the following

chapter). For example, for most, they make sense of "what happened? Why did you fail?" by

explaining a confluence of personal obligations and stressors that interfered with their ability to

do well in school. The way they discuss it is that withdrawal just seemed to happen to them, with

some taking personal responsibility for failing and not doing what they needed to do to succeed.

> This is my fault cause of what I was doing. If I had been forward about this, you know, talking to teachers, students, and counsellors about my problems, I would already be in second semester studying for my finals. I have no one to blame but myself for it. Even when I was failing, I said to myself 'I don't' blame anyone but my own'. Because these courses, all the assignments—they are my responsibility. have to do them. I can't blame the teachers for giving me this—I mean, I'm expected to do them (Rose).

Justine explains that she was never really engaged; she found the material boring or not

challenging enough. She failed several courses and repeated some. She notes that she was going

through a lot in her personal life that distracted her focus, and worked two-part time jobs while in

school. As a result, she said just didn't have the motivation to do better on assignments.

Delores had way too much on her plate. Being a single parent of a teenaged daughter,

with a 5-hour commute each class day and no computer or internet at home, Delores was

removed after her first year of heavy effort.

Alex is a textbook example of the super-star student who unravels. With grades of all As

in the beginning and making a significant impression at her placement, Alex begins to be

overwhelmed by what she recounts as significant depression; unable to get out of bed, not eating,

not sleeping for days, she starts to skip classes, not care about assignments, and isolates herself.

Yet she still went to placement, one of the only things that motivated her.

Program Fit

Program fit, or the level to which the program chosen suits the student's interests,

motivation, and capacity, is a primary reason cited for early departure (Tinto, 1993, 2006, 2012).

In terms of institutional fit, for the majority of respondents Seneca and the SSW-affiliated

programs were their first-choice programs for application. Speaking to motivation, 30 of the 45

respondents felt very strongly or strongly that they wanted to be social services workers, 13 were fairly certain and only two were uncertain.

Part of determining fit for a vocational education program is how well the student understands the profession. As there is a professional distinction between social work and its para-professions, specifically the social services worker (SSW) designation, it is quite common for there to be confusion between the two titles and their professional demarcation. This distinction may be an important factor in the decision to attend university for the social work profession or a community or vocational college for the para-professions. Of the 47 respondents to this question, 32 were aware of the professional distinction of SSW and 15 of the respondents were not aware at the time of application. Interestingly, for those who were not aware of the distinction at the time of application (n=15), only nine were aware of it at the time of the survey, the remaining six found out about the difference in their first week of classes. Therefore, a significant number of leavers were not aware of the professional fit dimension of their vocational education prior to embarking on it.

Knowledge of professional distinction
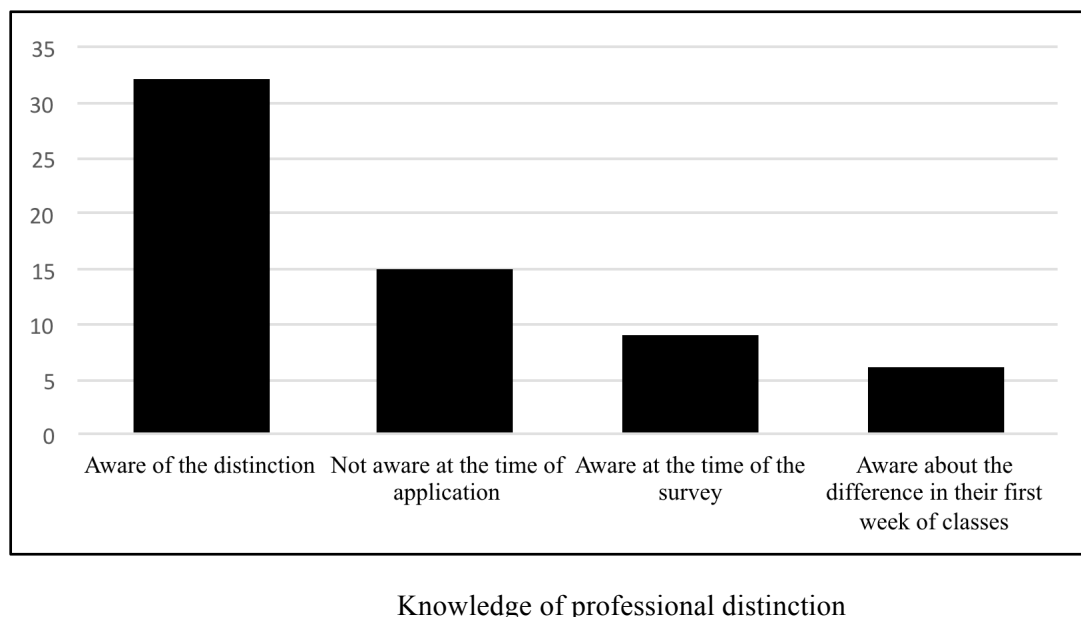
Figure 5. The respondents' knowledge of the professional distinction of SSW.

Fit as a determinant of persistence takes on a unique character in the context of vocational education, where the motivation to persist is influenced at least in part by the attainment of a professional goal. The stronger the link between the goal of completing other goals, such as access to a profession, the more likely one is to persist despite challenges (Tinto, 1993). However the more important this career goal is in terms of value may in part explain why so many students are prepared to leave early for other programs or other institutions, not willing to persist where it could compromise their other valued goals. For the most part, learning of the distinction did not have an impact on the future goals of the respondents at the time. However for some of the survey respondents (n=16) it did have an impact. For most, they wanted the scope of social work as a profession and therefore could not meet their intended career goals at community college. For some the perceived salary differential was a concern.

Students who participated in the qualitative part of this study universally indicated that they were not aware of a distinction between the scope of practice of a social services worker as

limited to that of a social worker; most thought that the terms were interchangeable, and a few even referred to their role as social workers during the interview. Jacob however understood the distinction as being more front-line, less clinical—and "I have resources I can help people with… let me do that.…Once I heard the difference, I preferred it [social services]" (Jacob). For Lorna, she "just wanted to get into the field as soon as possible" and didn't want the time and the effort of university.

At the time of application and of acceptance, interviewed students were not aware of the professional difference between a social worker and a social services worker. All confirmed that they thought they were entering a social work program and would be social workers when they graduated. None of the students knew there was a professional association or regulatory body that regulated either profession. This has unique implications given the importance of program fit to persistence, where students should have full information to consider whether a vocational program is right for them, especially in a college context where there is no room for discovery— students must enroll in a program in order to attend but have no chance to see if it is right for them or matches their expectations, or choose a general arts program. "I literally did not know who I was being. I had no reference whatsoever" (Patricia). Seneca College does not speak to this comparative scope on their recruitment websites. Although discussed at orientation, all ten interviewed students discovered in their first few weeks of classes that they were not going to be trained as social workers, nor would they be able to access the processional designation of social work in the programs that they just entered. It was hypothesized by the researcher that this would have been problematic for students, however most reported that it was not of great consequence for them in terms of their motivation or persistence. For Patricia, it was inconsequential. "I didn't

know the difference. I didn't know anything about it one way or the other. I was just trying to get

something to get a job" (Patricia).

> Yeah, I didn't know there was a difference. And even when I realized, discovered that there was a difference [at orientation], I wasn't put off. I was like 'cool', you know, I was like 'alright'. I'm not going to freak out if I'm not a social worker and I'm a social services worker, like, they're really—like the title isn't so different. It really isn't…there's still a lot you can do, and I wasn't out of all that this was…I don't even know if it's something that I could be part of cause I'm not clinical (Tamara).

> No. It was just like, they're basically—like I don't want to say they are basically the same—they obviously have different like job duties but its under the same umbrella. So for me, it was just like an either or kind of thing (Justine).

For Delores, she was trying to get the fastest route to the field and paid employment and

university was not a consideration for her: the time, the expense, the academic credentials she

did not have in order to enter. When she failed out of community college, she "found a way to

get around it" and went to a private career college instead, where she received a more generic

and unregulated professional title of Community Worker.

For some, they were choosing college over university for pragmatic reasons, therefore the

professional distinction was just part of the deal. "University wasn't an option for me, because I

knew how academically driven it was. I knew the pressure…so, no, I needed to go to college.

University's not going to work out for me…It was practical. So you had the practical application,

which was what I was looking for—being able to do something" (Jacob).

Tamara however had grown up in a context heavy with social services involvement, and

spoke specifically and accurately about the current shift from a more case management approach

to social assistance to its more "rigorous with rules", more clinical, "cut and dry, and very

cutthroat now" (Tamara) and she spoke of wanting to make a change back toward a more caring

approach.

Justine knew a lot of her friends chose SSW:

…because it wasn't academically challenging; it didn't have no math and no long essays—it was more about people and stuff like that, I think everyone thinks that it's something else—but it really isn't. It's different than what you think. And that's what I thought too…because you think it's easy, like 'yeah, it's not that serious' and 'I can get a job out of it' but when you actually take the program it's different from what you think you paid for…I feel like everyone has this idea, like, they're not going to have to work for it. So it's kind of you're just going to come up to the program and you're gonna be a social services worker and you're going to have to work with clients and stuff like that…I think most people think that not a lot of hard work is involved and that's why they choose that program but it's actually a lot of hard work and dedication (Justine).

Leavers were asked about their feelings toward community services/social services work after their departure. Of the 48 respondents to this question, just under the majority (n=23) stated that they had changed their goals and no longer wanted to do this line of work as a career. A good number however (n=17) stated that they still wanted to work in this field; six undertook other related programs to remain in this career field, and only two respondents noted that they were not really committed to working in this field.
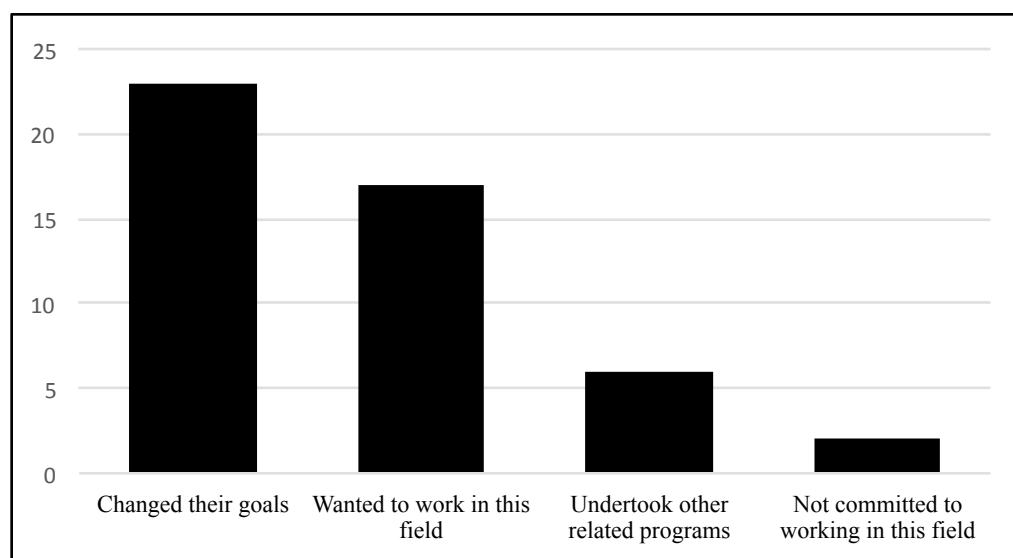
Feelings towards community services/social services work

Figure 6. Respondents' feelings toward social services work after their departure.

Fit took on a much different character though for the withdrawn students of the qualitative dimension of this study. One student "just started looking up programs, like what is this or that—what would work for me, what would work for me and my GPA where I am right now" (Jacob). The interviews with withdrawn students reveal a mix of both students with knowledge of the professional field for which they chose to train, and some without any knowledge or concern about that choice and a range of motivation to pursue SSW as a result.

Six of the ten interviewed students had direct involvement with the formal social services system prior to choosing and enrolling in their programs, and as such had some lived experience of the profession they chose. All six of these students demonstrated that they were highly committed to the SSW program, because they wanted to be SSWs. Four of the five were rather tenacious about their failure experience, all of them trying to get back into the program. All stated that their prior experience with social services influenced their decision to choose the field.

Shanice lived in a local women's shelter for a period shortly before enrolling in the program, and as a single mother has used social assistance until she received student financial aid, and currently lives in social housing which means she continues to have a municipal community support worker assigned to her family even while in the program. Her experience of being in the shelter motivated her toward SSW. "I seen—I used to be in one to be honest. And just to see different people in different situations, it made—it always makes me—that's what made me want to come and start the program. It's somewhere I want to be and help…the environment is not the best, but they say if you don't go through struggles in life, it makes you appreciate it" (Shanice).

Tamara had extensive social services involvement in her life, recounting several stories when as a child she and her younger brother were kept occupied in the social assistance case worker's office while her mom went to job interviews.

> No, I wanted to be a worker, I really did. Because my mom, my mom was a single mom before she met my step-dad and I spent my entire life in social services, so like full circle… I spent my whole life being part of that circle so I knew and understood it very well. I wanted to be a social worker because I thought I could do it, because I spent my entire childhood around them, and I understood it…I know what I'm getting into already…from having been part of the system throughout my childhood (Tamara).

Perhaps this certainty contributed to her maintaining her active status in the program despite poor grades and attendance. Ultimately however, Tamara accepted her withdrawal and did not try to re-enter the program, unaware of the steps or even that it was an option.

Delores, a mature student, recounted a life of many years relying on social assistance and some time spent in women's shelters. She had negative experiences in the social assistance system "I didn't like what I see. I… because I think it can be done differently." She was going to do things differently based on her lived experience.

Selena also grew up with a worker, although she was not sure what kind of worker or where they worked. She recounts a worker that would follow her family's life, and sometimes visit her at elementary and secondary school. She too said she had very few positive experiences with these workers and wanted to make sure other young people had a better experience than she had had. Her family also lived primarily relying on social assistance and found the "checking up" difficult.

Alex too had some lived experience of social services supports as she lived with her mother during many attempts at sobriety and relapse. She did not though talk about those as motivating experiences, but more confirmation: "I just know I'm gonna be good at this."

These previous social services experiences constitute lived knowledge of social work, contribute to a student having a sense of what they are going to do once they graduate, and helps convey a sense of fit for the program in that students knew well the professional role they were trying to attain. Given most seem to struggle with personal burdens and time constraints that interfered with their ability to adjust to the academic demands of post-secondary, community college may also have been a better fit for these students—as many viewed university as too rigorous, too demanding, or too long. For some, a social services worker diploma was considered a good compromise for something they really wanted to do. For Lily and Shanice, the social services program was a better option over the more rigorous nursing program that they had truly wanted to pursue. For Jacob, social services was the salaried option for his more spiritual calling to serve his community as a youth pastor. For Patricia, she just needed a college diploma to get anything better than the jobs she was doing after dropping out of high school.

Fit and Student Capacity

Fit also speaks to academic capacity. Jacob was looking for fit between what he wanted to do and what he could do based on his GPA as an indicator of his capacity. Jacob "just started looking up programs, like what is this or that—what would work for me, what would work for me and my GPA where I am right now. I didn't think I was going to get in to the program at first, because of when I submitted my application. So I submitted it way later than February. So I was surprised I got in, but I was able to pull my grades up by the end of my last semester" (Jacob).

Lorna was "100 per cent committed" to the field because she really wanted to help the community but her fit was more about adjustment. "It was the right choice for me and I'm glad I picked it, but like I said, I wasn't prepared for myself….the responsibility, the planning, the studying, just everything that comes with college and university" (Lorna). Selena had known

"for years" that she wanted to be a social services worker and she too noted she was and is totally committed to being one, "but there were a lot of distractions" (Selena).

Tamara thought it came naturally to her, and the program content confirmed she was doing the right program:

> You know, every time someone had a problem: home, relationship, whatever—everyone came to me, so I thought 'ah, this is going to be easy'. I was extremely surprised about how different it actually was….I knew that this was something I was good at…So I knew that these courses—I'd made the right decision" (Tamara).

For Tamara the timing was a bad fit. "I just think I applied to school at the wrong time, like, maybe I should've waited a couple of years, because if I waited until like, now, like if I applied now it would've been fine, right?"

For Delores, she was sure she wanted to work in social services—she was already educated as a health care aide, knew she liked the social services aspect of working with people better than the health care side, and she knew university was not for her in terms of length, expense, and rigour. For Delores though, Seneca King City was a bad fit—a 4-5 hour commute each day of classes is unreasonable given the hours of academic demands necessary and the social integration needed for persistence.

Because her family expected her to attend college right out of high school, Justine felt forced to choose a program earlier than she felt ready. Having volunteered in youth work a little bit, and with a family member in that field, she liked the idea of doing youth social services work but was not certain. A two-year program focused primarily on a vocation also didn't allow her that important process of discovery.

> But that was expected, like I said, from my parents and stuff like that. I personally wanted, um, a year off just to figure it out because I didn't really know from high school what I really wanted to do, so I felt I needed a year off, and they were like, 'no, you have to go to school' so I went to the SSW program and at that time, I had recently had a [pause] I broke up with my boyfriend, right around that—we were going through some

issues. And not all of us [referring to her friends] knew what we wanted to do but we had to like, pick a program (Justine).

Fit was also demonstrated through the interviewed students' inherent social justice orientation. The interviewed students demonstrated some very unique social work values and inherent respect for principles of social justice in their stories. Although a minor theme, their stories and explanations gave the impression that a social justice-oriented helping profession was a good fit for them in terms of values or perspectives.

Doing her field placement at The Works, a harm reduction-based needle exchange program in downtown Toronto, Alex had many stories where she displayed obvious enthusiasm for working with marginalized populations in what can be personally challenging environments in terms of their nascent anti-oppressive practice skills. Alex lit up:

> When I [first] went into the agency some clients had come up to me and they were talking about how um, this one trans woman came up to me and she was like 'Girl, what the hell are you doing here? You're too pretty!' and I was like, 'you're too pretty!' and she was like, "baby, I got this burn from my baby daddy from the crack pipe' and I was like "oh, I'm so sorry, you know they have nurses here?' and she was like "girl, I know, I wanted to know why you're here" [laughter] and they told me like, other people, like they stand in the corner and they wait outside to be called, and they come in and say 'hey, I'm here. I'll be outside', like, how can you expect to get a placement if you can't even interact with the clients, right? They said then and there that I got it and I was, like, so happy" (Alex).

Jacob was looking for the anti-racist perspective he was writing and performing about, but did not expect to find it in social services worker program, which helped the program fit him. He also had a powerful experience at his field placement, which was a low-threshold faith-based street drop-in centre in downtown Toronto.

> Man, it was one of the most eye-opening experiences of my whole life. Just the raw…the rawness of it. It was like, like I have never been in active service with homeless people before—like I grew up in an impoverished area so I was like, like I was used to poverty—poverty was one thing—but to be homeless, to be waiting for government cheques all the time, to be living—to be face-to-face all the time with people who were gay, trans, who didn't identify on the gender binary, that was a first for me, and it was the

best thing that ever could have happened to me…to be able to be in that environment and learn more about those communities and then be like, 'you know what? I need to step back from some of my boundaries and my world views here and broaden my scope on how I see things and other people'—that was the best thing. For me to be in a genuine environment where you are serving people and treating them with dignity and respect, I think, and the humility that comes with that (Jacob).

Patricia demonstrated critical self-reflection of her social location and its currency. Referring to being in the field in some capacity although she does not hold a credential:

I'm just fucking lucky. Because a lot of other people could have failed and not gotten to the place that I am in. I also have to identify just because this is an interview and we are talking about different things, I have to assume because I identify as a white woman with tonnes of privilege, I'm assuming that I am also getting to certain places because of that (Patricia).

As noted earlier, Lily went into gerontology social services work because she was concerned about witnessing seniors not being treated well or their vulnerability being exploited, and she wanted to change that reality. Most of the withdrawn students had compelling reasons for being in the SSW program and compelling reasons why their lived experiences were not only a good fit, but also mirrored the social justice and anti-oppression orientation of the program despite their brief and troubled participation in it.

Fit and Failing

The failure process does seem to change though in light of the important dimension of fit: when fit is poor, the process seems to follow the common sense logic of a student making meaning of the failure to inspire a different direction. Even though she followed the trajectory of failure, perhaps because her fit was poor with the program, her result was different from the others. Justine says she and her circle of friends failed most of their courses and either were kicked out or dropped out. She failed courses because she was bored; it wasn't challenging her. "I guess I just wasn't interested in it, so I didn't put the time and the effort towards it so I kind of

was just like 'oh, yeah, I'll do better next time'. Like, I wasn't focused. It wasn't interesting and I was also going through a lot in my personal life" (Justine).

She said that the failure experience didn't make her question her capacity for post-secondary education. She chalked it up to a lack of interest and too many pressures/distractions and figuring out in the process that she didn't really want this career. Immediately after being withdrawn, Justine sought out career counselling services at Seneca, and was enrolled in a fashion business program for the very next semester and said she was doing really well in it. In this way, she thinks the failure process helped her find her fit.

> I think it did help me cause I knew that I didn't want to go through that experience again in terms of failing, and like, just struggling with friends. I didn't want to repeat that, so with this program I made sure that I did everything. I didn't do what I did before—so attend classes, I do all of the assignments on time, focus, take notes, get all the textbooks, and do everything in this program that I didn't do in the other one [SSW] (Justine).

Institutional Factors Related to Students' Experiences

Surveyed students and interviewed students were asked what the school or program could have done to help them through to completion but those who did not something could have been done speak to better communication. Most reported nothing could have been done better. For example, "Nothing. I really liked my professors and the school. I really left for personal reasons" (surveyed student). Students who dropped out placed more responsibility on the school/program, noting the need for better communication about performance in general or more understanding. One mandatorily withdrawn respondent noted: "They could have been more understanding and show a little bit of sympathy and see I was trying to make an effort instead of being rude and ignorant. After all, they are getting paid to help students and to make them achieve their goals" (anonymous surveyed participant). No more detail was offered, but one is left with the impression that she likely did speak with someone about her situation and found the response

unhelpful but also lacking compassion toward her unique situation. It is interesting to note that

this same student booked three separate interview appointments with the researcher and did not

show up for all three without cancelling or explanation.

Several students discussed Seneca or the SSW program's need for better communication

or follow-up with students who might be failing. However, withdrawn students, comprising six

of the 10 respondents to this question, seemed to defer to personal responsibility. For example,

"No, it was more my problem than theirs"; "There wasn't really anything I think they could have

done specifically to help myself as my issue wasn't something anyone could really help with";

"They were good. It was my fault for slacking".

Support services use as an institutional factor. Of the twelve respondents who noted

grades were a factor in their early departure, three students said they accessed support services

and programs at Seneca once their realized their grades were not ideal (two who dropped out and

one who was mandatorily withdrawn). The others responded that they did not seek services or

assistance at Seneca. Of those who did not seek out services, some said that there was no

particular reason why they did not, others noted their disinterest in the program or that they had

already decided to leave the program; others noted they did not have time in light of their

personal problems. Of note, two of the withdrawn students reported a struggle with accessing

supports: one said "I felt scared I wouldn't succeed" and "…it was a mental struggle that held

me back from getting the help I needed" (survey respondent). Looking specifically at the seven

withdrawn students who answered this question, six of the seven did not access any support

services through Seneca. The one withdrawn student who did access supports did so through the

career counselling services, and they helped her to see that a different program was a better fit

for her (Justine). None of the interviewed students blamed the institution for not providing

enough supports or services in light of their difficulty, but rather took full responsibility for not making use of available services.

When asked why they did not access support services at Seneca when they realized their grades were problematic, the withdrawn students noted that they "didn't' bother" for several reasons. The withdrawn students primarily stated that a lack of time was the reason given their personal struggles, so it was not that they did not seek help, it was more that they could not spare the time or effort to get it. Others decided it was too late for them to turn things around. Given that several of them were experiencing significant mental health challenges simultaneously with their academic decline, their mental health problems may have contributed to an inability to reach out for help.

Looking at the institutional response, surveyed students who identified that their grades were problematic were asked if anyone from Seneca reached out to them about the situation. Of the 12 students who responded to this question, four of the 12 students responded that either a faculty member or coordinator did speak to them about their failing grades: three were withdrawn students and one was a student who identified as having dropped out. When a student is withdrawn, a code is placed on their student account that they must speak to their program coordinator for any information, so students who were surprised by being withdrawn could only speak to a coordinator about their situation and they would have had to reach out to get that information. Of the 12 respondents, only three reported that they chose to reach out to someone at Seneca to ask about their options. Two were helped by way of switching to a remedial general arts program and another into a program with different GPA requirements, both at Seneca. The other reported that she did reach out and was told her only option was to repeat courses, which she was not willing to do and subsequently left the program and Seneca. Of particular concern

though is the eight students who had no conversation at all about their situation or their options and then left early. All 12 students responded that they also did not talk to friends, family or any other person about their academic situation. Due to the limitations of survey data, it is not known why they chose to keep this to themselves but what can be confirmed is the isolating experience, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Student Perception of Faculty Role

"You guys need to be your profession while teaching how to do it" (Patricia). Patricia believes she was academically under-prepared coming into college and having dropped out of high school when she was 16. She didn't even do the General Education diploma (GED) because she entered college as a mature student. Speaking to both the professional responsibility and capacity of social work but also the expected teaching expertise of professional social workers-turned-instructors:

> I recognize that college is something that's supposed to be about being an adult and self-directed learning, I mean, so—it seems crazy to say that you know, you need to wrap yourself around me and like, you know, talk to me about things, that seems weird, because college should be about self-educated learning. But uh, between I guess it's no longer a cohort of ones that stop being in Grade 13 or whatever but younger people keep coming into college. I don't know. I think you might have to have a high school mindset—where you do need to wrap around them and say 'what do we do?' Because I remember…. I was a lost cause…That's really fucking complicated. But that's really weirdly awkward that you guys have to figure out how to be social services workers or social workers while you are teaching that—I don't know what to say other than that's what you need to do, I guess… You are going to get people like me that need to be taught at the very basic level. Let's just hope that the very basic level is that they need to be taught how to learn, and beyond that there are so many other things that draw people to social services, right? So it makes sense that you guys need to be your profession while teaching how to do it (Patricia).

Shanice did not think that we had a unique duty as instructors because of our social work backgrounds because "she was the one" who failed "because at the same time if you don't ask for help, how can they offer you help?" (Shanice). Lorna didn't see us as having any unique role

or responsibility either "…because this is my fault cause of what I was doing. If I had been forward about this, you know, talking to teachers, students and counsellors about my problems, I would already be in second semester studying for my finals. I have no one to blame but myself for it" (Lorna).

Selena "didn't really think about it" however the reality that she was a student whose anxiety and isolation struggles were so obvious yet the process of academic accommodation was not invoked informally by any instructors, the fact that she went an entire year without pursuing the process is disturbing.

Delores was angry at Seneca for taking her money and not seeing or acting on that she would not likely be successful given her commute time and mature status. She saw SSW faculty as having a unique role and responsibility in this regard.

> It's hard I guess to give everyone one-on-one time, I guess finding the time. Even before they [students] get there. Find out what's going on in their lives before they start the journey and you have to tell them "you're not going to make it" or they're not going to make it. You know?

She saw us as having that insight, that analysis, to know when a student would fail. She also thought that we would never allow a similar situation with our clients.

> You would think that because if you finish your course and you start working, you're in the field that you would be actively helping your clients. And you have to find the means to help your clients. They [Seneca] didn't look for any other means! …I guess they are teaching us one, and then doing something completely different… You're teaching me ethics, but you don't have the ethics around helping me out.

> Alex recognized this dual role as an:

> …interesting grey area—yeah, you're in social work and yeah you deal with crisis, and working with people with depression or anxiety or addiction or homelessness or you know, abuse and violence and things like that but at the same time you are also a professor, you are a teacher, you are with the school—you are teaching, so it's like—it's a funny thing to be a social worker and also be a professor, because it becomes like 'I want to help you but I can't' (Alex).

She also directly spoke to the gatekeeping function of professional instruction:

> I had some professors… like, that were like 'you are the boss'! Like 'if you can't do the readings, how the hell can you expect that when you have a client caseload… like don't come to class if you're not even going to do the reading, stuff like that…. She lost her shit. She's like 'how the hell can you guys expect to be in this field and you can't even do a 5-page reading, like, the first reading?' She's like 'I wouldn't want any of you' and the whole class was like 'oh my god' (Alex).

Whether or not social services faculty have a unique obligation to struggling students because of our social work professional background and knowledge, our role as faculty in supporting individual students in the same as any other educator. Discussed in the next chapter, it is clear that some faculty offered a lot of support to students when they are not doing well. Whether students are in a position to take advantage of extensions or accommodations is discussed in light of the experience of the failing process and subsequent student withdrawal.

Incongruence and Isolation

Incongruence (the perceived lack of fit between the student and the institution/program, e.g. a perceived mismatch in the skills or abilities of the student and the demands of the program) and isolation (defined as the absence of opportunities for social integration) act as significant roots of student departure (Bensimon, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 1997). Incongruence and isolation are significant summarizing themes of the student experience of early departure and mandatory withdrawal from their SSW program. Findings demonstrate that there was a significant level of professional fit for early leaving students in that most had a strong understanding of social services from a personal history of social service use or involvement, and the discovery of the professional distinction between social work and social services worker did not seem to deter their commitment to the field, some even preferring the more community orientation.

However, findings also demonstrate that withdrawn students were over-burdened by life obligations and experienced a continuum of mental health concerns while in their programs. As a result, they did not have the opportunities for integration and their academic experiences in the SSW program were characterized by significant isolation from social and academic college and campus life. Incongruence though is an interesting dimension, as it casts responsibility upon both the institution to engage and the student to take advantage of opportunities presented by the institution. This could be due in part to personal constraints such as time, psychosocial constraints such as stress or mental health problems, but could also speak to a more social dimension, where the student is unable to take opportunities for integration and improve their incongruence—and this speaks more to isolation.

The quantitative survey data revealed that many early leavers left for reasons of fit, as many discovered their interests were not in SSW or that their life demands made timing of attending college too difficult. Their leaving early of their own volition resolves any incongruence they experienced. Isolation in the form of a lack of human contact with Seneca or communication about their exit and options is concerning. The survey data, enhanced by the qualitative interview data, revealed that most students left without much contact or intervention with the college. Most prominent though in the interview data, Seneca College as an institution is implicated in the process and experience of failure beyond the policy and procedure withdrawal, but for what the automated process means in light of integration of the student with the institution—the lack of dialogue about the institutional decision, and the lack of interaction with protective services designed to prevent this phenomena.

Isolation is a root of student departure (Tinto, 1993), usually conceived of as a real or perceived lack of contact or relationship with others in the institution, whether it be faculty, staff,

or other students. Indeed, faculty-student interaction is associated and to some degree predictive of student GPA success and persistence at both community colleges and universities (Deil-Amen, 2011; Mertes, 2015; Wirt & Jaeger, 2014). Peers present a strong buffering effect, providing both academic support as well as social inclusion—however many students fail to make strong connections with peers in this entirely new environment early enough to make a difference (for example, most early leavers leave in their first semester). A lack of social integration is a critical ingredient in the lack of persistence. Enhancing the survey data that suggested some degree of student isolation, findings from the qualitative interviews illustrate that most of the withdrawn students could not remember their faculty's names and had little interaction to speak of, indicative perhaps of a less-than-ideal relationship or contact level with instructors and other staff (discussed further in the next chapter).

For some students, their isolation carried over from other aspects of their lives (e.g. Lorna noted that "I'm a loner" and Patricia did not attend classes because she felt socially uncomfortable with other students) or reflected the much more systemic matter of the challenges posed for some students (e.g. those who are single mothers, and are often isolated by the intense demands of parenting). For others it seems characteristic of their experience of their academic life. There are many isolating variables during the transition to higher education, rendered even more crucial during that critical first semester/first year (Tinto, 1993), beyond personality or personal circumstances. These include whether or not students see others like them in the institution, and this is where a metropolitan campus may be a protective factor, as students who would be deemed marginalized or non-traditional by racialization or religious affiliation, see that the campus is comprised predominantly of students of colour and visibly multiple ethnic and religion-affiliated students. Other factors include the degree to which the institutions welcomes

and provides integrative activities to new students. A particularly isolating factor of large metropolitan campuses such as Seneca College, is that most are non-residential campuses, where most students are therefore commuting several hours or great distances. Several characteristics of large community colleges may also hinder social integration between faculty and students, such as large classrooms, large teaching loads, a predominance of sessional faculty in the program who are briefly on campus and have other professional roles to maintain outside of the college, and the reality that community college instructors do not have teaching assistants, who would provide a valuable role not only in terms of workload support so instructors could spend more time with students, but also as peer mentors/supports for students.

To summarize, fit was a strong indicator of persistence in complicated ways. Many early leavers in the SSW program cited leaving early for reasons associated with fit, and others appeared to have strong fit for the nature of the program which may explain why they hung on so long despite failing experiences (discussed further in the next chapter). Also, these findings demonstrate that for the most part, early leavers did not have or experience some of the core fundamentals to support their persistence, namely congruence and support, or academic and social integration as Tinto's work on student departure (1993, 1997, 2012) recognizes as critical to support completion. The findings thus far also have significant implications for social work vocational education. Students recognize we are hired for our social work practice background, and some expect that this background will infuse our teaching practice, informing a better response to those who struggle through our programs. They don't seem to expect social work roles or supports from us, but do expect that the understanding of complex factors that impact people's success be applied in a way that better supports them as people in our classrooms and as students.

CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS REGARDING FAILURE AND MANDATORY WITHDRAWAL

The following chapter discusses findings as they relate specifically to students who were failing out and eventually withdrawn from their SSW program by the college. The experience of multiple course failures and withdrawal involved several disconnects that deserve examination as they relate to understanding what happened as these students failed out. A significant theme across all of their experiences was that multiple failures seem to have a paralyzing effect on students, almost sweeping them along in a tide they can't reverse until it ushers them out the door. The failure process involves students caught up in the trajectory of failure and eventual withdrawal uninterrupted.

In terms of what happened to these students, and the processes that are at issue, it seems that students who were eventually withdrawn began their programs in earnest, experienced difficulty, and then were swept up in an escalating process of failure and simultaneous inability to do anything about it. The process though seems to have some similarities for all of these students. The process of failure leading to withdrawal, although gradual, seems to come as a surprise for all of these students. Although aware they were failing some assignments or some courses, that were largely unaware they could fail out of the program or that it would come so quickly.

> Well, I knew I was going to fail… I knew it.. because I wasn't stupid. I knew that there was no way I could retain any information. I did it in good faith but I knew I wasn't going to pass. Like, I knew. I didn't expect the letter so fast… (Tamara).

For others, when they did fail, it seemed logical or common sense.

> Passing is good, but when you fail it make you feel like you didn't do much. It still brings me down, failing, but like I said, when you don't push yourself the way you're supposed to, you can't expect (Shanice).

For some, there was denial. "Actually, I knew I was failing. I just didn't want to confront myself about it" (Lorna). Students did not seem to be aware though of when the process of failure leads to withdrawal. For most it seemed to unexpected.

Most of the students found out they were withdrawn in un-contextualized ways. They found out when the received a letter from OSAP that their funding was denied due to not being able to improve their grades since receiving a warning letter, or by trying to find out their new schedule for the semester and not seeing one, thus being redirected to their transcripts where they would read a comment code about being withdrawn and recommending they speak to their program coordinator.

Alex did not learn of her removal until she arrived on campus to pay her tuition in person when she found she was blocked from doing so online. Nothing she saw on her online account indicated she could not enrol in her fourth and final semester, so she travelled to campus to have it done manually, unsuspecting of her removal despite her acknowledgement that she had failed several courses and was not sure at the time of her grades at all.

Most knew they were failing, but did not seem to know that this process would have a time limit or would be acted on by the institution—they seem to just keep going. Referring to passing a core prerequisite course, Shanice notes:

> I passed. I'm passing but I'm still failing as I'm going along so, you have to know that, like failing should push you to do better…Because I could have dropped out after first semester, to be honest, but I still try to see how far I can get along and then I wind up in a situation that I didn't expect it at all. It was all a surprise. I knew I was gonna fail—I knew it. Because I wasn't stupid. I knew that there is no way I could retain any information. I did it in good faith, but I knew I wasn't going to pass. Like, I knew. I didn't expect the letter [from OSAP) so fast because I, I thought that the department heads and the actual students themselves, like they would keep in contact (Tamara).

Struggling with personal problems, mental health problems, and learning barriers that were confirmed in high school but without the benefits of the academic accommodations process in

post-secondary, Selena was caught off-guard. "I guess I wasn't surprised when I found out, but like, I wasn't expecting it. I was still hopeful, you know?"

Students' Accounts of Their Failure

Most saw failure as the logical consequence of being unable to adjust to the academic demands of community college in light of their personal distractions and obligations. When asked why she failed her courses, her explanation reveals the complexity of both academic and social integration to navigate.

> I think that I was really committed but there were a lot of distractions. I think it was a mixture of both, really [personal life problems as well as problems of a social nature on campus]. Like, I was really new to the college environment so I didn't know what to expect and there was a lot to do (Selena).

Selena had her fair share of challenges. She had un-addressed learning and mental health challenges interfering in her SSW program, had significant social anxiety and did not interact with other students or faculty, and had personal life problems that were distracting her.

> Justine likens the process of failure and staying in the program to a relationship.

> I feel like it's similar to relationships. Like, you know your relationship's bad and you just stay because it's comfortable, right? It's comfortable so you stay, and you don't know what's going to happen next and you're scared. I guess it's the fear of not knowing what's going to happen next so you just stick with it, stick with it and try to make it work.

Delores was not only surprised at the impersonal process, she didn't know that withdrawal was even a possibility.

> I saw people leaving in their first semester, but the possibility of me… no. I thought I would have been brought into the office and be told, you know, this is this, and this is that, and maybe try again another time or do something else or whatever but not just tell me on Blackboard "Don't come back"…

For some it was a wake-up call. Tamara recounts receiving the letter from OSAP that they were withdrawing her funding due to poor performance. At this point, Tamara was not

aware she had been removed from the program but the OSAP letter of no funding was a de facto

dismissal, as she could not return without financial assistance. So her letter was her wake-up call.

> Well yeah, it wasn't like, obviously when I read it it wasn't like getting a birthday card. You get that little drop in your stomach, you know, like when you hear bad news. And it's just like [heavy sigh], I guess it just solidified that I couldn't do it and it just kind of like you know, was like, that last like 'ah, you could do it'-type thing, right? Because I really tried to do it (Tamara).

When Jacob was required to see his program coordinator as a result of the mandatory

withdrawal code,

> He was like, "so what happened?"... And I was like, at that time I didn't have the full understanding to be like, 'Look, I'm suffering from these things, like mental health. I don't live in a culture, I don't come from a culture where that's acceptable. I'm a Black male, I'm Jamaican. I don't come from a culture where that's accepted at all…So for me I was just like I can't… I couldn't physically or mentally or emotionally just be in a place where I could operate at school, so he was like 'You know what? Take some time. I have to fail you, since you failed this other one, but take time—Just go, take a semester, come back in the fall, and we'll see what's up' and I was 'alright, I accept that" and so I pulled out of second semester from there…

> I'm doing really well, and so I was happy I left when I did for the sake of my mental health, um, I also look back and think if I had had, whether the humility, or the language or the ability to talk about the things I was going through while I was there, and find ways to work through that… I would have been able to finish with a diploma and at least have a backup plan if I need it, right? (Jacob).

Above Jacob refers to have "left", not having been forced to leave. Students do not use the

language of the institution in that for the most part they did not use the term withdrawal but

rather a few refer to having to drop out or being forced to drop out.

> Yeah, I was getting anxious, horrified, worried [at her bad grades]… all those things. Then sooner or later [the program coordinator] himself told me that you can't go into the second semester so I had to drop out (Lorna).

> Justine's interview revealed that she saw her situation as having pulled herself out of her

program to take stock and self-reflect on her career goals, and switched programs. Perhaps she

did not realize she was withdrawn, if she never checked her transcript (as this seems to be the

only way students learn of their removal) because she was thinking of leaving the program anyway. "I feel like a lot of people want to pull out, they just don't know how" (Justine). For others, the process of failing stopped them in their tracks and they realized too late. After receiving failing grades in most of her class assignments in her first semester, Lorna was asked what she did to try to improve or get back on track: "No, nothing. I just stopped working all of a sudden. I just, you know, stopped studying. Stopped doing the assignments, things like that... I didn't do anything cause I said to myself 'what's the point? It's too late. Even if I do pass, it's not going to pass all my courses'" (Lorna).

> "I'm kind of afraid to look at my transcript because it's probably going to be all zeros and fails. I did see something telling me to go see the coordinator or whatever, but I didn't. I just shut down. It was too much at the time. I just can't deal with it" (Tamara).

This is referring to academic probation, and Tamara "shut down". As a result of inaction and no improvement, Tamara was eventually withdrawn from the program. "I didn't think I was gonna [survive]—when it happened—because when you're in it, in that situation—you can't even think about it. I guess you just take everything one day at a time" (Tamara).

For Alex, mental health problems both kept her in denial and stopped her from being able to act on her own behalf, even when offered extensions and accommodations by her faculty.

> …that feeling, but then it felt—I would just keep procrastinating. Like, I can't get out of it. Like, I'm just "Oh, tomorrow". Like I get home from work and I'm like "tomorrow" and then the next day and the next day… it's like "classes are starting" and then the next day and then "what the hell am I doing?" It like the most self-destructive like horrible awful feeling, but then there's like, there's this other side. There's this rational and irrational side and they're both at the same time saying, like irrationally, it's like "oh you know, like you can do it tomorrow. Like, you'll be able to fix this. Like, don't worry. You can always fix things. Don't worry" and then the other side is like "what the hell are you doing? Like, wake up!" … and then do it tomorrow, and then it's like, yeah, it doesn't happen tomorrow. Tomorrow doesn't come (Alex).

The Disconnects

Zimmerman (2008) demonstrated that self-regulated learning is a dimension of academic self-efficacy and is "the degree to which students are meta-cognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process" (p.167). Self-efficacy has been found to exert some influence on persistence through the rational pathway of being better able to achieve higher grades when steps are taken by the student to improve their chances to do so (Liao, Edlin, & Ferdenzi, 2014). These withdrawn students definitely demonstrated and discussed what could be interpreted as a general lack of self-regulated learning behaviours from this perspective. They employed learning and performance strategies that were incongruent with success when one has an adequate sense of the academic demands of post-secondary work (for example, the "last-minute" phenomenon discussed later), did not alter their learning or performance strategies in light of failure, or more accurately were not able to for a variety of reasons (lack of awareness, immobilization, mental health problems, structurally unable to change their circumstances or environment to study), and did not seek help (for the very same reasons). Many of the students reported puzzling perceptions of their capacity to succeed, their lack of altered action to improve their performance in light of feedback that they were not doing well, or regarding the reality of their situations. For some, the disconnect speaks to some serious mental health experiences but for others there are some puzzling elements as to how they moved through the failure process. However, the findings from this study also reveal that the process they are going through as they fail involves some sense of paralysis, immobility, or a general "auto-pilot" in the sense that students seem to just carry on the status quo until they are withdrawn. This process seems to play a part itself, although to what degree is outside of the scope of this small-scale exploratory study to determine. However to only look at self-efficacy would be to employ a deficit-oriented perspective focused solely on the student, without

considering how institutional processes are involved. The disconnects that would make someone

on the outside shake their head as to why these students did what they did (or didn't do) in light

of their situations means a closer look is needed, and not rely on these narrow, convenient

explanations like a lack of a quality such as self-efficacy. Rather, their stories reveal that the

failure process could involve some influence on their agency in context.

> Well, I guess I can't pretend to think that if I didn't go to class, I wouldn't fail. Most
> certainly is the disconnect between the concept of failing something and the act of going
> to class, you know? I don't know. I don't know how to explain the disconnect, there is a
> disconnect. I'm not going to class, how do I expect to pass the course? Maybe it's an
> accepted… that you're not going to succeed, versus an accepted that you are going to
> fail… I think it is interesting in a way to think about the fact of succeeding versus failure
> (Patricia).

Putting this in context, Patricia—through the process of our interview dialogue—comes

to understand her failing out of the SSW program as being a result of "not wanting to be there."

Patricia was not successful at navigating the academic or social demands of community college

life as it was presented to her. Being uncomfortable socially, Patricia never engaged in social

activities on campus, and barely attended classes because of her lack of comfort.

The disconnects continue throughout their stories. Jacob had all the right stuff for the

classroom and the field, but would take entire courses and not submit a single assignment. Lorna,

after having been removed from the program and currently pursuing academic upgrading to re-

apply to it seems to still not a sense of the demands of post-secondary work.

> I actually thought, 'okay, this is part-time study. They got to hand out the textbooks.' But
> then they told me, 'no, you have to pay for this on your own and we have a bookstore
> here on campus'. And I was like, oh, maybe that's why I failed that course. So I took
> pictures of the pages on my phone' (Lorna).

Rose recounts getting mostly Cs in her SSW Gerontology program, but only too many Fs

trigger the withdrawal—could this be that she didn't keep tabs on her grades? When asked to

explain further, "I do not know. I didn't check them." This disconnect seems to run throughout

her interview, and it is therefore not likely social desirability bias, but rather indicative a larger

disconnect between Rose and her academic life and the process of failure. Alex was getting all

As and excelling in her placement. She details her spiralling depression that stopped her from

coming to classes and caring about assignments, but continuing on at her placement to fulfill her

hours there with performance beyond expectation. "[My instructors] would say 'You know

what? I believe you can do this' and I'm like 'oh, I know I <u>can</u> do it, that's not the issue. I'm just

not doing it. That's the issue'" (Alex). Detailing her inability to act and what she calls extreme

procrastination, Alex describes her immobility from what it must look like to others:

> It's like if someone were looking at me from the outside in, they'd be like "what? What's
> wrong with you? You're the laziest like garbage human ever, like why don't you just—
> like everything you want, you obviously just don't deserve it, you're not doing anything
> to, like, get it. Why are you continuing like, doing the exact same thing you know is
> going to end you up in the exact same position and feeling worse, and worse, and
> worse… continuously (Alex).

Two of the students had experienced the withdrawal and re-affiliation process, yet still

were withdrawn a second time. Multiple attempts are crucial in terms of understanding success

and failure. That these students re-affiliate, but do not seem to have either different conditions in

which to better participate in their academic lives the second time around, or do not change their

academic behaviour. For example, they don't get extra help or change their study/preparation

habits.

For Justine, her disconnect involved her "collective failure" with 4-5 of her peers. Social

integration and involvement with peers both inside and outside of the classroom is a protective

factor when it comes to persistence (Tinto, 1993). However the process of failure takes these

connections in the wrong direction and serve as a distraction—the disconnect where logic of the

failure process seems to be ignored and just submitted to in hopes for a better outcome but with

no action to contribute to it. "So it was, like, 'I don't know what happened there, I have no idea',

but it was just like a collective fail and we were all like, 'ok we need help'"(Justine). After a

group meeting with their program coordinator (as required on their transcripts in order to move

into the next semester on probation), they learned they had to repeat courses.

> Yeah, and it was a really depressive time for me because everything was happening, and
> then I wanted to do school, right? And I kinda wanted to focus on that, but other things
> were getting in the way, so it was difficult for me. I think it was really difficult for me to
> focus. And then, again, having friends who were also going through problems as well, the
> same thing as you, we were all just like "we're over this", you know? It's a lot on us, so I
> think that's why we became friends because we kind of like, you know, we focused on
> each other and we didn't really focus on school (Justine).

Student Agency and Failure

The qualitative interviews about students' experiences of mandatory withdrawal revealed

a highly complicated yet strikingly common experience of trying to participate in their college

programs while largely unable to focus at school. Factors such as significant personal life

burdens and obligations, sometimes compounded by a continuum of mental health problems and

symptoms, the lack of access of prevention supports offered within the institution, and a lack of

substantive attachment to the program's people (their faculty members, their coordinators, or

their peers), and a misguided perception that everything would work out if they just kept moving.

All these factors contributed to an overall demonstrated lack of agency to prevent being pushed

out of the program that is perhaps influenced by the failure process itself. Agency is

differentiated here from self-efficacy as Zimmerman (2008) conceives of it in that agency allows

us to look not only at the student and their response/behaviour but look at institutional or

systemic factors that influence the student, bringing into focus factors that interrupt or interfere,

such as a significant mental health problems that disconnect the student from their agency,

working too many hours at a job, or a lack of genuine connection or integration with their

instructors and coursework (which could also be as a result of these factors).

Being aware of one's academic circumstances is a prerequisite for agency. For the most part, students were aware they were not doing well in classes or in the program, but as these interview demonstrated, most students only had a vague sense of recall of their performance or the concrete details of academic experience. Most had a sense they were not doing well, but were hopeful that they would still persist in their programs, unable to make the necessary changes to their lives to allow for better focus and performance. Most had no inkling a withdrawal was imminent, and found out only when they went online to check out their new timetables for the next semester. One gets a sense of a fog surrounding the process of failure and withdrawal, one where the student "just keeps going" along in the process until it ultimately closes in on them. Interrupting agency, all but one student detailed significant personal burdens and obligations as prioritized obligations but also serving as distractions from the demands of academic and social life at college. This one student though detailed significant social anxiety, as emotional and mental health problems were common among the withdrawn students. In terms of taking action and demonstrated in the previous chapter, most students did not access any support services or help of any kind either in the classroom or by way of formal supports offered by the college.

Like all of the other students, Justine had several distractions and obligations. She worked two part-time jobs during her time in the program, Justine thinks working so much interfered with her academic performance. However the need to work as many hours as necessary is not a variable for students, and this reality involves a sacrifice either to financial security or academic performance. Students in this financial position cannot choose to work less to focus more on school.

> Because honestly if I had a choice, I wouldn't work during school. But then I needed the money, right? So… I just feel like it's a distraction, like, because let's say you have

classes all day and then you go to work after, and it's just like, it's so tiring and then you get home and all you want to do is sleep but you have assignments due tomorrow, and it just piles up and it keep building and it's just like, "oh my gosh, I have like so many assignments due and I have work this weekend, what am I going to do?" (Justine).

Most students had busy lives that interfered with assignments. Regrettably but not surprisingly, most of the students revealed that they worked well at the last-minute, preparing assignments the night before they were due or even working on assignments in classes—and that this strategy was also employed by their colleagues. This is one of those "shake your head" moments from the outside where one could reasonably question how a student expected to be successful without the hard work that usually goes into assignments. When asked if they struggled with the academic expectations or adjustments:

> I cringe a little bit about the concept of, yeah, so pretty academic and stuff, but yes, I did find the deadlines problematic until I found my own groove. So I totally found it hard in the beginning because there were timelines, and I don't' work well with timelines, and you know, I had to do these things and so there was a lot of pressure ahead of time, like, 'Oh my god. I need to do what?' and 'how many papers?' and 'what do I need to do?' It was, it reminded me of high school and it was chaotic for me in my mind and it was problematic (Patricia).

She had very little experience with managing a workload and ultimately had very little even secondary experience to help make her adjustment to post-secondary expectations.

> I just realized that I work well last-minute, so I did my paper the night before. That's it. I just realized—I just could not, I could no longer do what I did in high school, which was worry myself about the deadline and then think about it three weeks in advance, then two weeks in advance, because I never did it…I just didn't do it. So once I realized that I could just do it the night before, it made it easier for me. And so I just decided to do it the night before.

She developed a strategy, one that ultimately did not work as she failed out of the program however, but she saw as a success—believing still that she can work effectively last-minute. "That's how I was successful—me finally realizing when I could do something was my success, when I figured out I could do things at the last minute, that was my thing" (Patricia).

> For me, it was like, I had been the way I was my whole school career, so not even like, I learned it in high school as a teenager. You get lazy, I mean… all the way through school. I was like 'yeah, I understand the work. Cool. If I have to throw something together, an assignment, I'll do it the night before. I have too much going on. Let me just [snaps his fingers] and that's how I was (Jacob).

When asked about the early stages of the process when she started to get failing grades on her assignments, Lorna noted:

> Well, the assignments I actually finished, when I got them back I had like Cs, and I was really upset about this. But one I got from fieldwork placement, I got I think a C, and I just wanted to tear it up and I threw it away. I was that upset actually…Maybe I wasn't planning out, like, time to study, time to work on the assignments. The assignments I did finish, I did them the night before (Lorna).

Although she notes that people warned her that post-secondary school was harder than high school, "they tell you how post-secondary is going to be much harder. Like if you get a B in high school you are going to get a C or a D, and you will have to work really hard in order to maintain grades."

Justine admits that while in the SSW program she didn't do the work. For her it was not a matter of adjustment, but rather she states she was not that interested in the program after awhile, and she didn't find the content interesting or challenging. When she did not complete an assignment she would skip classes to avoid the embarrassment of not handing in a paper. She talked about having personal problems that interfered with her focus at the time, and that she worked two part-time jobs while in school. She just didn't do what she knew she had to do.

> So in this [new] program, I didn't do what I did before [in the SSW program]—so attend classes, I do all the assignments on time, focus, take notes, get all the textbooks, and do everything in this program that I didn't do in the other one (Justine).

Shanice recognized too late that this strategy did not work.

> Honestly, I didn't study much…I just didn't focus the way I should. I didn't concentrate the way I was supposed to so I just half did everything and just go along that way, you know?

Shanice details getting home exhausted, caring for her children, and then working on assignments the night before they were due. In fact, she details that one night before an assignment was due, she was desperate to complete it and resorted to copying material posted on the internet, which resulted in a academic honesty decision. As it was her second offence, Shanice ultimately wound up failing the assignment, thus failing the course, and has a permanent notation of the plagiarism offence on her Seneca College transcript.

Jacob, because he was so distracted at night between his family obligations and deteriorating mental health, said that he did all of his work during class time, writing papers due the next period in another course.

It seemed that these students employed strategies that were necessary given their circumstances but irrational in terms of expecting to do well academically. This disconnect could justify looking solely at the student to change their behaviour or expect their fate, but must be more thoroughly examined in light of all factors simply because they do not make sense to us as educators. What else is happening that could explain such disconnect? Examining the failure process as they experience it sheds some light as an actor in their withdrawal.

Being Swept Up in the Process of Failure

It appears as though nothing changes once the students recognized they were failing assignments or courses. The process of failure, once acknowledged, seems to sweep these students along to its conclusion: the mandatory withdrawal from their programs.

Jacob was aware he was failing classes. In fact, Jacob was withdrawn once and returned to the program, so he was very aware of the process and its consequences. However when asked why he didn't take a break in light of everything he was dealing with at the time, he says that "wasn't an option. The, when I first thought of it—because I remember after first semester

thinking about it, trying to take a break, and my parents flipped. So I was like 'oh, this isn't an option. Back to it' (Jacob). Ultimately this resulted in his second withdrawal from the program.

Jacob represents a common phenomenon that troubles the community college educator: engaged and demonstrably strong in the academic side of the classroom, some students never turn in a single page of assignments. Jacob attended classes religiously, and was an active participant in classroom discussion. Only when I asked him directly about the connection to some serious stressors he experienced, such as the death of three young men in his family/peer circle from gun violence, did he note that these things were influencing his ability to perform at school. In hindsight though, Jacob acknowledges that he was dealing with some serious symptoms of depression and anxiety at the time, and was unable to act on the process of failure to turn it around—he just didn't have "the language" to do so at the time.

What the participants profess to think and feel about their failure and withdrawal experience is important in light of their behavioural response, or lack thereof. For example, despite the negative emotional experience—"the anxiety, horror and worry"—Lorna does not act on her process. She does not reach out for help, find out her options or the consequences if she continues in this direction, and hides the situation from her family members.

Rose noted she tried really hard to get through, but could not detail anything other than plugging away at the assignments and not getting results. "To be honest, I was kind of disappointed in myself because I was—I really tried. I guess, I can't believe I let myself down because of everything that was going on" (Rose). So trying means the effort to keep going despite what is happening in their academic and personal lives; not trying something different, trying to get help, trying to approach things differently—just the effort to keep going. "That's

what I thought. I just tried to get through with a decent mark, but it didn't end up that way"

(Rose).

> And it's just like [heavy sigh], I guess it just solidified that I couldn't do it and it just kind of like you know, was like, that last like 'ah, you could do it'-type thing, right? Because I really tried to do it (Tamara).

Here Tamara talks about really trying, but in the context of her story, she didn't reach out for

help, change her situation or change her study practices. Again, the "trying again" appears to

refer to the efforts made to just keeping going.

> It was like the end of the first semester I realized that it was gonna get, like how am I gonna get through this for another like seven months, you know what I mean? Like, I wasn't really going to get a break. It was just gonna be a nightmare and then when I got back, it wasn't getting any better. I don't know, for some reason I just thought that I could try and at least I could try, and then I'd be telling myself just to try. I feel like, doomed if I did, doomed if I didn't. I would have been mad at myself either way. At least I did try—at least I can say that to myself. I just kept going and it's like 'I'm here. Survive. Here. Survive'. I guess I was just on autopilot all the time (Tamara).

This auto-pilot of trying mode was a common theme and could explain some of the other

elements of the failure process, like the poor recall of the details of the process of their failure,

the disconnects, the lack of help-seeking or action, and ultimately their lack of agency in the

process of failure and withdrawal. This autopilot can be powerful in light of distressing personal

circumstances and stressors many of the withdrawn students were experiencing.

> I was just so wrapped up in my bubble that I didn't notice or recognize anything. I was like not perceptive to anything at all. There could've been a meteor shower and I wouldn't have noticed [laughter] (Tamara).

> Justine's interview showed the immobilizing influence of failure when on a larger scale.

Failing multiple courses simultaneously,

> When I did fail, the first thing I thought of was that [that she was told that post-secondary was much harder than high school], but then I was like, it was kind of embarrassing, and like I was kind of disappointed in myself because why am I failing? Like, I've never failed a class before [in high school] and now I'm failing so many classes, so like,

"what's going on?" I knew it was a problem that had to be fixed, I just didn't know how to fix it at the time. And then I kind of just stuck with it; "should I continue? Should I not?" but then I did it for a year and a half… It was just a couple courses. I forget which ones to be honest. I think the first semester I failed one, but I don't know which one it was. And then it just went downhill from there (Justine).

Some said they had too many other things to worry about. On a pragmatic level, Delores could not be expected to do the work she needed to do in order to be successful. With a 5-hour commute each class day, she spent no extra time on campus for group work, socializing, or accessing resources or supports, because she had to rush home in traffic to care for her teenage daughter. She had no computer or internet access at home, and her local library was often closed by the time she made it home. She did however attend every single class, four days a week—she just kept going—but was removed from her program after the second semester.

The experience of the process of failing appears to involve an immobilizing effect, a "just keep going" kind of auto-pilot that takes over and interrupts or interferes with agency in some way. There are other factors that also interfere with student agency in this context and cannot be separated out in terms of how they interact with the failure process.

Mental Health, Emotional Well-being, and the Failure Process

For Jacob, the involuntary withdrawal from the program was a necessary thing for him to get some respite and take care of his deteriorating mental and emotional well-being

But essentially I'm doing really well, and so I was happy I left when I did for the sake of my mental health, but I also look back and think if I had had whether the humility or the language or the ability to talk about the things I was going through that I would have been able to finish the diploma and at least have a back-up plan if I need it, right (Jacob)?

Given what Tamara was dealing with… "Even if I had barely passed it, it still would have been a huge success." For Rose, it was another awful thing to add to a list of awful things that were happening to her and her family at that time, something so difficult she could not discuss it without crying.

It is common for post-secondary students to experience some level of elevated psycho-social distress in their first year (Davidson, Feldman, & Margalit, 2012) from various sources, including academic stresses (such as an increased workload or higher expectations) and interpersonal (stresses related to new social demands or changing relationships). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to stress-triggered mental health problems as they have an increased sensitivity to stressors (Steinberg, 2014). It is important to remember that most of these students were older adolescents at the time of their withdrawal. Despite being considered "adult" students, most started when they were 18 or 19 and were withdrawn in their first year. Beyond the heightened stress of a new and demanding experience and the subsequent adjustments needed, these students had lives messy with expectations and challenges.

Alex's story and withdrawal process exemplifies the distressed emotional state of all of the interviewed students during their failure process. Three ex-students were in tears at some point during their interviews as they recalled the process. Justine noted that she was "very depressive at the time." Selena noted that she was "not mentally alright", experiencing depression and anxiety while in school, combined with a need for learning supports that she did not pursue accommodations for at the time. Tamara discussed the complex feelings of grief about her family situation and a lot of stress, "being a long way from fine." Jacob discusses undiagnosed PTSD, anxiety and depression during his time in school, which he needed a break from in order to get well again. Lily mentioned depression in her interview and Alex recounted very serious depression and anxiety symptoms throughout her time in the program. Shanice cited "overwhelming" stress during her time in the program, and Delores said that she would cry every day for hours, often crying the whole way home on her long commute. Patricia was the only one not to speak of emotional or mental distress, however she does cite being socially uncomfortable

in class as one of the primary reasons for her lack of attendance that eventually led to her failure and withdrawal. Lorna had a very unique situation. Lorna recounts several times where she experienced extreme emotional distress after receiving poor grades on returning assignments. Once she tore up an assignment and stood above a 3-storey open staircase on campus, contemplating hurling herself down. She reported that since that time she has received treatment for clinical depression and anxiety.

With the exception of Lorna, whose emotional distress was reportedly a result of not doing well in school, for the remainder the source of the emotional and mental distress is at home or in their personal lives. It is not hard to understand how challenging focus and performance must be, and how school moves down the priority list for students. From their stories, it is obvious that most of these students were overwhelmed by their personal circumstances, and that school demands exacerbated already challenging circumstances. Going a little deeper into their stories, for example, Selena was struggling with depression and anxiety throughout her program, circumstances for which she had learning accommodations for as a high school student but did not follow through with as a college student. Here it is worth noting that high school accommodations plans are not transferable to the college context. Students have to re-submit certain documentation to the college and undergo a college-specific assessment process. Anecdotally, this takes quite a bit of time, expense, and agency—which at the time, she said she could not focus and had no control, so she did not pursue academic accommodations until her withdrawal and subsequent enrollment in the remedial programs.

Tamara had a string of unexpected deaths in her immediate family. Her mother, distraught at this time, was unable to care for her little brother and experiencing her own mental health problems as result. Tamara was left with this responsibility and took over his daily care.

While Jacob was in school over four years, he lost three to four friends and family members to gun violence. He was violently mugged more than once. His home situation had become abusive, even resulting in physical violence from his step-father. His younger brother was becoming gang-involved and in conflict with the law, and Jacob was ordered by family and cultural code to protect him from further involvement. He reports struggling with undiagnosed PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Alex lived at home caretaking her mother who struggles with addiction. She discussed a painful break up, and very significant symptoms of depression (not being able to leave house, not sleeping, not eating, not getting out of bed and isolating herself), and was afraid to leave the house for too long in case something happened, like "I have to hide all the lighters when I leave in case she lights a smoke and burns the house down". Lorna was the only student who did not recount any personal stressors or burdens to contend with while trying to adjust to or meet the demands of post-secondary school, however she did recount some significant mental health symptoms of anxiety and suicidal thoughts in response to her failure process and withdrawal, so there may have been an underlying diathesis. Some students were dealing with diagnosed mental health problems, and some mental health problems were self-reported.

To compound their experience, the withdrawn students talked about their emotional response to the failure process or withdrawal. Most were shamed and embarrassed, Jacob recounted being anxious and horrified, and Lorna recounts several emotional outbursts both at home and at school as a result of the stress.

Whether or not these stressful events or factors triggered failure in some way is not within the scope of this study, but it is confirmed by their interviews that their stressors and burdens had a significant impact on their failure and withdrawal as a result of cumulative failures. This could have an overwhelming effect that contributes to the "just keeping going" as

an auto-pilot response to failure. What is of note though is that most students knew the college offered some level of supports, whether directly or through student health benefits, but none took them up—possibly because this would involve some level of agency not possible at the time.

It is the expectation that struggling students will avail themselves of the specific student success supports made available by the college, make accommodations in their personal lives to better suit the demands of college, and generally try to improve their situation. For many students, the first few poor grades or failed classes did not seem to have a wake-up call effect, as they seemed to shut down in the failure process. Alex just couldn't—she couldn't snap herself out of her depression, couldn't do the work even with flexibility and encouragement from faculty, and "just couldn't' get out of bed" to turn her situation around. Jacob said that as a result of his PTSD, anxiety, and depression that "I was just not there. I just wasn't present" and in hindsight reflecting on his mental health at the time, it was "just not possible", and Lorna said that when she got back those first poor grades, "I just stopped working all of a sudden", Selena said she "can't even think about it", and for Tamara "it was just not possible for me" to emotionally stabilize given her circumstances.

Failure and Accessing Help

As noted in the previous chapter, early leavers did not typically access support services from the institution as demonstrated in the survey data. For the most part, the withdrawn students did not access any help either formally from Seneca College's support services, or staff and faculty, or informally, from peers or family. Their reasons ranged from: being "private" (Justine and Shanice), not wanting to talk about it (Selena), or accessing help not being in their "nature" (Lorna), or that seeking help was admitting defeat (Tamara). Seeking help carried another layer of complexity for students who were experiencing distressing mental health problems at the

time: Jacob was not able to access the language to understand what he was experiencing, let alone reach out for help. Alex, even after a recommendation from a friend about personal counselling services on campus being welcoming and helpful to her, still didn't access help because she could barely be on campus due to her anxiety and depression symptoms, and was compelled to leave campus immediately after classes because of her distress.

Two students who did access help reported it was of little use and was inadequate to address their situations. Delores noted she did access some counselling and tutoring help on campus when she started to receive poor grades back on assignments, however she said it was of no help. Her real challenges were more structural. She summarized what she was offered as help was "how to better prioritize" , which she found insulting. For Lorna, she noted an occasion when her distress became visible to the instructor, who took the time to talk to her and accompany her to the counselling service on campus. Lorna noted that she accessed counselling services regarding her suicidal thoughts and said that although the intervention was helpful on an emotional level, it had little effect on turning her academic life around as "it was already too late".

The auto-pilot that seems to characterize the failing process interacts with the lack of support or help these students receive/seek out means that most students experienced the failure process and withdrawal alone and un-supported and with little chance of internal or external intervention to turn it around. In fact, some went so far as to hide their failing from friends and family. A few students who did seek help through tutoring or learning supports acknowledged that it was too late to have any real impact on their circumstances or the process. The few students who did have meaningful interaction with faculty were offered extensive accommodations regarding due dates and absences, to the point of disregarding mandatory

attendance or late submission policies, but they had little effect—students were either struggling with serious mental health concerns (as in the case of Alex and Jacob) or were too over-burdened with responsibilities at home to take advantage of the opportunity.

Jacob's situation extends beyond mental health challenges into trauma, and requiring trauma-informed supports. Jacob did not reach out to formal services at Seneca: "that wasn't even a thought in my mind". Jacob had "no help at either end", either at school or at home. Between his mental health problems at the time and an abusive home environment, "I just wasn't mentally stable. I remember second year first semester, I just wasn't there. I just wasn't present [mentally]" (Jacob). When I asked why he never sought out counselling for the emotional impact of these deaths, his abusive step-father, or the violent mugging that I was aware he experienced in first semester, he said he didn't believe that such services were for him; they were for more serious personal problems of others.

> Jacob: It was nonsensical to go to a service to talk about being stressed about work and being stressed about all the other things I was doing. No one has time for that. These are for people with serious issues, like being raped on campus, or getting mugged like…"
> Interviewer: Which you did get mugged…
> Jacob: Uh, yeah [laughter]. That hasn't even registered in my mind, when I think back about it.

When the few instructors who noticed did try to connect and offer some flexibility, it seemed to wake him out of the failure process a bit.

> I think I did once, it was out of like "holy crow", like one of those moments of clarity where "I'm, like, failing. I need to do something" and then try and ask for an extension, um, but just the time… even in the period of the extensions where I still had to go home and do stuff, it's like, what time do I actually have? The extensions don't change anything… I had no control over my environment (Jacob).

When asked if she sought out help or clarification from faculty when she started to receive under-expectation grades, Lorna repeated "No I didn't. I didn't even go to tutoring. I just kept to myself saying, 'I'm fine. Things will turn out well. I don't…. I don't need anyone.'" .

There seems to be some level of minimizing or denial from several students about the severity of their performance as possibly worsening or being fully aware of consequences of their decisions. By the time she comes to the realization, it's too late for help to be effective. "She was really helpful too [a tutor] but I just dropped it—I didn't do anything, cause I said to myself 'what's the point? It's too late. Even if I do pass, it's not going to pass all my courses'. Here is where some advisement of the failure process may have done some good though, as withdrawal is the result of too many failures. Perhaps if she had been able to pull through one or two courses, the at least the withdrawal could have been avoided.

These stories reveal that there is some level of immobility involved on the part of the student during the failing process, and this may be related to a sense of helplessness. Accessing help or support is severely constrained by their many obligations and busy lives. In the context of seeking help, being "done school" meant attending classes, and not the other activities of academic work. Tamara noted:

> I really didn't feel like I could talk to anyone because like, I—as soon as I was done school I had to go immediately home and be with my brother. I couldn't really spend any time doing anything or talking about it because I had to make sure I was there for him when he got home from school.

Rose had to be home more than she was at school in order to be the caregiver for her family while they dealt with a family crisis. Alex had to leave campus immediately after the classes that she did manage to attend because of her strong desire to be at home because of depression and out of concern for not trusting her mother to be at home alone because of substance abuse. Delores couldn't spend any extra time on campus because of her lengthy commute and needing to get home as quickly as possible to care for her daughter. Shanice had subsidized daycare to help, but still had to back home at a reasonable time after class to pick up her kids. Justine was juggling two jobs and worked every evening. Students conceived of help as

either not possible in terms of time, or not worth the tradeoff in terms of obligations at home, or too late to resolve their overall circumstances of failure.

Because most students found out about their withdrawal online or by a letter advising them of being cut off financial assistance from OSAP, students did not receive any advising about their situation, why it happened, or their options. Two students who were hiding their withdrawal from family sought out information as to how to remain in school in order to maintain their participation—both of these students were currently in the remedial GAP program at the time of interview. This need to appear as continuing on in the program was the driver for their continued persistence and hopeful re-affiliation. However, others just left without the benefit of information. When asked if it would have been better to find out in advance of the transcript comment by a coordinator or advisor:

> It probably would have been a little different maybe. Maybe I would've felt like 'ok, I can't do this' and like, maybe I would've been like 'I need to take a break and I need to decompress a bit and then maybe come back' or like, seen that there were other options available, when I thought the only option was to leave (Tamara).

Delores had a similar experience, finding out on her transcript that she was withdrawn, she accessed no further information and never spoke to a single person at Seneca after that "No, I didn't. And I just went on with my life" (Delores).

Seeking help, from any service or source, seemed to be outside of their capacity to do during the failure process. They could not find the time, did not have faith in the efficacy perhaps given it was "too late", or just seemed to lack the agency to do so. The good news is that all students knew this help was available on campus and readily available to them as students, which is puzzling as well in that none accessed them, or perhaps more accurate, none could find their way to access them. This puzzling reality may speak to the immobilizing effect of the failure "auto-pilot" they recount.

Also, not being able to access available help is a complex reality for people with mental health problems, even with support. Referring to a friend who tried to encourage her to access supports on campus:

> Yeah, it was at Seneca too—she just literally, "you just walk into the office" and she said it helped her a lot. Like, a lot. And she was like "you gotta do it" and I was like "yeah, yeah, yeah" and then "as soon as class is done, I'm leaving", like "I'm not staying here any longer". And as soon as I was done I had to leave—I couldn't, I physically couldn't make myself stay, like maybe a couple of times when something was due the next day and I would stay in the library and I would be like so angry and like, frustrated. And I knew as soon as I got home and walk through the door I would not get anything done. So I absolutely NEED to stay, you know… but I couldn't (Alex).

Lack of Connection

It is important to acknowledge that seeking out or accepting support or help has some relationship to the connection students feel to their environment or experience while in their program, or perhaps to what Tinto (1993, 1997, 2012) refers to as academic or social integration. Genuine connection to others is a prerequisite for agency. Most students had only a vague recall of course titles, their faculty's names, and even their grade performance—things within the daily routines of being a student that also signal some level of connection or attention. With so little connection it seems unrealistic to expect students to be proactive in the pursuit of help from faculty they barely know, services that they may be aware of but have no familiarity, and procedures for which they have not been involved, such as the right to appeal a grade or what happens when they are on academic probation. The circumstances exemplified by this poor recall speaks to a lack of genuine connection and to their academic life and leads to a literal disconnect between needing some form of help or support to prevent worsening their circumstances.

Shanice barely remembered the names of the courses in her two years and two withdrawals, was not sure which courses she passed and which ones she failed, and could not accurately name most of her professors during her interview. She had no relationship with us—

she tried to be quiet in classes and could barely focus from being so tired, stressed, and distracted; she spent no extra time on campus after classes and had to miss a lot of classes related to her custody battle and illness related to her pregnancy. She had minimal faculty-student interaction, and very little interaction with Seneca's ancillary programs and services as they were limited on a satellite campus. If this speaks to their attachment to their academic lives or campus life, or if it speaks to a lack of a relationship, it seems both are crucial elements to consider when it comes to help-seeking. To illustrate more concretely, not one of the 10 withdrawn students interviewed could recall instructor names accurately or at all and most were not sure what courses they actually failed or how many.

> I was told to apply for accommodations you know, from, what's his name…he teach class in the bigger room…He was African. I forgot his name. I can't… anyway, he was the only one who was willing to help. He told me to reach out… but I didn't… He explain to me, but to be honest, I forget everything he said (Shanice).

Not only names, but also courses:

> I think I failed all of them… I think that I… yeah, I think I failed all of them (Patricia).

> I repeated, yeah, I repeated placement – which I think I wound up passing, um, the second time. And then (pause) I can barely remember if I passed the interview course…I think I did. If I did, it was barely (Jacob).

> No, [I failed] just a couple of courses. I forget which ones to be honest—I think the first semester I failed one, but I don't know which one it was. And then it just went downhill from there (Justine).

When asked if she repeated failed courses in an attempt to stay in the program: "I think I did. I re-did two of them. I think I did pass, and then one of them I re-did I failed again… I am not sure" (Justine).

For some it was overall, and perhaps demonstrated more so a lack of willingness to discuss it as this interview passage with Lily shows. Her recall is of having passing grades,

which is incongruent with the subsequent withdrawal from the program. As context, the

interview was conducted less than one year from her removal.

> Lily: I got a lot of Cs.
> Interviewer: Ok, in everything?
> Lily: I don't remember.
> Interviewer: But enough that you didn't feel as though you were failing your courses?
> Lily: yeah.
> Interviewer: How did you make sense then that you were going to be terminated from the program?
> Lily: I don't remember… because she said it would be a better chance for me to go to the general arts program… or something like that—I don't remember correctly.

When asked how it was that she found out she was terminated from the program, she said she

could not remember. "I don't remember. I don't know. I remember talking to somebody but I

don't remember if I had a letter either" (Lily).

The overall sense is that these students were disconnected during their time in the

program. Here institutional factors are also key to highlight, as college faculty cannot be

expected to forge strong connections with all students, especially if they are only in the program

briefly before being withdrawn. Characteristics of typical community colleges do not readily

facilitate this kind of connection with students, such as large class sizes and significant teaching

loads for instructors, all without the teaching assistant supports that university counterparts can

rely on for large classes. Typical of both college and universities is that the bulk of the teaching

load lies with part-time and sessional faculty, with other jobs to manage and less connection to

campus life and operations than their full-time counterparts. These disconnecting conditions,

combined with the reality that many students spent the barest minimum of time on campus,

create the grounds for disconnection.

It is important to note that interaction with faculty both in class and outside of class was

an important dimension of social integration, not just academic (Deil-Amen, 2011; Mertes,

2015). Given that all of the interviewed students also had very little recall of faculty names or interactions, this appears to convey a lack of meaningful faculty interaction as well.

Belief in Their Capacity for Academic Success

Interestingly, a belief in their capacity to complete the program successfully was common among the students. This belief exemplifies a sense of academic agency (Feldman & Kubota, 2015) and is therefore a contradiction in this context. For the most part, students conceived of themselves as highly capable academically under the right conditions, with several noting that they didn't struggle academically with the content of the program. All of the students saw themselves as academically capable and bright. "I don't question my intelligence… I just question my intelligence within the framework of academia" (Patricia). "I didn't struggle academically at all" (Jacob). He thinks school would be "easy" for him now that he has moved away from home and no longer experiencing distress related to mental health problems. Delores had been to vocational school before: "No, I know I could do this, you know? Because I have a background as a health care aide. I don't think I saw it as a failure, because, like I said, I knew I could do it. There were just some barriers in my way. And challenges. And people have challenges in their lives every day…" (Delores).

Selena believed that she can do the SSW program now that she has her academic accommodations in place. Alex was very successful in terms of academic performance until her mental health problems began to worsen and she stopped attending classes and doing assignments. She knew she could do the work academically as her grades suggested when she turned in her work, but was worried that the depression wouldn't lift in time or will return and interrupt her completion again. Referring to school in general, Tamara said she knew she could

do well in classes, "I knew I was good at this. I knew this was something I was good at…like in school I was always good."

At times though perhaps the "I can do this" also contributed to their not reaching out for help or doing things differently in light of bad results; most students who said it did so in a way that meant they were bolstering themselves with self-talk, but not really making any substantial change that will lead to improvement. "I got this. I thought: I got this under control" (Lorna). When asked if the withdrawal experience had any effect on her academic confidence or beliefs in her abilities as a post-secondary student: "No, it didn't. I had that in the back of mind, but I told myself "No, I don't, I can do this again" (Lorna).

Shanice thinks she will be successful now that had the baby and had daycare lined up for all three kids:

> Yea, I think so. I have high hopes for myself. Some days I am down still, but if I keep it up, I feel like I can be okay. I can do it. I know I can do it. I know I can do better. I just have to tell myself that (Shanice).

How students view their ability plays an important role in their academic achievement. It would seem that they did not take their low or unsuccessful grades as evidence of low academic ability or need for remediation—but rather as a reflection of bad timing. However the fact remained that they signed up for a college program at this time in their lives—most of their circumstances in terms of limitations were not new or did not develop since their time in the program. It can be assumed then that they believed they could succeed despite their circumstances at the time.

Agency

Despite what seems like a strong belief in their academic abilities and tenacity, the interviews revealed that most students exhibited very little involvement or control over their

academic lives, their failure process, and none in terms of their withdrawal (only a few spoke to a coordinator about the withdrawal to try to find out next steps or take up recommendations for upgrading to re-affiliate). As the findings about the process of failure demonstrated, most students were swept along with the failure process, most immobilized to some degree by failure. This is paralleled by a simultaneous lack of agency to control their personal stressors and burdens, which extended to their academic worlds. In terms of academic self-efficacy though, most students believed that they could "do it" if the conditions were better or in hindsight, now that their lives were a bit more settled. From a funds of knowledge perspective then, it is not something about the students' intrinsic characteristics, bur rather it is the process of failure itself that is immobilizing. The extent to which a lack of agency over their personal circumstances contributes to the immobilizing process of failure is unknown, however to suggest that it does contribute seems reasonable given these students' stories.

Students had very little control over their context it seems, which confirms research about academic probation and a tendency to disbelieve their ability to influence their personal or academic circumstances (Balduf, 2009; Hseih, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Once the failure process took over (and in some cases interconnected with mental health problems), they were swept up and unable to intervene in their own process and best interests. According to the research on the role and importance of hope and optimism to education outcomes and achievement, hope has been found to be predictive of self-efficacy, and academic self-efficacy then predicts GPA (Day et al., 2010; Feldman & Kubota, 2015). The hopeless that seems to take over during the failure process interrupts their agency over it, and the process just moves along without interventions that we imagine to be logical responses as educators, like

putting plans in place to study more, prepare better, or access tutoring services. As competent and talented people then, the process needs to be examined for its effect on them.

Previous research has demonstrated that student self-efficacy, or the belief in their ability to have control over, and their ability to achieve tasks were associated with persistence and correlates highly with academic achievement (Feldman & Kubota, 2015; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Zimmerman, 2008). Higher self-efficacy is associated with greater participation, putting in effort to meet goals, pursuing challenging goals, and greater willingness to persist in the face of challenges and enhances motivation. Therefore adequate self-efficacy is a protective factor in the adjustment to the demands of post-secondary education (Davidson, Feldman, & Margalit, 2012). Agency however refers to a sense of an individual's belief that those goals can be achieved but also is conceived of as one's capacity to act independently or have control over their life circumstances sufficient to act in their own best interests. Self-efficacy does not involve the belief that a specific action or actions will lead to achievement (as this relates more to hope), nor does it have anything to do with the capacity or motivation to action (Feldman & Kubota, 2015). Factors of hope, optimism, agency, and self-efficacy influence or have a predictive relationship to grade point averages (such as Day, Hanson, Maltby, Proctor & Wood, 2010; Feldman & Kubota, 2015). The qualitative data reveal that failing students demonstrated very little action to improve their academic situation, perhaps because of lower levels of self-efficacy in terms of their beliefs in their abilities to alter their situations both at home and at school. The trajectory of the failure process—the process of getting poor grades, leading eventually to academic probation and then swiftly to withdrawal--seems to just happen to these students. This speaks to the reality of institutionalized academic failure as a powerful process, interfering with students' inherent self-efficacy and agency. They do not alter their work habits or conditions,

they do not seek help, and they spend energy on hiding the situation from family. Coupled with the self-imposed social isolation of several students, and the general lack of social integration overall, the failure experience as isolating may serve to reinforce their general lack of agency, or what looks like passivity, in the failure process. The effects of the process of failure then may appear as a lack of some quality or another or a deficit on behalf of the student, which is part of its power—one that we maintain with our expectations that students should be able to something about on their own.

The process of failure appears to interrupt agency, freezing students from the belief that actions will make any change (hope) or making any changes to their actions in order to avoid further consequences of sustained failure (self-efficacy). The feedback information that course failures, poor grades, or academic probation provide does not seem to result in behavior change in these students, almost defying logic, and speaking to the disconnect discussed earlier.

> …individuals can believe that a particular course of action will produce certain outcomes, but if they entertain serious doubts about whether they can perform the necessary activities, such information does not influence their behavior (Bandura, 1997, p.93).

Therefore, one has to believe that they have the capacity to make change first. This belief is highly influenced by the systems and structures that are influencing their circumstances. Indeed the college construction of the failure/success process is very powerful. Here we see that students took full responsibility for their failures; they expressed disappointment and frustration with the withdrawal or the withdrawal process, but they took full responsibility for their academic performance. In this way, the message of adult education—that adult students are responsible for their work, their performance, knowing what to do and when, and being proactive about their own situations—seems to be a convenient and logical rationale that shifts the locus of responsibility and control primarily onto the student instead of other institutional realities.

Agency is heavily influenced by systemic factors such as socio-economic class, racialized identities, gender, and other social identity factors. Non-traditional and community college students experience these systemic barriers to agency disproportionately, and likely have a profound impact on the agency they perceive and experience within the institution, which is outside the realm of this small-scale study to convey. What is evident from this study though is the complicating factors, sometimes experienced simultaneously, of living highly fractured lives as students, workers, and caregivers and exacerbated by dealing with un-supported mental health problems while attempting their post-secondary goals seems insurmountable. This lack of agency related to their ability to influence their personal life challenges, their mental well-being, as well as their ability to turn their situations around and prevent further failure and withdrawal. For the many dimensions that interfere with agency demonstrated, the experience or process of failing put students on auto-pilot, and they just keep going until stopped by the institution.

"Because when you're in this situation you can't even think about it" (Tamara). One can hardly act on something that is even too difficult to think about. For some there were added complexities, like not being aware of their academic standing at all, which is difficult to understand from an outside perspective. It is reasonable to expect that students would receive at least a minimum amount of feedback at regular intervals of their coursework that things were not going well or as planned. But each student conveyed that they were largely unaware of their overall at-risk of withdrawal status, their academic standing, and even some were unaware of basic important information about course expectations. Some were surprised they failed courses, some were not sure if they had decent grades for some. A deficit orientation would point to the student; an orientation toward critical pedagogy and the funds of knowledge stance looks first to

the process as taking something away from students that they inherently possess, focusing on the process itself and not its targets as the problem.

Some ex-students noted trying but not getting anywhere. Regarding her second attempt and subsequent withdrawal, Shanice notes: "I'm trying, I'm failing, but I'm trying". When asked what she was trying, Shanice didn't know. She was not accessing help, she was not studying more or better, and she simply could not manage her time any better given that she now had a young baby in addition to two young daughters to care for by herself. For her, trying meant just doing it again. "It's a must; it's a have to, right? Like, I ain't going to push or kill myself, but I need it. I really really need it. And I need to come back starting off with small… like if I could take two, finish it off and pay for it, I need to pass it because to pay for it and fail it again is going to get me really angry" (Shanice). For her, the effort is in not giving up, but this time taking on less at once after finally acknowledging that perhaps she could not manage a full-course load and all of her other roles.

For some, there was a sense of disempowerment and a lack of self-determination. Patricia, who was unsure of which classes she passed and which ones she failed. Patricia rarely came to classes and always did her assignments at the last minute (which she identified as a successful strategy, despite failing classes). When asked if she had some sense of what was needed to be done in order to be successful to pass a course, she replied: "I don't know… I am not quite sure if I did. I don't know if I knew what I needed to do to succeed." Patricia did nothing to address the anxiety she reported she felt in classes—she just stopped attending classes. She also did not take it upon herself to obtain the skills she felt she lacked receiving from her home. "I know this isn't going well, but I am not turning it around [laughter]" (Patricia).

It would be reasonable to expect that a student who sees this "writing on the wall" would perhaps drop their course, preferring an incomplete grade on their transcripts to a failing one. These students did not drop out. Stopping out (just stopping participating in school in any way but not removing themselves administratively) or dropping out is ultimately an act of self-determination as students make the decision to invest their time, energy, resources elsewhere or prevent it from being squandered in the wrong place (Tinto, 1997). Why these students did not pursue such institutional options is puzzling, and their stories suggest it must be related to a lack of self-efficacy or agency that is evident in the failing process.

Some students recognized they were in trouble, but felt that it was too far gone to alter their course, and therefore believed a change in behavior would not result in improvement, speaking to a sense of a lack of personal agency. When asked why if he ever requested extensions for assignments given his difficult circumstances (instead of just not handing anything in at all), he replied:

> I think any time I did, it was out of like 'holy crow', like one of those moments of clarity where 'I'm like, failing. I need to do something' and then try to ask for an extension, but just the time—even in the period of the extensions where I still had to go home and do stuff, it's like, what time do I actually have? The extension doesn't change anything (Jacob).

Jacob discussed that students had a unique obligation to monitor their own mental health and practice self-care, take responsibility, and be accountable for their own success, "like this is what I am capable of right now" and approaching faculty. Jacob also explicitly names and calls out as problematic using GPA for gatekeeping, a system keeps talented students from moving ahead that is "routinely criminal of our education systems". Jacob noted that most faculty did not approach him about his grades or missing assignments and interpreted that as part of the accountability of adult education. But he notes not having "any control over my environment",

home or school at the time. Indicted here are faculty who didn't notice or didn't do anything about it if they did, including me.

Lorna was very aware she was failing all of her work and courses. "Actually I knew that I was failing, I just didn't want to confront myself about it" (Lorna) but there were elements of a lack of awareness over the process. For example, she notes finding out that she had a general education class late into her second semester that she did not know she had to take, and had already missed so much class and work she could not salvage it. She did not buy textbooks, assuming that they were given out like in high school courses "…and like maybe that's why I failed that course" (Lorna). This speaks to some level of disconnect as a college student, or perhaps a problem of adjusting to the different expectations of post-secondary courses.

In fact, Lorna is an apt example of the lack of agency as a new college student. When asked if she attending orientation where we discussed adjustment and expectations, she thought I meant the first class of a course: "I mean I looked over the outline and said 'you know, I can do this. It's not that hard if I take my time out of my day just to do all of this" (Lorna) and indeed she details being very disappointed in some marks for which she had done a lot of planning and work on assignments. She talked about that she should have made more friends in her courses so that they could have approached faculty on her behalf for some help. She takes full responsibility for her failure and withdrawal because she did not act:

> I owed myself an apology…because this is my fault cause of what I was doing. If I had been forward about this, you know, talking to teachers, students, and counsellors about my problems, I would already be in second semester studying for my finals. I have no one to blame but myself for it…yes, even when I was failing I said to myself 'I don't blame anyone but my own' (Lorna).

In hindsight, if allowed back into the program, she would "take action" and be her 'own person."

Tamara was too afraid to look at her transcripts to check up on her academic standing. She did see some comments "telling me to go see the coordinator, but I didn't...I just shut down. It was just too much at the time. I just can't deal with it" (Tamara), even if that meant a plan could be put in place to help. Tamara notes that she "really tried to do it" but when asked what she tried, she said she tried to go to class more and that was it. In hindsight, she wishes that she had taken charge enough to take a break when she started to fail courses:

> Maybe I wouldn't' have felt like 'ok, I can't do this' and like, maybe I would've been like 'I need to take a break and I need to decompress a bit and then maybe come back', or like seen that there were other options available, when I thought the only option was to leave…and that probably wasn't the only option I had (Tamara).

Without any information or advisement, or any action on her part, she was out of the program thinking this was her only option. Speaking to the hopelessness that might accompany this lack of agency, "I felt like, 'what's the point'? Like, I've already passed this like… I felt like I was passed the point of return, you know what I mean?" (Tamara). These students let it go so far, trying what they might but not what we might expect as the traditional academic efforts to improve academic skills, and then find themselves past the point of successful return. When asked why she did not try to get help when there was still time:

> I didn't think I was gonna… when it happened.. because you're in it, in that situation you can't even think about it. I guess you just take everything one day at a time. I wasn't ever thinking, like a week from now, I was just… every day was a new challenge, so if I made it through that day, it was a victory (Tamara).

Once Justine started failing courses, and even repeating some, she decided "it wasn't working" and she just stopped—stopped doing any work, handing in assignments, and started to not attend classes because she was embarrassed when she wouldn't have a paper ready to submit. "I've been doing what I've been doing" (Justine) and she didn't know how to make it work. She stayed stuck in this pattern for her entire second semester until she had a moment of recognition

when she became aware after meeting with a coordinator that she was to be withdrawn. Here her moment of recognition snapped to attention some form of agency, and instead of going home to tell her parents she had been kicked out of school she stalled in the program long enough to get career counselling and change programs. In the end, she demonstrated strong agency and self-determination, turning the failure process around as a possible sign that reinforced for her that the SSW program was a bad fit. Here is where fit is a powerful factor—because she was not genuinely committed to or interested in social services, this may have made it been easier for her to take action to fix her situation.

Selena knew she was failing classes, but she did not know that she could be withdrawn from the program. She was confused and surprised by this. When she was told by her coordinator that she was being withdrawn, she said she was sad because "she didn't know what was going to happen from then on". She took the GAP recommendation "because I didn't know what else to do" and was in the program at the time of the interview, but said that she did not know how she was doing in the program or whether or not her grades were getting any better. She assumed so, because now she had the academic accommodations in place that she did not pursue while she was in the SSW program. Overall, she portrayed a sense of still not being aware of or involved in her academic life; that it was something happening around her but not being actively managed by her.

Speaking directly to a certain inability to intervene in one's own best interest, Alex refers to herself as an "adult child, literally", knowing she needed to do work and do more work to get ahead, but just not doing it. She was aware that she was losing her good academic standing, but did nothing to stop it. She was offered extensive accommodations, but she didn't make use of them. She was encouraged to go to on-campus counselling by a friend who did the same, but she

didn't go. She eventually just stopped going to classes. She attributes this to being "so tired and heavy", caring very much, but not being able to do what she knew she should. "Yeah.. it's like something is—I feel like I'm in quicksand". Alex had a lot of insight into her lack of action. She said she had a lifelong problem of procrastination mixed with depression. She left re-enrolling for classes until the very last minute, so when she had to unravel some financial matters before she could auto-enrol, she was past the deadline. She said she would do one step, like go to campus to talk to registration about her inability to self-register, but would have to return home as soon as she could because she couldn't handle being on campus before she got the process completed. "I got here. I did the thing. I can only do so much. Doing the exact same thing you know is going to end you up in the exact same position and feeling worse, and worse and worse, continuously" (Alex).

Mental health problems seem to compound the lack of agency these students exhibit when faced with failing assignments and courses. Whether it impairs their ability to act, takes up all of their energy and focus, or overwhelms them when experienced together, many of these students expressed having serious mental health problems while they were in the program and for some, it contributed to their failure experience (Alex, Jacob, Tamara, and Selena). When one considers the pressures and obligations they experienced at the time of being in the program, it becomes more understandable when students do not reach out for help to change their situations—this helplessness is compounded by the failure process which seems to just sweep up students. They move on auto-pilot through it until they ultimately turn around and realize they have been removed from the program.

The Influence of Family Connection

Another major theme in the data was the role family played in early departure for most students. Many surveyed early leavers departed to prioritize their families who were in need of their help or support or because the demands of family life interfered with ability to complete their programs successfully. Given the social isolation/disconnection many students experienced in campus life, the role families play in student well-being cannot be under-estimated. Students who have parents that attended post-secondary education have a greater likelihood to attend and persist (Finnie & Meuller, 2008). Although a few were unsure, over half (56 per cent) of the surveyed sample had at least one parent who completed post-secondary education, and approximately 35 per cent reported that not having a parent that completed any post-secondary education. The students involved in the qualitative part of the study were also split, with half having at least one parent with post-secondary completion and one half not having a parental history of post-secondary completion.

All of the ex-students mentioned family in their interviews but in some unexpected ways. Some students discussed their families or home life as the context or arena of their burdens or stresses. Some discussed the pressures or expectations placed on them by parents to complete school. Expectations of family regarding education and career sometimes factored into students' choices to attend post-secondary or persist. For the most part, families were unaware of the troubles at school, due in part to the efforts to camouflage the signs by some students but also in part because there seemed to be so much going on at home on which family members were likely focused. Some families supported them to persist while others remained un-involved. For the most part students did not seem to expect more help or support from family, and many of them hid the situation so effectively that families did not know there was a problem. As examples, Patricia went so far as to blame her family for her lack of academic success, noting they did not

teach her how to learn or create a culture of education as they left high school at 16, just like she eventually did. Tamara said her first priority was her family, and when they were in need, she put her family's interest above her studies. Without regret, she blames her family's need for her help and support as the reason she failed out of the program. Tamara's mother was putting pressure on her also, not to succeed in school but rather for "leaning on her a lot" for emotional and practical support as she was losing her sister to cancer. "I think she was so numbed out…I think she just thought she knew what I was doing and was getting it done". Here Tamara "lies by omission" to her family, not wanting to burden her mother with the knowledge of her failing out of her program: "I've never told them and because I dealt with all my own financial stuff, I didn't feel like I needed to them because I was ashamed. I still am. And also I didn't want my mom to feel awful, like it was her fault" (Tamara).

Eight of the ten withdrawn students lived at home with family, sometimes extended family, and therefore their failure process was often contextualized with what was happening at home. Most students had significant roles to play in terms of supporting their families through difficult times, or family matters requiring significant caretaking if family members. For example, Jacob had to monitor and care for his two brothers while simultaneously experiencing an abusive relationship with his step-father.

For some, parental academic expectation was a factor; for others, expectations placed on them in terms of family support to provide help was a factor. Lily's parents were angry and disappointed. "They were upset (pause) because they didn't graduate from school… so they were disappointed that I did not (pause) try (pause) or it seemed like I didn't try" (Lily). Their expectation was that she work and save money to return to school at the first opportunity, which Lily was doing, as "They are forcing me back", she said with laughter. At the time of the

interview, I helped Lily move through some administrative hurdles to pay off her debt in order to release her transcript for her application to a different college for a pre-health program.

Alex paid for her own tuition, and despite living at home, her mother was not aware of academic problems. Working at night and experiencing her own substance use issues, Alex said her mother was not really paying attention. Now that she had failed out, and is at home obviously struggling with some depression issues, her mother's response to Alex was summed up with: "I wasn't going to say anything. You'll figure it out" (Alex).

Justine's mother was angry at her daughter failing courses and forced her to return to school, which served as a source of motivation for Justine. In her family, post-secondary "…it's kind of like, taught. It's kind of like, you must go… It's kind of expected. It's kind of looked down upon if you don't go into post-secondary after high school, well, at least in my family" (Justine).

Patricia though is very clear that her lack of education culture at home was partly to blame for her lack of ability academically. When asked if her parents encouraged her to attend post-secondary school, she shot back: "they didn't even encourage me to go to high school".

A unique recognition for supporting the connection of students who are parents is important. While in their programs, only two students lived independently of family members—both of them single mothers and for them there was a significant element of legacy in the way that they think about post-secondary completion and their own experience in it. Delores' parents didn't complete post-secondary education but she spoke with great pride about her daughter who also just graduated from the local community college with a diploma in early childhood education. Shanice's mom did not get a college education, and none of her siblings went to college, so she was motivated by being a first child/generation to complete college. Shanice is

also concerned about the legacy she leaves for her own daughters if she was not able to find her way to completion.

> To [her mother], she said that since none of her kids went to college, she don't—it's not something that she's proud of, that's why I say, if I can do it—not for her, more to say for me and my kids to see that I finish. I look at it that that's important, right? And I also need a job (Shanice).

Most of the withdrawn students had family roles and expectations that interfered with their ability to be successful, however these very experiences demonstrated their capacity for social services roles of support and these family ties likely provided a strong foundation of connection that should have been engaged in order to facilitate greater academic or campus connections, if only educators understood how to do so. What is also demonstrated is that these students offered vital help and support to others instead of focusing on their own academic problems; providing others' help instead of accessing help themselves. This disconnect further reinforces the idea that the failure process removes any sense of agency or self-efficacy, overwhelming students and immobilizing their capacity to do anything about it until it comes to its logical end with students on the other side of the open door.

Hiding Failure From Family

For most, part of the failure and withdrawal process involved actively hiding the circumstances from family members. This effort to conceal their circumstances also has implications for seeking help because if students were not seeking help from the college's services or faculty to prevent further failure or withdrawal, they were also not able or willing to access the help and support that might be possible from family members. No doubt this placed additional stress on already-stressful situations, coupled with the elevated psychological distress associated with the first year of post-secondary education (Davidson, Feldman, & Margalit, 2012). Beyond hiding the situation from family members as it was happening, several students

lied about their failure and withdrawal to family members, speaking to the shame and embarrassment of failing/being withdrawn. Patricia told her parents she quit school and that everything was fine because she had found a job. As her parents had left school themselves at the minimum age to find jobs instead, this was acceptable, however not the preferred path. Jacob said his parents had no clue what was going on in his first failure experience and subsequent withdrawal. When he re-affiliated and soon began to fail again, he said his parents thought he was just going back to upgrade a course or two. This resulted in tension at home that compounded his already difficult situation with his parents (that had been marked by physical violence from his step-father at some point).

Delores, as a mature student with her own adolescent child, did not have to answer to anyone at home however she "kept it to myself" about failing courses and about her subsequent withdrawal from the program. She did so because she was embarrassed, and this embarrassment stopped her from reaching out to others for help or support.

Selena's family did not know she was failing or was withdrawn from her program. At the time of the interview, she was upgrading in the remedial GAP program and her parents believe that she was still in the SSW program. When asked why she chose GAP versus taking time off or switching schools, she said it was because she didn't want her parents to know she had failed out—so staying at Seneca and in any classes was her only option.

A year later and no longer attending college, Tamara's parents did not know that she failed out of her program at the time of her interview, and she had no plans to tell them. "I never told them and because I dealt with all of my financial stuff, I didn't feel like I needed to tell them, like, because I was ashamed. I still am".

Justine's mother knew she failed some courses and was very upset. However she was not aware Justine had been withdrawn from the program, and before Justine told her she proactively went to career counselling at Seneca and signed up for another program before telling her mother so that she could at least be satisfied that she was staying in school and for a program with a better fit for her. Also relevant is that Justine's story involved the "collective failure" of her circle of friends in the program. When asked about the experience of failing and having to hide it from family, she refers to these campus friends but also to an element of hiding things from one another.

> Every day, well, I mean since I had friends in that program I was excited to go to school to see them and to catch up a little bit. But then it would come to school work and assignments, I guess all the people were like, kind of embarrassed. So we didn't—we weren't as open with each other about school. We were open about other things but when it came to school we were all embarrassed so we like put up a kind of shield and we were like 'let's not talk about that right now' (Justine).

Alex covered up a lot with her mother.

> Well, mom's like 'why the fuck aren't you going to class?' I'd be like 'it got cancelled' but I would continuously say that. But you know the thing is with her is she wouldn't pry… she knows, like even right now, like, even with starting for January, she wasn't like on my ass about it at all (Alex).

Lorna was perhaps the most extreme case of hiding: "…I didn't tell anyone about this, I just kept things to myself…This is my problem. No one else needs to know about it". After failing out of her first semester, she pretended to her parents that she was still enrolled and attending classes. For almost the entire winter semester, she continued to come to campus and spent most of her day in the library. She said this was her plan: "to stall" until she could do the upgrading courses to get back in, but that she had missed the enrollment window so had to stall until the following semester. "I was scared to confront them about this because I thought my

mom would just lash out on me. But surprisingly when we talked about it, she was pretty calm. I was surprised by this" (Lorna).

Family and home life was influential in unexpected ways, but for the most part, represented some challenges for these students. Challenges at home seemed to interfere with their ability to focus on school as a priority, which is expected as part of the adjustment to college demands such as making the prioritizing of school demands over work (which provides financial support to their families) or caregiving an impossible, unrealistic or inappropriately selfish choice to make. This result lends some weight to Tinto's idea that demands at home/personal life unavoidably interfere with the academic and social integration of post-secondary students.

Withdrawn students demonstrated that they typically do not take action to alter the course of their failures. Likely this is related to their lack of connection and integration with their academic lives that these students also demonstrated. With no action and no help, and significant non-academic obligations and pressures to keep their focus on, the process of failure remains undisturbed. Because these students demonstrate strengths that should enhance their persistence under the right circumstances, such as a commitment to SSW and strong family ties as assets, we must question the failure process as immobilizing, overwhelming agency and self-efficacy of students, rather than question students as lacking agency. The auto-pilot that characterizes the failure process withdrawn students demonstrate and the denial they experience as to their actions and the process (such as hiding it from family members) suggests that the immobilizing process of failure is strengthened by their lack of connection academically, as evidenced in the many disconnects noted in how they approached their academic lives and their failure. The incongruence and the isolation characteristic of early leaving strengthens the immobilizing

effects of failure, carrying students along unwittingly to the withdrawal process and out of the

program.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ANALYSIS

The findings from this study confirm that matters of fit (including institutional fit, program/vocational fit), and the importance of the lack of fit as it appears in disconnects, incongruence, and isolation are important dimensions of early leaving. The findings also demonstrate how easy it is to lapse into deficit-thinking orientations around failed out students in that on the surface it seems that these students just didn't do an adequate amount of work while in their programs, and did not pursue the common sense solutions to improve their performance once they had the warning signs of failed assignments and courses in order to alter the withdrawal trajectory. This was not a surprise given my experience as an educator in that I would see daily students not turning in work, failing classes, and not once reaching out for help. Their vocational fit was strong, but their academic and social integration was relatively weaker. But ending the enquiry there is too easy and convenient, and the significant disconnects call for an examination that perhaps there were larger forces at play that help explain their trajectory. Explanations that acknowledge these students as competent students and community intellectuals are necessary. What was surprising in terms of findings though was a significantly common experience of immobility or auto-pilot once the failure process began for these students.

Fundamentally, it is agency—or the institutional process of failure's immobilizing effect on student agency—that emerges as the most problematic for the potential for critical pedagogy, anti-oppression frameworks, and ultimately the transformative potential for vocational education in the community college context and transformative professionalism (as opposed to gatekeeping). Based on findings, what appears to be a lack of agency—the absence of the perception of being able to act on their own behalf to alter negative institutional courses as well as the actual action involved in doing so—seems to be a dimension of failure and subsequent

withdrawal from participation in community colleges/vocational programs. A focus on agency has direct implications for how we explain failure and withdrawal in these settings—we faultily extend the concept of agency into individualizing responsibility and accountability for failure. The factors that influence and complicate agency for these students are related to their non-traditionality and dizzyingly demanding roles outside of school, as well as their pre-existing mental health problems or precarious emotional well-being during the failure process. From a social work perspective, these circumstances are of particular concern as systemic barriers to success, as opposed to individual characteristics. As educators, we also need to recognize that failure is not a consequence, but is also a process that seems to have a distinct effect on what might be already-compromised agency many students' experience. This is a unique perspective on student failure, as typically the onus is placed firmly on the student's behaviour or individual characteristics such as capacity. This deficit-thinking orientation may be pervasive is such settings in part because of our lack of understanding of the powerful influence failure plays on students already struggling under the weight of so many other pressing factors. This chapter demonstrates the disruptive power of failure on agency, and the flawed logic of deficit-thinking that is pervasive in this context through critiquing two common hyper-rationalizations common employed by educators and institutions alike when explaining failure.

Critical pedagogy is wary of applying reason alone to what might appear as fact or truth without concern for justice (Kincheloe, 2008) out of resistance to the oppressive effects of dominant powers and how they influence teaching and learning. This means that the routine practice of mandatory withdrawal and its seemingly common sense rationale should be examined more closely, as it has in this study. The findings from this study highlight two very common circumstances of these students. First, it documents their overwhelmingly busy lives full of

obligations and burdens that interfere with schooling, often including experiences of simultaneous mental health challenges. Second, it reveals that the failure process seems to be characterized by a lack of agency, sweeping students out of their programs in the process of mandatory withdrawal with almost no action on their part to reverse their circumstances. These findings contradict two very powerful hyper-rationalizations inherent in the standard rationale for kicking students out: 1) that certain students are under-prepared for post-secondary education, even at its lower rungs and 2) some students fail courses and programs, and are solely responsible for their academic fate. When these hyper-rationalizations are applied to vocational education, or most community colleges programs and students, they have significant implication in terms of professional closure. These hyper-rationalizations invoke only reason—that students do not have the academic head start of the skills and aptitudes necessary from their post-secondary experiences or demographic factors such as adequate household income; that open enrollment at community colleges does not select out those who do not possess these qualities and assets; and that students do not appropriately apply themselves and do what it takes to succeed in post-secondary education. This rationale is upheld without the emotion and caring and concern for justice (as hyper-rationalization does; Kincheloe, 2008) that is so essential to both Freire's conceptualization of liberatory pedagogy and the values of the profession of social work itself.

"They are Under-prepared"

To hyperrationalize their failure and being withdrawn from programs, some students are labeled conveniently as un-prepared or under-prepared for post- secondary education. This is problematic given the original purpose of CAATs, to serve the education and training needs for all students from any level of secondary preparation and not eligible for university level studies

(Ontario Department of Education, 1967). It is also problematic in terms of moving away from faulty deficit-models lingering in post-secondary education and vocational education toward more transformational critical pedagogy.

Explanations for marginalized students' poor educational outcomes as a result of a student's cultural identity or poverty had a strong hold in the latter half of the century, serving to legitimize the marginalization and poor educational outcomes of low-income and linguistically/ethnically minoritized students (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), and its legacy continues today. Deficit models of explaining student failure or poor outcomes are tenacious and continue on in many forms, and as a result, render poor students and students of colour responsible for their own poorer educational outcomes (Valencia, 2010). The foothold deficit models have in explaining poor performance or education outcomes, for example focusing primarily on the internal deficiencies of the student (such as cognitive limitations or problems of motivation) or familial deficits (such as household or intergenerational poverty) means that systemic factors are rendered benign in explaining why students fail (Valencia, 2010).

The legacy of this discourse and resulting explanations for poorer pedagogical outcomes constructs the "at-risk" student as in need of remediation and intervention, an extension of this passive object rationale that results in calls for increased support for marginalized students in the form of reduced academic workloads, mandatory basic skills training and orientation, and improved financial aid (Roueche & Roueche, 2006). The focus is on compensating for the characteristics of marginalized students to explain and prevent failure. Contradicting this faulty explanation, the findings of this study demonstrate that it was not that these are qualities these students do not possess, but rather that the possibility of the process of failing in an open access institution could invoke responses such as those demonstrated by the students in this study: a

universal lack of agency once the failure process begins. When we include ourselves in the examination, the lack of relationship and connection we have with these students as exemplified by their inability to recall our names, to recall course names or their grade performance, and the lack of interaction with institutional actors during the failure process, it is little wonder that the process does not get interrupted once it begins. This lack of connection mistakenly appears as a lack of preparation on behalf of the student, but it is not their deficit. Such individual deficit rationales also obscure viewing poor performance, or what educators construct as a lack of self-regulated learning or motivation, as possibly resistance to a process that alienates students. The a-critical process of vocational education that prepares worker-students for lower or middle-rung professional roles by diminishing their higher education experience to labour market preparation alienates students from their own learning. Their lack of academic success or even their self-sabotaging behaviours (such as missing classes or not preparing papers in advance as these students often did) in the vocational education realm could be perceived as a rational process of maintaining their humanization within an alienating process or system (Shor, 1987). Certainly many characteristics of the today's community college could be considered alienating as noted earlier, with massive classrooms and teaching loads, no teaching support for faculty such as teaching assistants, and the heavy reliance on partial load instructors with other priorities to balance to fill programs. Often harried ourselves, rushing to the next class or the next meeting, with 250 students names we do not know—the very kinds of impersonal interactions with faculty that "repel students from taking academic life seriously" (Shor, 1987, p.80).

Freire would vehemently criticize this under-prepared hyper rationalization—reminding us that every person has the structures for learning but may not have been prepared in the specific mainstream pedagogical approaches and values deemed academically valuable. They

may be un-prepared for the kind of learning to which they are subjected, but that this is a problem of disingenuous pedagogy, not the student. They may however come unprepared for the ways in which privilege may make this process easier for some than others, or appear as more prepared than others. For students who are marginalized, working long hours in precarious jobs in addition to taking courses, who are more likely to be parents or caring for others than their university counterparts—Freire would remind us that these students are no strangers to and are very prepared for systems and policies that have a success or failure element—and that perhaps such systems are more about vocational gatekeeping. In this way, the gatekeeping project is flawed because in this context, it keeps out the knowledge and voices of some of most valuable to the justice and community orientation of social work. The withdrawn students in this study demonstrated histories of service use that are valuable sources of knowledge to the field, their experiences of trying to "make it" while up against impossible hurdles are the heart of why social workers support others in the pursuit of social justice, their experiences of isolation are important to inform practice with those who are socially isolated or disconnected, and their marginalities in terms of social identity represent valuable knowledge to a field still based on primarily white, settler, middle class, professionalized values and representation. Their funds of knowledge are strong and badly needed, not only to enhance and maintain the social justice/transformative potential in vocational education that social services is uniquely positioned to do, but also in terms of the field in which they would enter.

Exemplifying strong funds of social work knowledge, students' families figured largely during the failure experience. As a community-based pedagogy, the funds of knowledge approach means that reflective teachers engage in reciprocal relations with student families and households in the pedagogical project (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The ability to engage

students' families is limited in an adult education context. In colleges or university settings, we draw a line when communicating with family members but also we are not engaging with people's families at all. For these students, we see that they are largely unable to make an arbitrarily line between their student life and their real life—so if we could make real-life easier to experience while in school, inviting their lives in, we may address some significant dimensions of persistence. A community-engaged pedagogy and professional program, as social services worker programs should be, would necessarily bring families, family, and daily life into the classroom by proxy. This would mean students experience less of a divide between their academic and community lives, and classrooms are enriched by community funds of knowledge. Prioritizing student and community funds of knowledge calls for a reorienting of the assumed priorities and resources of the student: the classroom is just another part of their social network (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), not the most important one or the most consequential it appears. For many of the students, their post-secondary experience was a source of burden or obligation, one that had to be dealt with minimally or as efficiently as possible—it didn't enhance what they were experiencing or offer them solutions to their life challenges. For some, failure was not the most crucial thing they were dealing with—it was barely managed, along with everything else, until it couldn't be.

Taken together, the conditions of vocational education, and the implications for its students and faculty, prevent us from meaningful relationships with our mass student population, let alone afford us the conditions for meaningfully engaging their families and communities—the important aspects of our students' daily lives that they bring with them to every class. In terms of critical pedagogy, the daily struggles and lived realities of students and instructors are a meaningful starting point for critical consciousness development in the classroom (Freire, 1970,

2007). Students' lives and experiences as funds of knowledge are especially relevant to SSW

given most have direct experiences of marginalization, systems of bias and oppression, and in the

classroom can make the connections between the oppressive systems and institutions that impose

limitations and barriers on marginalized groups. This, combined with their own experiences of

social services, render their funds of knowledge very valuable both in the classroom and as

future social services workers. The opportunity to critically reflect on the every day, the routine

systems and social relations of their lives, and to have the freedom of the time to do this

reflection is our responsibility as social justice educators because it is possibly the only space left

in their fractured lives to do so. Here we have the opportunity for a transformative kind of

academic and social integration, instead of the separation that is seen as necessary for persistence

according to Tinto early departure theory (1993, 1997). The opportunity is the space to separate

temporarily from aspects of our daily lives and render them up for view and reflection in order to

problem-pose that reality and develop critical consciousness about their worker-student lives and

implications for practice (Shor, 1987). Class, and the time to be there, means they benefit from

the funds of knowledge of others; a place where they can be in the same space with others who

experience similar and different things and can inspire their critical consciousness better perhaps

than the instructor they are alienated from in the classroom by class status and education level

(Shor, 1987). It is up to the teacher to initiate this process (Shor, 1987) and engage this

knowledge as a strategic resource—before they leave—bringing these experiences into the

classroom, engaging this fund of knowledge as a heuristic device, just as those who work with

the funds of knowledge concept bring households into the classroom for younger learners

(González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The onus for connection and relationship is on the instructor,

a valuable lesson to remember from the professional realm as it is on the social worker to build,

protect, and be responsible for maintaining a genuine relationship with service users in the professional context.

Their households are rich sources of helping and caregiving, especially relevant to the social work field and profession. Most of the withdrawn students who participated in this study were direct caregivers in their families. Although students' described families for the most part as a factor in their failure and withdrawal as they become overburdened or overwhelmed with these responsibilities in trying to adjust to the demands of academic life, in terms of household and family functioning or well-being, and in helping and supporting—these students are rich. Instead of identifying these issues as burdens or deficits (because they interfere with the ability to attend class, focus, or do the work), we could strategically engage their non-traditionality in the classroom and training project, thus debunking their "un-preparedness". We should be finding ways to integrate their families and communities, seeing caregiving priorities as part of their knowledge and experience, creating meaningful connection that allows students to cope with their burdens and obligations without severing them from their academic lives.

Social services education is based on the profession of social work, and as such, the concept of anti-oppressive practice is particular relevant and emphasized in the curriculum. This content and pedagogy renders highly visible the experiences of marginalization and structural inequality based on racism, misogyny, settler colonialism, language and religious imperialism, heterosexism, etc. that these students experience on a daily basis and that have powerful influence over their lives and future selves. It also renders visible the difference of many instructors—typically members of the dominant classes who have been very successful academically due to this identity and the ameliorative effects of dominant identity on higher education. Most of us are direct recipients of the benefits produced and maintained by the very

forces that oppose and restrict them. Their daily lives and their classroom experiences are funds of anti-oppressive practice knowledge that their instructors more often do not possess. Employing a funds of knowledge perspective highlights that we are under-prepared for them, not the other way around.

As the interviews showed, not all students faced serious consequences as a result of their withdrawal. However, the main priority for this study was not only to question our failure process on their behalf, but was also motivated by the loss to our professional field as a result of "at-risk" "low-rung" novices to the social work field as a result of significant withdrawal numbers. Gibelman & Furman (2008), researchers of human service organizations, note the critical value of para-professionals to an organization. Many human services organizations, although heavily influenced by the same managerialist and neoliberal forces as non-HSOs, but as grassroots and community organizations are trying to establish a more principled, social justice-oriented approach to service delivery. Based on organizational principles of empowerment and inclusivity, they recommend the reliance on para-professionals from diverse populations as such "non-degreed" workers are able to provide direct services while also representing community voices and lived experiences (p.112). The fundamental flaw in their logic is that diversity and lived experience are richer in the non-degreed population, or the inverse, that degreed workers do not represent communities and their struggles as well as non-degreed workers. However, the lived experience of the "para" or being "non-degreed" is of interest in itself.

Troubling the "under-prepared" hyper-rationalization. Transformative pedagogy needs to value and embrace a reciprocity between our professional selves, the pedagogical relationship, and the everyday lives of our students. Here González, et al., (2005) offer a practical avenue for providing the opportunity for reciprocal relationships of teaching and

learning advocated by Freire and critical pedagogy. Integrating their realities—their

responsibilities and obligations that we construct as distractions from their academic and social

adjustment to post-secondary demands—all of the things that are conveniently rationalized as

comprising "the wrong time" for the student to be in college—is crucial, and requires a paradigm

shift in vocational pedagogy. Integrating their daily realities—their funds of knowledge—into

formal study is mandatory not only if we are to retain them, but also because to fail to do so is an

alienating and dehumanizing process that focuses solely on "domesticating them in the methods

of the discipline" (Shor, 1987, p.100).

González et al.'s (2005) networks of exchange involve bringing funds of knowledge from

their home and personal life and experience into the classroom, but what is reciprocated?

Adapting the funds of knowledge approach requires the active engagement of teachers with

student households as learners involved in a reciprocity and network of exchange, where teachers

also assisted families in the roles that the young students often had to play as liaison between

English-speaking and non-English speaking families—such as language translation, helping to

fill out forms, providing advice regarding community resources they were knowledgeable about

because of their role as teachers (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This might mean that we

offer our professional help and skills in those situations, something that would certainly be seen

as a boundary drift or as not within our role to do as educators at all. This would be a real

departure from our current pedagogical orientation, but in terms of relationship-building and

providing some level of practical support (e.g. referrals, brokering of services, service

navigation, help filling out government forms, etc.) as is the orientation of a social services

worker, might be consistent with our values and principles more so than passively waiting for the

student to interact with us.

Critical pedagogy serves as the orientation we should undertake when working with primarily what are constructed as "at-risk" populations. This is an identity that is reinforced by their community college participation and third class educational status (Shor, 19987), and worsened for those who are unsuccessful even for post-secondary education at its lower vocational rungs: quick, focused, narrow, and intrinsically tied to labour market employability. Taking up Freire in this social services context, pedagogy is further transformative if it is consistent with the values and ethics of the social work profession under which it toils. As has been explored in this thesis, the process of academic-turned-vocational failure as it leads to mandatory withdrawal is problematic in light of social work values. It could be argued that the adult education model of community colleges respects the social work values of self-determination, autonomy, and honouring people's attempts at life goals, no matter the result. However, one could question the principle of informed consent in this context; as the students demonstrated, they had little knowledge that failure might lead to withdrawal. In terms of the autonomy assumed in adult education, it seems as though the failure process may have the effect of nullifying agency and producing a fog of sorts, where the student moves along the trajectory passively until removal. In terms of practice, the lack of relationship most of these students had with their faculty is certainly indicative of something broken in the community college system. Most demonstrated a lack of critical agency in that they willingly bore the responsibility for not averting their withdrawal by asking for help or expecting more from their faculty and college in terms of intervention and support. As the people who paid the price, these students blamed themselves and did not critically analyse the systems and institutional practices for which an anti-oppression lens (or critical consciousness) would have prepared them.

In this regard, Freire would say that no student can be under-prepared for genuine democratic education, because of every human's innate right to realization of their potential and to come to education as an act of liberation of that realization. Instead, we may have set up the rules where only certain people can be successful, those "prepared" with the right backgrounds and the right skills. Here Varenne & McDermmot (1998) remind us as educational actors that we make both success and failure possible, but often step away from any meaningful accountability for failure.

Knowing more about the experience of failure and mandatory withdrawal should inspire a different response, recognizing two things from this study. First, students have most of the cards stacked against them, and that these cards significantly interfere with their ability to adjust academically and socially to college demands (a critical element in persistence; Tinto, 1993). Second, the process of failure, at least in the community college context with this particular group of students, seems to involve an automatic pilot function, where the student is no longer in control of the journey and it is ended for them abruptly by withdrawal. Recognition that the cards are stacked against them in reality means that for many students, they were unlikely to be successful under traditional institutional conditions and practices. The "bad timing" rationale appears a valid reason for counselling students to postpone or suspend their education at least temporarily, as these students noted that some of their problems resolved and that they were in a better position to try again. However there were several students who re-affiliated but were unsuccessful in their second and third attempts. For those with bigger more permanent hurdles, there would appear to some validity to the idea that traditional post-secondary education is not for everyone. Many of these students were worse off for trying at the "wrong time." Less-than-ideal post-secondary records and a large student debt with no credential to show for it are

significant consequences for trying at the wrong time or under the wrong conditions. The bad timing rationale needs to be questioned in light of the purpose and mandate of CAATs, established to embrace all students who would otherwise not be eligible for university studies (Ontario Department of Education, 1967; Skolnik, 2004). But these rationales must be resisted in an effort to combat deficit-thinking about student persistence. These kinds of rationales are convenient in that they leave our practices in tact. Transformative education, at least in this case transformative vocational education, must embrace those hurdles (whether temporary or more long-term) as part of allowing the student to bring their life into the classroom, not expecting them to be able to compartmentalize and focus more on school. Rather, find ways to bring their whole selves to the process with willing educators who will engage with problems such as lack of daycare or family bereavement or mental health problems as everyday struggle and find ways to not only help the student persist away from failure but perhaps to enrich pedagogy. The post-secondary experience overall should at least be one where the student experiences positive connections and increases their relationships and social integration, and in turn, has a chance for their participation to influence knowledge, for their voice to be heard and contribute to content and pedagogy—the genuine promise of reciprocity upon which critical and transformative education is possible. However, the reality is that their final interaction with faculty and the institution is often only a note on the transcript that they have been withdrawn when they were expecting to see their next semester's schedule.

In many ways the timing rationale would seem to make better claim: "they are over-burdened", and un/under-prepared for our methods and practices. This hyper-rationalization stands in direct contrast to elements of critical pedagogy—that no one is un/under-prepared for education; educators need to find the ways to reach every student. An orientation toward seeing

their whole lives as funds of knowledge, bringing all of their lives into the classroom, may even help to protect against the lack of agency that takes over during the failure process.

The power of the un/under-prepared hyper-rationalization is in its deficit-orientation, blaming the student for not being able to succeed under the conditions in which others do, blaming their academic capacity prior to entry. The gaze remains on the student for making it through our processes of success/failure. A common alternative to this hyper-rationalization is different in that a gaze is cast on the educator, but quickly dashed.

"I Didn't Fail You; You Failed Yourself"

Another common and convenient hyper-rationalization for failure and withdrawal is to blame not their level of academic preparation for post-secondary studies but their academic behaviour while in their programs. What was demonstrated in this study is that the process of failure overwhelms some students and they persist in auto-pilot mode until they are removed, some without evening being aware of their removal they are so deeply disconnected. We have to adjust our expectations of student agency and initiative when students are experiencing failures, and we have to change how we currently respond institutionally—which is a tendency to hyperationalize the process and blame the victim. When we individualize failure, we destroy agency (Varenne & McDermott, 1998) because we erase from view and implication the social conditions that make failure a daily reality. The under-prepared hyper-rationalization noted above is akin to the deficiency theories of culture or difference in the context of higher education, which according to Varenne & McDermott (1998) is a "bogus attempt" to obscure the power behind the construct—that this is a structure and system that has been put in place by people for other people. In this case, it obscures the powerful system of gatekeeping put in place by people who were very successful at it for a group to sort its own way through on the guise of

merit, ability, and effort. It is at this moment that those of us who are educators of dominance are conveniently let off the hook in a colour-blind or colonially innocent approach to both the failure and erasure of forced out students—it was their fault, we did what we were supposed to, and they did not. Although not all instructors in community colleges represent dominant social identities, for the most part the college academy is primarily white and middle class. The institutional systems of failure and success that we have relied on for decades were constructed by educational actors during a time when there was even less diversity among faculty than we have today. In an act of critical reflexivity, all educators of dominance need to come to understand that these systems and their practices are not benign, and to question our ability to genuinely engage in liberatory education with those othered as "at-risk" when we take up institutionalized forms of understanding pedagogy and practice. As a personal response and an institutional response to failure, "We do not need to explain it; we need to confront it" (McDermott, 1987, p.363).

What individualizing failure or blaming the victim does is reproduce the hierarchy of the professions administering to those in need—that these under-prepared students require our compassion, and need our professional interventions in the form of remedial teaching skills and institutional support services. Lacking a sense of agency, as we saw in the interviews, seems to have more to do with systems of limits, regulations, marginalization, and a lack of opportunity for self-determination. This reality seems to be exactly what these students have ample preparation for—and perhaps it is not learned helplessness, but rather an experience of lacking agency that renders the individual immobile when immersed in it. In this way, the world that creates these systems (gatekeeping, vocational education, higher education) remains unchallenged, and even makes sense. Ultimately this is the purpose of a hyper-rationalizing

inequality—a dialogue about failure that justifies their professional fate. Gatekeeping is questioned in the democratic exercise of higher education in community colleges. As Shannon (1998) reminds us, it is the professional class that names the problem, defines its parameters, and creates the rules. In this context, professions and its educators establish the rules for academic success and subsequent vocational entry, or failure at both. That is not to say that social services workers are failed social workers—as this is definitely not the case—but rather that college was their only or best option with the resources they had at the time. This has significant ramifications for everyday personal and community life, as the college disinvites the student back to the community of precarious labour, with a terrible educational track record to overcome, and likely in debt.

Varenne & McDermott (1998) invite us to question what we as educators "make for others" (p. 215). From the results of this study, we can see the highly contextual forms of failure that necessitate different responses based on a better understanding of the process. Understanding that failure is immobilizing, and understanding that most of these students do not have meaningful integration with us, means that a different response is needed. For example, several forms of failure were evident in this study: developmental failure (or a student who just doesn't seem able to adjust to the academic demands, like Lorna); or structural failure (like Selena who did not get her accommodations in time or Delores with her horrendous commute), or capacity failure (like Tamara, who just had too much going on in her personal life to focus on school). The barriers may be common, but the shape and character shift. We cannot rationalize a universal response to failure, especially in the community college context where academic failure leads to program failure, and in turn, vocational closure to those whose knowledge is on the very margins that we serve as a profession.

Troubling the "you failed yourself" hyper-rationalization. All this is not to say that we better reflect our professional values and principles pedagogically by allowing professional imperative to intervene to creep into the pedagogical project. As social workers we may want to correct deficiencies, broaden limitations, destroy barriers, or improve services—this is our professional orientation. But it is not their personal lives that need our professional intervention, but rather the failure process in which we participate. Interestingly the students for the most part did not see us as having an additional burden of responsibility to intervene on their struggles or failure. This taking of full responsibility on behalf of students is reflective of a domesticating and alienating educational experience that is characteristic of vocational education according to Shor (1987). Here Shannon's (1998) concept of "reverse interventions" is intriguing. Instead of looking how to intervene further in the lives of "at-risk" individuals (usually used as a euphemism for "poor" according to Shannon), we misunderstand and therefore discount their strengths. Rather, Shannon asserts that we should ask ourselves how their lives, their experiences, and their strengths should intervene in the process of learning or education and question our lack of response as faculty to their dismissal and absence.

Grades are suggestive of academic ability but they are not wholly indicative of ability or future ability, as personal life problems or stressors such as a pregnancy can interfere with grade achievement but do not affect academic ability, just performance. Arguably, neither are grades alone indicative or suggestive of the potential for good and ethical social work practice capacity or suitability. On the other side though, community college para-professional programs focus on the applied and the practical, often at the cost of the broad and theoretical. This means that these programs more accurately reflect the actual practice context of the para-professional. Rationally, this would mean that failure in our classes more accurately reflects a potential lack of ability in

the field. However, one could argue that perhaps it is the narrow or a-theoretical orientation and

minimal preparation for the complexity of the issues at hand that are also problematic for

persistence. However, it is the primary assumption in this project that many students do not have

the same opportunity to achieve academically and prove their ability as others. Their personal

experiences and those of their families are an asset to social work, but the success/failure

structures that we impose on them mean that we may be excluding too many great future social

services workers and our communities.

Indifferent to how it is rationalized or explained, the end result is that the students

themselves are just gone, vanished by the program and replaced by another novice professional

hopeful or community college student trying to figure out if social services or college is for

them. But if we only have the perspectives of the successful, we are missing part of the

knowledge needed to serve our communities more holistically and from various perspectives.

> As citizens, as teachers, even as reformers, our questions have been focused on who is
> going to be acquired by failure and who by success; there is only so much of each to go
> around. If we take seriously that failure is an institutional fabrication, a mock-up for
> scapegoating, a mystification, a culturally mandated foolishness that keeps us all in our
> respective places, what would an explanation of failure be, and why would we expect
> failure to have any relation to the traits of the children who come to our schools
> (McDermott, 1987, p.363)?

Students become the "scapegoats" (McDermott, 1987, p.363) of what is a falsely

individualized process. In an open access institution such as the CAAT's, we agreed to a low bar:

"…to meet the relevant needs of all adults within a community, at all socio-economic levels, of

all kinds of interests and aptitudes, and at all stages of educational achievement" (Ontario

Department of Education, 1967, p. 8). This bar should be set at the level that would allow for

anyone experiencing life's barriers to education. The bar should be help at the same level

throughout their programs, not just at entry. If they made it in, they should be able to make it out,

or at least not to be kicked out under the faulty rationale that they failed with agency and sole responsibility.

Transformative Vocational Education

The consequences of mandatory withdrawal for the disinvited student include that they do not participate in the environment where so much growth and opportunity to is supposed to be readily available. Not that they would not find this arena or opportunity otherwise, but here is at least one opportunity to understand that systemic and social conditions are changeable and in their power and that of others to transform. This is what is transformative about post-secondary education—the opportunity to engage in ideas and dialogue with diverse others and perspectives, not only to prepare for future professional endeavours. The limits to transformative potential posed by the narrow focus of vocational programs (with primary focus on courses related to training and preparation for a career/job and less focus on general education and the liberal arts, etc.) or the a-critical perspective associated with vocational education (Shor, 1987) may mean that the potential for critical consciousness development is limited in these settings. However social services vocational programs have unique qualities that overcome these traditional characteristics of vocational education, setting the stage for transformative opportunities. Based on anti-oppressive theory and perspectives, oriented toward the community rather than the formal treatment system, and having a rich activist history of social work to draw from, social services worker classrooms are fertile ground for resisting the usual tropes of vocational education.

Social work as conceived of in this study is an activist endeavor, not merely a professional one. Despite limitations posed by in community colleges (Shor, 1987), it is possible to adopt a radical democratic pedagogy consistent with social work values, ethics, and principles.

For example, helping students to engage and participate more fully—by integrating their daily lives, their families, and their struggles directly in a relationship of reciprocity, as advocated by the funds of knowledge approach. This may be as simple as allowing students to bring children to classroom spaces when childcare cancels at the last minute, which is a practice not allowed in the SSW program due to institutional liability concerns and the practical matter of distraction in class. College instructors are very used to distracted students, and dealing with the spontaneous as learning opportunities in classes. It is these moments where educators can make a choice to respond as an agent of the institution or as a transformative agent of critical pedagogy, opening the possibility for bringing life and community into the classroom as practical methods for supporting distracted students and engaging what they know in the activist social work project.

Completing a professional program successfully does not guarantee or automatically produce critical consciousness (Bizzell, 1992). However, learning to see things from a social work perspective and reflecting on their experiences, whether or not they enter the profession, will help to foster critical consciousness by recognizing their right to engage in research and academic environments (Appadurai, 2006) and participating in environments that produce formal knowledge (Bizzell, 1992). This presents the opportunity for their "non-academic cultural literacies" to interact with our discipline-specific literacies in an ongoing knowledge diffusion project (Bizzell, 1992). People cannot fail at the process of learning and knowing. Rather, they fail at the structures professionals determine demonstrate knowledge and competence. This is not to say their opportunities should be limitless. To some degree, as for students who were immobilized by things like serious and debilitating mental health problems, the process should perhaps be postponed for them if they do not have the capacity at the moment to act on their own behalf, so they do not continue to incur the financial and academic consequences of something

over which they have little control. We should spend commensurate energy questioning the institutional structures of success and failure as perhaps built on outdated notions of academic success and its direct relationship to vocational capacity and success. It is unrealistic though to expect the profound cultural shift it would require to be more concerned with learning and professional practice than institutional accountability and pressures. However, to do otherwise is in itself a dehumanizing process for the educational actor, and reflects poorly on our professional values, principles, and commitments. As part of an activist social work and critical pedagogical orientation, we must consider who better to train and empower, "to learn to mobilize and organize so that we can better supervise the state as it fulfills or fails to fulfill its constitutional duty" (Freire, 2005, p.20). Our course content is rife with examples of the decay of the social welfare state and social contract.

Students marginalized by both their social identities as "at-risk" or under-prepared students and people who have extensive history with institutional practices and policies, especially those that can serve to create and perpetuate socio-economic consequences, are in a valuable and unique position to translate that lived experience into transformative practice. Also, in terms of their future professional identities, as professionals they may be better to supervise the state than those who are most closely tied to its social contract and most dependent on its fulfillment, for example, Ontario's new policy paradigm of free post-secondary tuition for low-income families, social assistance reform, immigration policy reform, or minimum-wage policy. Those whose journeys involved structural and systemic barriers and hurdles potentially have greater understanding and empathy for the structural and systemic causes of the primarily socio-economic difficulties social services users face. Without such funds of knowledge, social services knowledge and professionalization is only partial and therefore incomplete. These funds

of knowledge are deeply connected to the grassroots and community work typical of para-professional social services work. Practitioners with these experiences often represent community voices and experience in the organizations and institutions where they are employed. Perhaps it is the para-professions themselves that enhance and provide community-level legitimacy for professional practice, as is the case for social services workers—more likely to be in front-line work in community-based organizations, with lower pay and diminished recognition, yet thankfully still protected by a regulatory body and sanctioned for this important work. Regrettably, a great many hopefuls do not make it through the relatively low-threshold vocational education process at community colleges, and this should be a great concern for the professional field and related pedagogical gatekeeping practices, and the potential for transformative vocational education that social services inherently provides.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Overall, this study confirms what is known about the highly contextual nature of persistence in post-secondary education: that GPA is the primary determinant of persistence, and that the fit between the student's characteristics and that of their chosen program and institution is one of the primary predictors of completion. As confirmed in this study, many early leavers left their SSW program early for reasons of fit, and that most students had multiple roles and obligations that interfered with their ability to adjust to the demands and rigours of their programs. Overwhelmingly, struggling students did not access or otherwise make use of available institutional support services designed to help them make this adjustment, improve their academic skills and standing, or to avert incompletion. Most experienced a very isolated process where they carried out their departure without much guidance, interference from the institution, or action on their own behalf.

Some of these same themes were echoed in the qualitative interviews with involuntarily withdrawn students, or students who were kicked out of the SSW program. Surprisingly, nine out of the 10 students in the study believed that they had the academic capacity or ability to be successful—most noted "I knew I could do it" academically, if they could just put the time and effort in. Therefore, these students held beliefs that they were capable and could be successful under the right conditions, or had high self-efficacy—but they did not or could not put the effort in to be successful. On the surface, it seems a contradiction—a disconnect from the reality that they were doing very poorly but could have taken at least some steps to alter their course at least in terms of seeking help or advice. Most cited a list of common circumstances that prevented them from being able to put in the time and effort needed. They all had a lot of burdens and obligations outside of their school lives, and they too made very little use of any institutional

supports in an effort to avert the failure and withdrawal process. Here the qualitative findings enhance the survey findings about their support service use: most students also had very poor recall of their faculty, their grades and performance, and their courses names which signals a lack of integration or connection both socially and academically. Many also exhibited practices and behaviours that signaled another disconnect: surprised at their failure, yet preparing papers at the last minute or missing a lot of classes. What was surprising though is that there was a high level of perceived fit between their aspirations and their SSW programs, as most were certain they wanted a career as a SSW, wanted to complete college and enter the field as quickly as possible. Several even had personal experiences of social services that would seem to enhance one's certainty about their commitment to a career in social services. In terms of poor fit, most of the students also talked about being sure they could "do it", successfully complete their programs if it were not for their many burdens, or their poor mental health at the time they were in the SSW program—essentially that it may have been the wrong time to have attempted college.

Thus what is involved in the process of failure and withdrawal as students who experienced it reveals a pedagogy of failure heavily entrenched in vocational education or community college settings. A failure pedagogy assumes a lack of preparation on behalf of students at the lower rungs of the educational hierarchy, does not recognize or value the vocationally-rich knowledge they hold and the democratic aims their involvement and voices represent, blames them for failure in a heavily institutionalized process and for not being able to turn their situation around, and despite welcoming them in through open doors, shuts them out in an isolating process of failure and withdrawal. Understanding better how students experience the process of failure as overwhelming, isolating, and immobilizing allows this pedagogy of failure to be made transparent and investigated in its implications. The following chapter discusses the

implications for the social work profession, community colleges, and social work educators and their praxis.

Examining Failure and Withdrawal

This study was undertaken in order to examine the concerning process of withdrawal, a process that led a significant number of students to be removed from social services programs at one large community college. Findings led to an examination of this process and its consequences in light of critical pedagogy and transformative vocational education. The qualitative interviews in this exploratory study also revealed data about the experience of failure and mandatory withdrawal itself that should lead us to question our standard assumptions about student behaviour and accountability as post-secondary adult students. The method in which we carry out withdrawal is essentially dehumanizing—leaving too much to the student to bear in terms of accountability for failing courses and understanding the consequences of failure in terms of the institutional response to too much failure (mandatory withdrawal). Most dehumanizing about the process is the lack of human interaction and opportunity for dialogue once it takes over. It seems as though institutional help, whether offered or sought, could not penetrate the failure process as it leads to withdrawal.

Indeed the interviews demonstrated what would appear on the outside as some level of passivity on behalf of students—some for good reasons, such as others matters consuming their energy and occupying their agency—but for some it seems like things happened to and around them. If the goal of critical pedagogy is to empower students to act as transformative agents in their own lives and in the lives of their communities, we should also be encouraging this in their own lives while in college, in our classrooms and programs, in their immediate lives, not just when they are done because some don't "get done". It is to a lack of self-regulated learning and

self-efficacy that the familiar refrain is invoked by faculty steeped in deficit-orientations: "well, if they don't have the skills to make it here, what is going to happen to them in the field?" as part of our gatekeeping rationale for our pedagogical practice. It is the learning that is possible about achieving goals despite barriers and contending with institutional forces that is what is valuable about what they can do in the field, more so than can they meet deadlines and show up for work every day—the experience of going to college and completing a program is not analogous to "what it takes in the field." We are only looking at professional behaviour, and not valuable professional knowledge and experience. We teach how to help people foster and maintain hope in difficult situations, and how to act on their own behalf despite barriers and limitations, but this did not transcend to the student internalizing these messages—perhaps because most of these students were not around long enough to engage that material, or missed that important learning due to poor attendance. The findings of this study show the faulty deficit logic of viewing this as passivity and an inherent quality of the student, rather than an inherent characteristic of the institutional process. Processes that limit or rob people of their agency and self-determination are oppressive processes against which critical educators commit not only to resist but also to make transparent through examination of the daily lives of those in the classroom.

Implications for Critical Pedagogy

What the interviews showed is that failed out students did not act on their own behalf in time to alter their course. They did not carry out action to save themselves from withdrawal as we as educators expect them to, or that we expect is easily done. This speaks to a pedagogy of failure. It lacks the understanding of the power of the process in that it just does not make sense that students did not intervene in their own best interests. Anti-oppressive social work and critical pedagogy guide us to look at what doesn't make sense from the perspective of systems

and processes of oppression, asking not why they didn't act but rather what prevented them from acting? If their educational experience is meant to be liberatory or transformative, learners must reject the passivity that is made possible by the institution and its actors, and educators must provide the opportunities and conditions for this to happen. This will require that they too engage in this process of transformation as they undertake their vocational studies. A hopeful sign though is that some did resist the process by accepting only the removal from Seneca itself, but not from post-secondary education or the profession altogether. But as the data from the qualitative dimension of this study reveals, the agency to do so in their pedagogical lives seems missing. Perhaps this is because, as Freire notes, it is the educator's responsibility to acknowledge that we have not facilitated the necessary liberatory pedagogical opportunities, bringing this institutional process into dialogic examination in the classroom. We have not worked from a practical funds of knowledge orientation that would facilitate this process in vocational programs. Instead, educators in this context participate in that passivity in terms of allowing embedded institutional practices and processes to take over unquestioned, as we do with the process of academic failure. This reflects the caution that Verenne and McDermott's (1998) work on the institutional creation of success and failure offers. We create this process and reality, and can disrupt it, but as a process in which the institution and associated disciplines and actors are heavily invested, this will take resistance work. This is a tough challenge for educators in the context these students described.

From a critical pedagogy perspective, there are some serious shortcomings related to this context. For example, how does one engage in dialogical practice when the student is suddenly gone, escorted out the door by computerized and administrative processes—often with no contact by a person in the institution to explain their options? More complexly, how does one

engage in dialogic education with students who do not come to class or who do not have the language to explain their circumstances because of mental health problems or life stressors that take them off campus as soon as class is over?

According to Freire, learning is a collective process, one that is co-constructed through social interactions and shared experience between students and teachers as they exchange roles reciprocally throughout the learning encounter. The lack of social interaction and dialogue in general between students and faculty and between students and other institutional actors is cause for concern in terms of pedagogy and the genuine opportunities faculty are responsible for creating in order to facilitate learning. This may be in part be due to a failure on behalf of faculty and the institution to value or even understand their funds of knowledge—unique to them as community college students—not only in terms of their contribution to the learning process but also their professional capacity for the field. This lack of interaction and dialogue must be addressed as a failed opportunity to develop the conditions necessary for critical consciousness and liberatory education. The extent to which faculty can create opportunities for meaningful interaction both inside and outside of the classroom with every student is severely constrained in the community college context with large classes and teaching loads, further exacerbated by the reality that students can barely afford the time to be on campus. Therefore institutional conditions that prevent interaction need to be examined, as we cannot expect the character of our students' lives to change.

Implications for Institution and Institutional Processes

What is interesting though is that students did not report shortcomings of the program or institution, but rather bore the shortcomings themselves. The experience of failure for this group of students—highly burdened at home or at work, and having what seems to be minimal social

interaction with either fellow students or faculty/coordinators, and a lack of support overall both at home and on campus—seems to involve a particular kind of autopilot, a sweeping up experience where the student continues on through each day without making any adjustments or experiencing any improvements, until in the end they stumble upon that they have been mandatorily withdrawn. The failure process seems to unfold itself, carrying the student along, until the door is closed—often without the student knowing they are on the other side of the door and there is no sign pointing how to get back in. The failure experience appears to be related to isolation as well, as students lack any engagement with help seeking from either friends, family, or services at the college. Several students went to great lengths to have the failure process and even the withdrawal undetected by family, adding to the emotional distress that most revealed they were experiencing concurrently or as a result of the failure. Echoing Varenne and McDermott (1998), if we as institutional actors who make both success and failure possible understood that the failure process involves a lack of agency—whether it was present prior to the failure as a component of their marginalized academic identities as community college students or whether it was enhanced by the emotional and psychological effects of failing—perhaps our practices as both educators and as an institution should shift. An orientation toward understanding and valuing their funds of knowledge, and lessons from critical pedagogy, are particularly useful in this regard, reminding us that these students have exactly what this profession needs in order to sustain its transformative orientation and that this transformative orientation begins in the vocational preparation for it—in the classroom, and the community college student and classroom presents a uniquely valuable opportunity for both.

The fundamentals of critical pedagogy remind us that a humanizing approach to education means that students cannot be blamed for their failure and that if lived experience were

to be valued as legitimate knowledge, this would prevent students from blame for their failure

(Kincheloe, 2008). The lack of agency (a critical ingredient of critical consciousness) and action

during the process of failure demonstrated by the withdrawn students in the study, would be

considered by Freire as evidence of the banking model of education that he warned us against.

Two paradoxes were examined in this study. First, the reality that volumes of students participate

in higher education and vocational education as a result of open door admissions policies yet

high numbers of students not only do not complete their programs but are prevented from doing

so by mandatory withdrawal practices. Second, that social work practice involves recognizing

the institutional and socio-economic forces that limit the life chances and opportunities of

marginalized peoples and working toward transformative change in partnership with service

users and that this practice does not translate into the classroom or our pedagogical practices,

largely due to the institutional limits that make success and failure possible in the first place. In

light of these paradoxes, recommendations for pedagogical practice involve: finding ways of

valuing both these students and their lived knowledge, improving our response to failure and

failing students as educators from a critical pedagogy perspective, and focusing on altering the

institutional response to not assume or expect students in this context to be able to turn their

circumstances around before our withdrawal response.

Implications for Community Colleges

Noted earlier, large metropolitan community colleges often embody conditions that do

not facilitate meaningful interaction and relationships between students, educators, and other

institutional actors such as support and advising staff. Typical of most post-secondary

institutions currently, pressures for accountability and falling operational financial support

restricts staffing and services and many processes that used to involve human interaction are now

automated, from enrollment and registration to more consequential processes such as withdrawal. The reliance of many programs on partial load or part-time faculty means that educators are often poorly tethered to the institution, dividing their time among multiple jobs. Part of their original purpose and design, community colleges are also usually commuter colleges (Ontario Department of Education, 1967), with both instructors and students bustling through their day and spending little time outside of class on campus or in non-academic activities that contribute to better social integration. The significant number of early leavers in community college programs is an ongoing concern as colleges struggle with student retention in light of growing institutional competitiveness, increased reliance on student tuition in light of declining operational revenues, and accountability frameworks that value completion statistics as effectiveness. Keeping each and every student through to completion is imperative to live up to our mandate, and community colleges need to effect programming that overcomes the limitations the institutions' characteristics themselves contribute to the problem.

In light of the findings of this study, community colleges have the rationale necessary to examine institutional practices as part of their retention efforts. Faculty labour unions have significant evidence for resolving these conditions for the benefit of both students and faculty, such as pressures to improve full-time to part-time instructor ratios. Instructors need to be supported to have more time and opportunity to establish meaningful interactions and relationships with students, such as creating teaching assistant positions to help cope with large classrooms and big teaching loads. Findings may be most relevant to faculty and student support services. We need to shift our understanding of student help-seeking behaviour and agency, especially during the difficult time of experiencing failure. The reality is, students who are precarious in terms of persistence due to low or failing grades do not seem to reach out for help

to the institution. This study made obvious that institutional actors must question the failure imperative and process entirely in light of the knowledge of what these students experienced. We need to stop expecting their agency to pull them up and through because the experience of failure seems to involve a paralyzing effect on agency. Community colleges are part of students' communities, not the other way around. What we know from community social work is that the better integrated a person or group is to their community, the better their health and social outcomes. The same logic applies to students, as Tinto (1993, 1997, 2012) demonstrates and these findings confirm. What should not be questioned, and often is regrettably, is the open door mission of community colleges. Open door admissions do not mean under-preparedness, as this study demonstrates. The path to withdrawal for failing students is too slippery, and this should be the focus of our efforts to retain academically precarious students who have the potential to be very effective professionals.

Implications for Praxis

The institutional response to failure is remediation, probation, and academic skills workshops. But a social work response to failure might be more comprehensive in that how the student views themselves influences their beliefs and behaviours, and their ability to exert influence over their life circumstances is the realm of social work practice. We also need to recognize their lack of support networks both on campus and in their personal lives and provide opportunities to build this resilience asset, just like we would with service users in the community. A community-engaged pedagogy would provide the foundation for building this into our teaching practice. Whether voluntary or more intrusive interventions are offered to students to help improve their performance, they have to believe in those interventions (Seirup & Rose, 2011) and also believe that those interventions will lead to an improvement in time. In other

words, there has to be some hope. Hopeful-oriented students tend to utilize more learning strategies and improve their skills, and have shown to attend more classes (Seirup & Rose, 2011).

We seem to worry more about the failure than the conditions that produce it—what comes across as a lack of agency (or self-regulated learning from the institutional perspective as a lack of agency as an individual characteristic or property, and not as a result of a lack of relationship or an effect of the failure process instead of cause). How can we revision our practice so that agency is developed or preserved? Is agency possible during the process of failure? We think that our students can just push through failure or use it as a wake-up call, we do so from a reductionist view of failure. Large teaching loads and class sizes also make banking forms of education convenient methods on which to rely for over-burdened faculty. This must be resisted, because lessons from critical pedagogy reinforced by the experiences of disinvited students in this study confirm that banking models of education do not inspire agency or the conditions necessary for its development. Pedagogical creativity is difficult for the vocational instructor, who quite likely does not have a professional teaching background or training as we are primarily hired for our specific vocational experience and expertise. The character of teaching is also very different in a community college versus a university, without the opportunities for research and sabbatical that might energize our pedagogical praxis. However, with teaching our primary focus, community college instructors have the genuine opportunity to develop teaching excellence based on the knowledge and expertise of learning from our students in the same way that Freire developed his expertise and theories from his students and their communities.

More importantly our relationship to students needs to be developed better and earlier, focusing on relentless interaction in those early weeks of their first semesters. Without the traditional opportunities at community colleges for social interaction or non-classroom campus activities with faculty, faculty have to create opportunities for frequent and meaningful interaction with students. This is not easy to do with the teaching expectations of community college faculty, often with five to seven courses and upwards of 40-50 students in each course. Faculty are expected to make meaningful interactions and relationships with 200-300 students. Responding to a pedagogy of failure though means this is necessary, both to resist and improve the institutional conditions that make this an uphill battle and to find ways of making relationship to the funds of knowledge they each hold. The concept of the funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) makes it possible to reconsider and reorganize failure, or at least recognize the reality that students are not responsible for their lack of success because of their innate traits, characteristics, and skills—thereby making it less possible they are scapegoated as solely responsible for their own failure. As the interviews demonstrated, there is no one particular trait that all of these students who failed and were withdrawn share—they were not a particular kind of student. However, once the process began—universally the failure and withdrawal was experienced as an overwhelming process characterized by a lack of agency, and a subsequent lack of action to respond to and confront it.

Instructors engaging in students' lives and experiences in an effort to discover their funds of knowledge is especially relevant to social services work given most have direct experiences of marginalization, systems of bias, and oppression. Because of such knowledge and experience, they are particularly prepared in the classroom to make the connections between the oppressive systems and institutions that impose limitations and barriers on marginalized groups and

communities. This preparation, combined with their own experiences of social services, render their funds of knowledge very valuable both in the classroom and as future social service workers in the field. It is up to the teacher to engage this knowledge as a strategic resource—before they leave—bringing these experiences into the classroom, engaging this fund of knowledge as a heuristic device, just as those who work with the funds of knowledge concept bring households into the classroom for younger learners (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Implications for Gatekeeping

The concern for the loss to the profession of these students and their knowledge and experience motivated this study. Personally, I met and taught students that I knew had the fire for activism and connection to community that the more activist community orientation of the social work profession needed, and the experiences of precarity and marginality that the field would benefit from prioritizing. In light of findings, it can be argued that GPA is not a strong indicator of professional capacity or future effectiveness. In fact it is student experience and lived knowledge that could be argued is a valuable indicator of their professional capacity. From a social work perspective, we understand the importance of agency to well-being and that there are significant structural and institutional that interfere with human agency. This knowledge applies to non-traditional students and their experiences of academic precarity. As educators, our efforts to retain academically precarious students not only is a good reflection of our continued anti-oppressive stance carried over from our practice, but a critical pedagogy orientation helps us maintain the promise of social justice we sought in our practice as social workers. It demonstrates an anti-oppressive and social justice commitment to our field when we commit to these students. This orientation and approach to praxis also helps to relieve some of the tension found between social work as a profession and social work education that motivated this study.

In light of these findings, transformational education is possible in vocational education and critical pedagogy grounds what makes this possible. Deficit thinking and banking forms of education may be common, but critical pedagogy and a funds of knowledge approach to praxis provides the antidote to these realities. They are also approaches that resonate most strongly with the social justice orientation we had as social work professionals, bringing that same potential and commitment into our praxis in the classroom. Ultimately, the activist orientation of our profession will be protected and enhanced by such praxis in vocational programs.

Post-script

As a result of this study, and the many conversations I had with colleagues about its progress and findings as I went along, there has been some attitudinal shift in practice and institutional procedure within the SSW program at Seneca College. I was able to talk with colleagues and administrators to shift the conversation away from expecting students to do the hard work of getting their grades back without individualizing the problem to the student—reminding faculty of the almost impossible task of managing school while managing their overly busy lives as workers and family members. I have been able to tag onto campus mental health awareness efforts to discuss the strong influence mental health problems have on our students, and the pressures they experience to manage their academic and personal lives under sometimes very difficult emotional conditions, and how both their busy lives and their mental health status influence their ability to reach out for help or support. Although withdrawal is maintained as an automatic process done by administrative software, all withdrawls have to be looked at individually and the decision to officially withdraw has to be approved by an academic chair after recommendation by the program coordinators. I am told that the numbers of mandatory withdrawals from the SSW program are down as a result of this work and these conversations.

With other faculty, I am able to have conversations about social justice education and why it is imperative that we find ways to retain the most academically and socially marginalized of our students, but the institutional barriers remain in place. Perhaps with the recent gains made by college faculty unions as a result of their nine-week strike, as well as the decision to unionize part-time and sessional instructors, the conditions will shift to make genuine relationships and quality interactions possible with our students. In terms of the tension under which I struggled to support both students and my profession, this study has absolved me of the belief that I had to keep everyone in class—for some, this cannot be expected. Engaging students while they lead such fractured lives and experience so much emotional strain is something probably even the best critical educator could not effectively accomplish. As a result of what I learned from this study, I will continue to promote our need for a community-engaged democratic orientation to our pedagogy, inviting students in through an open door carrying everything they can, and stop expecting them to be students first, but rather the real family members, workers, and community intellectuals that they are and finding ways to make that a priority in the program and in the classroom.

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Appendix A: Online Survey

Using Seneca's survey tools and formatted into questions with drop-down menu answers, the following will be emailed to participants as an online link.

"Thank you for agreeing to participate!

You have been invited to be complete this survey in order to better understand your social services education experience at Seneca College. The researcher (Tanya Shute) is trying to understand the experience of students who leave their SSW program early. The survey should take about 30 minutes. It is hoped that you would also be willing to take part in an interview as part of this research study in order to get a better understanding of your experience and your perspective, and you will be asked if you are willing to be interviewed at the end of the survey—it is completely voluntary."

The first screen will describe the study and involve a consent form approval drop-down. Consent screen: Before we get started, Seneca College needs me to review the confidentiality and ethical considerations of this study.

Part A: Ethics/Consent
I would like to remind you that your participation is voluntary and your responses to the interview questions will remain confidential. Only the research team (Tanya Shute, as well as Seneca College's Institutional Research supporters) will have access to your responses however they will be made anonymous before being passed on to Tanya Shute, the researcher. That means that she will not have access to your name or any other identifying information, only your responses. If there are any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, please feel free to skip them. The data will be securely stored for two years and then destroyed.

Are you willing to participate in this survey?
- o Yes, by responding to this survey I give my full consent to participate in this study.
- o No, I do not want to continue with this survey.
- o I will participate in the interview but not in the survey. Here is my phone number so that I can be contacted to arrange for the interview.

Note: One of the options above must be checked for the survey results to be valid. Only proceed to the survey if you checked Yes.

Part B:
B1. First, some demographic data [these are open boxes to be filled by participant]:
i) age now, and age at time of leaving the program
iii) ethno-racial identity
iv) marital status now and at time of leaving the program
v) do you have children? Did you have children when you were in the SSW program?

B2. What was your highest level of education before attending Seneca College's SSW program?
- o Highschool graduate
- o GED or Highschool Equivalency Certificate
- o Some post-secondary education
- o Post-secondary certificate, diploma, or trades qualification?
- o Bachelor's degree
- o Certificate or diploma above bachelor's level
- o Don't know
- o I prefer not to answer

B3. What best describes your status when you started the SSW program at Seneca college?
- o I started my program right after highschool
- o I started my program after a year (or more) of completing high school
- o I transferred from another college or university
- o I started my program after a year (or more) of completing another program from another college or university

B4. Has either of your parents (or guardians) ever attended a college or university?
- o Yes
- o No
- o Don't know
- o I prefer not to answer

B5. While you were in the SSW program, where did you live?
- o With parent(s) or other family members
- o With spouse or partner
- o With spouse/partner and children
- o With child or children
- o With friends
- o On my own
- o School residence
- o Other (please specify): _____
- o I prefer not to answer

B6. Funding
For each of the funding sources, please indicate whether it was a Major or Minor source of funds to meet your school expenses while at Seneca College in the SSW program. Expenses include tuition, books, travel and living expenses. [Options: Major, Minor or Did Not Use]

- a) Personal Savings
- b) Private loans
- c) Scholarship/Awards
- d) Parent/Family money
- e) Government student loans such as OSAP
- f) Other (specify)

B7. Did you work while you were attending Seneca's SSW program?
- o   Yes
- o   No

 If Yes, on average how many hours did you work per week?

B8. What best describes your current employment/education situation?
- o   I am working full-time
- o   I am working part-time
- o   I am going to school full-time
      If so, where and for what?
- o   I am going to school part-time
      If so, where and for what?
- o   I am not working but I am looking for work
- o   I am not working and I am not looking for work (e.g. off on maternity leave or taking time off for other reasons)
- o   I prefer not to answer

B9. If you are currently working, is your job related to the social services sector?
- o   Yes
- o   No

If yes, what kind of social services or community services work are you doing?

B10. If you did not return to any schooling, do you ever consider re-entering the SSW program? If no, why not?

Section C: Social Services Worker Program

C1. Was the SSW program your first-choice program?
- o   Yes
- o   No

   If you answered No, what was your first choice program?

C2. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being very weak and 5 being very strong) how sure that you wanted to be an SSW were you?

C3. Were you aware <u>before</u> you began your program that there was a professional distinction between social workers and social services workers?
- o   Yes
- o   No

If No, when did you learn of the distinction? _____

C3.a) Did it make a difference in terms of your future goals?
- o   Yes
- o   No

If yes, what difference did it make to you? [open box]

C3.b) Did it make a difference in terms of your commitment to completing the program?
- o Yes
- o No

If yes, what difference did it make to your commitment to being an SSW? [open box]

C4. How do you feel about social services work now? What statement best describes your goals:
- o I really want to work in the social services field
- o I currently work in the social services field
- o I am in a related educational program to allow me to work in social services
- o I have changed my career goals and I no longer wish to work in social services
- o I really wasn't that committed to a career in social services in the first place

Part D: Departure
D1.Which of the following statements best describes your primary goal when you started the SSW program at Seneca College?
After graduation from the SSW program, I planned to…
- o Apply to university
- o Obtain employment
- o Apply for a different program at Seneca College
- o Other (please specify): _____

D2. You left the SSW program early. What was the last semester you completed fully before leaving:
- o I did not finish first semester
- o I completed only the first semester
- o I completed the second semester
- o I completed the third semester
- o I left during the fourth semester
- o I don't know
- o I prefer to not answer

D3. Which statement best describes why you left before completing the program?
1) I dropped out
2) I just stopped going
3) I failed too many courses and I was withdrawn from the SSW program by the school
4) I took a break from school but will be returning to the SSW program
5) I realized SSW wasn't for me and I transferred to a different program at Seneca College
6) I realized SSW wasn't for me and I transferred to a different program in a different institution

An open-ended box will appear at end of this question asking: "Would you tell us more about that?"

D4. Were your grades a factor in your leaving early?

- o Yes
- o No

[If yes, respondents will be routed to the following Grades section before completing the rest of the survey. See Grades section.]

D5. What happened after you left the SSW program?
What was your main activity in the first 3-6 months after leaving the SSW program?
- o Working full-time
- o Working part-time
- o Looking for work
- o Travelling
- o Caring for family members
- o Going to another school. If so, please specify for where and for what?
- o Nothing
- o Illness
- o Other: Please specify _____
- o Prefer not to answer

GRADES section: for participants who responded that poor grades were a factor, or who noted that they were mandatorily withdrawn from the program. B4 c) or B5 Yes will be routed to these questions.

G.1 Overall, if you left the program due to poor grades what do you think are the reasons for your grades not being successful: Please state in order of importance (1=highest, 2=second highest) the reasons that you feel contributed the low marks that resulted in being withdrawn?
- a) lack of interest in classes
- b) lack of interest in program
- c) financial problems/concerns
- d) personal/family problems
- e) employment pressures
- f) effort was high but could not achieve minimum grades
- g) lack of services or support to help achieve/maintain grades

G2. If your grades had anything to do with your leaving the program before graduating, did you ever attend any support services or programs at Seneca while in the SSW program once you realized your grades were not ideal?
- o Yes
- o No

If so, what programs did you make use of? Overall what did you find the most helpful?

If you did not, was there a specific reason why you did not?

G3. If your grades had anything to do with your leaving the SSW program early, did anyone speak to you about your grades at all?
- o Yes

    o   No

If yes, who?
   a) Faculty
   b) Academic Advisor
   c) Coordinator
   d) Family
   e) Friends
   f) Other: Please specify _____

If no, did you approach anyone for help? Who did you approach? Did it help at all?

G4. You might have been offered a chance to go into the GAP program and do some courses before applying to return to the SSW program. To your best recollection, were you offered an opportunity to attend GAP (would have been a note on your transcript):
   o   Yes
   o   No
   o   Don't know

If yes, did you access the program? IF not, tell us why you decided not to….
If no, did you enquire with anyone at the school about what you could do to get back into the SSW program? If so, who? Was it helpful?

G2. What do you think your faculty or the school could have done differently or better to help you stay to complete your program?

A thank you screen will appear, and remind participants of contact information should they have any further questions. On this screen they will respond to a yes/no question as to whether or not they would agree to learn more and possibly participate in the interview process or request more information to consider further involvement.

"Thank you very much for your time. The information you have provide to us is very important and will help to make the educational experience a better one for future SSW students.
If you would like to take part in a 30-45 minute interview with a researcher, for which you will be reimbursed a $25 stipend, please indicate so here. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and if you decide not to participate, we thank you for helping us with this survey.

   o   I agree to participate in the interview and a researcher may contact me at:
   o   I do not want to participate in the interview.
   o   I agree to have the researcher contact me to tell me more about the interview and may consider participating

If you have any questions about this survey or the study, please contact Tanya Shute, principal researcher and SSW faculty member.

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with willing participants a small stipend will be offered to offset the costs of participation, such as any transportation or childcare costs incurred. Sample questions will include:

1) When you entered the program how certain were you that you wanted to be an SSW? Were you more interested in attending post-secondary or in attaining your career goal?
2) When you were in the program, did you see yourself as starting work after graduation or transitioning into a university program?
3) Tell me about your commitment to the program. Did it change over time with us? What do you make of why your commitment changed, if it did?
4) Were you aware when you began the program that there was a professional distinction between social workers and social services workers? If not, did that realization in any way affect your commitment or motivation to continue?
5) Tell me more about your academic performance while in the SSW program at Seneca. For example, did you find the academics demands too hard or easy for you?
6) Tell me more about the factors do you think contributed to your academic performance? For example, did you find it difficult to adjust or cope with the expectations of the program or post-secondary schooling?
7) Did you take advantage of any of the college's support services? If no, why not?
8) Tell me about the experience of being withdrawn from the program. What was that like? What were the consequences for you in your personal life? What is a positive or negative thing for you?
9) Tell me more about what you did in the period immediately afterward? For example, were you already working? Did you find work? Did you go to another institution or switch programs?
10) Overall, what did the experience mean to you?
11) In your opinion, how can we better support students who may have similar experiences and prevent their getting to the withdrawal stage?

I also intend to focus on some questions related to their experience of social work in light of their withdrawal from the professional program:

1) Tell me about your experience of how well the program fit for you and your personal life? Were you certain that social work profession was a good fit for you?
2) Did you persist with the profession and perhaps enter a social service-related job or go back to school to obtain similar credentials? Or did you leave behind social services work when you were withdrawn?
3) In your opinion, do you think social work has a unique responsibility to students compared to other programs? What can social work educators do better to support at-risk students?

Appendix C: Introducing the Study

Letterhead

Study Title: Withdrawal Study

Lead Researcher: Tanya Shute, RSW, MSW, PhD Candidate (York University Faculty of Education)

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the student experience of being mandatorily withdrawn from the SSW program at Seneca College. This project will involve a short online survey and an additional optional semi-structured interview with the lead researcher or alternate designate (if I choose). I understand that to participate in the study, I will be asked to discuss my experience and my current education and employment circumstances.

The researcher is asking if I am willing to be contacted about participating in this study. When a researcher contacts me, she will give me more information about the study and will answer any questions I might have.

I know that I can refuse to participate if I wish. A refusal to participate will not affect my relationship with Seneca College in any way, or any other college or institution.

I understand that: My participation in this study is strictly voluntary.
If I agree, an email will be sent to me with a link to the online survey. At the end of the survey will be a question asking me if I am willing to be interviewed. I understand I can take part in only the survey part, and that the interview is optional.
If I decide to participate in both the survey and the interview, it will take about three hours of my time. I understand that I will receive a $25 honourarium if I agree to the interview to cover any expenses that I may have related to the interview time such as childcare.
I have the right to refuse to participate in the study at any time and my current or future relationship with either Seneca College will not be affected if I do so.
If I agree to have a researcher contact me, my contact information will be given to the researcher.
If I wish, a different interviewer will be provided in order to for me to be more comfortable.
My identity will not be revealed at any time through the research activities or reports.
All individual information I provide will be used only for the purposes of this research and will be held strictly confidential.

I agree to have my name/contact information included to participate in this study and I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____
Signature of Potential Participant   Date

_____
Signature of Witness

Appendix D: Information Letter

Letterhead

Study Title: Withdrawal Study

Lead Researchers: Tanya Shute, RSW, MSW, PhD Candidate (York University Faculty of Education)
Co-Investigators: To be determined

Tanya Shute is studying community college student mandatory withdrawal as part of her PhD process. The purpose of this small-scale, qualitative study is to explore the experiences of students who were involuntarily withdrawn from the Seneca College Social Services Worker program. The project involves you filling out a short online survey about your withdrawal experience as well as your current education and employment situation.

At the end of the survey, you will also be asked if you would like to participate in an interview about your experience. If you participate in both parts, it should take about 2-3 hours of your time. You will receive the survey by email and complete it online. You will then be contacted by the researcher to arrange an interview if you agree to participate further. You can request a different interviewer if that is your preference. During the interview you will be asked a series of questions about your withdrawal experience, and the researcher will ask you to use a tape recorder. Tape recording the conversation will allow the researcher to transcribe the interview. At the end of the study, the tape recording will be destroyed. The transcribed notes will be kept for 2 years in a secure storage.

You will be asked to sign a form before taking part in the study. Your name and any identifying information will not appear with any writing about this study. All signed consent forms will be locked in a filing cabinet in Tanya Shute's campus office and then destroyed after 2 years.

Appendix E: Consent

Study Name: Involuntary Withdrawal Study

Researcher: Tanya Shute, RSW, MSW
                  PhD Student, York University, Faculty of Education

Purpose of the research:
The purpose of this small-scale, qualitative study is to explore the experiences of students who were involuntarily withdrawn from the Social Services Worker program. This study is proposed to involve 15-20 ex-Seneca students who were involuntarily withdrawn from the Social Services Worker program over the past five years. Early leavers have much to teach us about their interrupted post-secondary experience however their voices are not currently informing the academic literature or institutional action on student retention in higher education. Findings will be presented as part of my PhD dissertation, and may appear as a paper in academic journals or conferences.

What you will be asked to do in the research:
You will be asked to answer a short online survey with several questions about your experience of withdrawal from the program and your experiences since the withdrawal from the SSW program. You will then be invited to participate in a taped interview, lasting about 30-45 minutes, to elaborate on these experiences. The estimated time involved should be between 2 and 3 hours. In addition you will be asked to review and comment on the prepared interview material that will be forwarded to you by email, which is anticipated to require 30 minutes of your time.

Risks and discomforts:
The researcher does not anticipate that there will be any risks or discomforts as a result of your participation in this study. Your time and schedule will be respected, and if any changes are necessary, the researcher will accommodate them.

Benefits of the research and benefits to you:
It is anticipated by the researcher that perhaps there would be benefits to discussing your experience with a researcher who is knowledgeable and empathetic about your experience, and that you might benefit from seeing your contribution potentially create change in academic practice and institutional action for students in similar circumstances.

Voluntary participation:
Your participation in the research is completely voluntary. Participants may choose to stop participating at any time. A participant's decision not to continue participating will not influence their relationship or the nature of their relationship with researchers or with staff of York University either now or in the future.

Withdrawal from the study:
You may stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your

relationship with the researchers, York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event that you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality:
Any information you provide will remain in confidence. No other researchers are involved in this study and therefore no one other than the researcher will see or have access to your personal information of the data derived from the survey or the interview. All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office on campus, and I am the only person who will have access to the data. The data will be stored for two years and then shredded. The anonymized findings will be presented as part of my dissertation and possibly in subsequent academic publications or conferences. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Questions about the research?
If you have any questions about the research in general or your role in the study, you should contact the researcher, Tanya Shute. The graduate program office may also be contacted at 416.736.5521.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee and York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University, 416-736-5914 or email ore@yorku.ca.

Legal Rights and Signatures:
I, _____, consent to participate in the Early Withdrawal Study. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

_____
Participant Signature   Date

_____
Principal Investigator: Tanya Shute   Date