

ABSTRACT

CASEY WELLS, TWYLA. The Ties that Bind: Understanding the “Relationships” in Community College Alumni Relations. (Under the direction of Dr. Susan J. Barcinas).

Community colleges continue to be challenged to achieve the same level of philanthropic support as private and public colleges and universities. While nearly 50 percent of all undergraduates are educated at community colleges, only two percent of the nearly \$8 billion donated annually by higher education alumni is contributed to community colleges (Council for Aid to Education, 2013). The disproportionate share of philanthropic dollars going to community colleges is troubling. However, before any significant dollars can be raised from alumni, there must be an understanding of the relational aspect of institutional philanthropy, specifically in terms of connecting community college alumni back to their institutions. The purpose of this qualitative explanatory case study was to explore and better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates, with the hope that the findings will contribute to community college philanthropic efforts. Relationship Management Theory was the theoretical framework that guided this study. Situated within the context of a Southern community college alumni relations program, this study explored how 18 graduates and key leaders explain and perceive the relationship building process, their perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, and beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. Major findings of this study suggest the community college-alumni relationship is influenced by interpersonal relationships grounded by trust, commitment, and obligation. Transformational experiences as students influence the alumni relationship formation as do institutional culture, communication, and timing of the relationship formation. Ultimately, the investment in terms of resources and staff dedicated to the community college alumni relations function is critical

to its success. The study findings include the development of a definition of the community college-alumni relationship as well as the creation of the **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle**, a model created to provide a praxis linking theory to practice in the context of the community college alumni relationship cycle. The model includes six phases beginning when prospective students make initial contact with the institution for information and application. The relationship travels through several phases until moving to the final phase – lifelong dedication, whereby community college alumni remain as vital participants in the life of the institution.

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The Ties that Bind: Understanding the “Relationships”
in Community College Alumni Relations

by
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DEDICATION

To my son John Thomas Wells: Your entire life to this point has been watching your mother sit at the dining room table at a computer. John, thank you for your patience! You have been so very supportive and tolerable as I worked to obtain my master's and now my doctorate. My desire is that by my doing this, you are inspired to grow, learn, and soar beyond your wildest dreams! I LOVE YOU!!

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To my late daughter Caroline Casey Wells: Though you were limited by the ravages of Rett Syndrome, you taught me more in your seven years here on Earth than any advanced degrees ever could. You are in my heart, mind, and soul daily!

BIOGRAPHY

Twyla Casey Wells is presently the executive director of Johnston Community College (JCC) Foundation, Inc. located in Smithfield, North Carolina. An employee of JCC since 2000, Wells has worked in various capacities in higher education advancement for 26 years to include her alma mater, University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

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Wells began her first graduate class in August 2003 at North Carolina State University as a single mother of sixteen-month old twins, working a full-time job at a community college as public information officer and grants director, and with little knowledge of the field of adult education.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
PROBLEM STATEMENT	4
PURPOSE STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTION	10
RESEARCH DESIGN	10
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	12
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	13
CHAPTER SUMMARY	14
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	16
RESEARCH QUESTION	18
PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE	18
RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT	20
Definition and Theoretical Background.....	20
Theoretical Influences.....	26
Social exchange theory.....	26
Additional theoretical influences.....	26
Measuring Relationships.....	28
Applications of Relationship Management.....	29
Relationship Management and Fundraising.....	29
OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF AMERICA’S COMMUNITY COLLEGES.....	31
Mission.....	33
Profile.....	35
CURRENT TRENDS AND ISSUES	37
Student Achievement, Persistence, and Completion.....	39
Remedial - Developmental Education.....	40
Adjunct and Part-time Faculty.....	42
Funding.....	43
HIGHER EDUCATION ALUMNI GIVING	46
Factors Leading to Giving.....	48
Individual Donor Characteristics.....	48
Age.....	48
Lifecycles and family status.....	49
Gender.....	49
Charitable giving.....	50
Student experiences.....	50
Alumni experiences.....	51
External Environment.....	51

Institutional Characteristics.	51
Fundraising Practices.	52
COMMUNITY COLLEGE FUNDRAISING AND ALUMNI RELATIONS	53
Recent Community College Alumni Giving Research.	56
Community Colleges Best Practices and Alumni Outreach.	57
Holyoke Community College – Phone-a-thon Campaigns.....	58
Monroe Community College – Alumni Hall of Fame.	59
Joliet Junior College – Alumni Connections to Student Body.	60
Lenoir Community College – Travel Programs.....	61
Sinclair Community College – Membership Programs and Use of Technology.....	62
Unique Characteristics of Community College Alumni.	64
NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM.....	65
CHAPTER SUMMARY	67
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	68
PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION	68
RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT THEORY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	69
Relationship Management and Fundraising	70
RESEARCH DESIGN	71
Qualitative Inquiry	72
Case Study Approach.....	73
PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CASE STUDY	75
Defining Case Study Characteristics.	76
Positionality and Subjectivity Statements.....	76
Positionality.	77
Subjectivity.	79
RESEARCH PROCESS	80
Context.....	80
Criteria 1: Have an alumni relations program in existence for a minimum of three years.	81
Criteria 2: Have an active alumni relations council or alumni association in existence.	81
Criteria 3: Have an alumni director, coordinator, or other professional for whom the responsibilities of alumni relations constitutes at minimum thirty percent of their job duties.	81
Criteria 4: Have a structured annual giving program that appeals directly to alumni constituents.	82
Criteria 5: Have a community college foundation, working either independently or interdependently, with the alumni relations program.	82
North Carolina Institutions.	83
Participant selection.	84
Participant criteria.	84
Data Collection.	86

Informed consent.....	86
Participants contact.....	87
Participant interviews and protocols.....	87
Interviewing.....	88
PILOT INTERVIEWS.....	88
Interview collection methodology.....	89
Member check-transcripts.....	89
Member check-findings.....	90
Document review.....	90
Research journal.....	90
Institutional Review Board Approval.....	91
Data Handling.....	91
Data Analysis and Strategies.....	92
Data immersion and analytic memorandums.....	93
Phase 1 Coding: Tagging and Labeling.....	94
Phase 2 Coding: Theoretical Coding.....	95
Phase 3: Members Check.....	95
Phase 4: Open Coding.....	96
NVivo Software.....	96
ISSUES OF RIGOR.....	97
Triangulation.....	97
Bias.....	98
Trustworthiness.....	98
Limitations of the Study.....	99
Novice researcher.....	99
College culture and philosophy.....	99
Giving “voice” to participants.....	100
Theoretical limitations.....	100
Strengths of the Study.....	100
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	101
CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND PRESENTATION OF DATA.....	103
PROFILE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH SITE.....	103
Participant Profiles.....	106
Alumni.....	107
Professionals.....	108
Individual participants.....	108
Amanda.....	108
Amber.....	111
Ben.....	113
Carter.....	115
Clark.....	117
Drew.....	119

Emma.....	122
Dr. Fitzgerald.....	124
Grace.....	126
Jay.....	128
Lee.....	129
Madeline.....	131
Matthew.....	133
Olivia.....	135
Perry.....	137
Rebecca.....	140
Sophie.....	141
Victor.....	143
FINDINGS.....	145
Relational Characteristics.....	150
Verrazano strong.....	152
Just a stepping stone.....	154
Juggling priorities.....	156
Trust.....	158
College confidence.....	159
Developing trust.....	160
Two-way street.....	164
Satisfaction.....	166
Exactly what I needed.....	166
Creating the win-win mentality.....	168
Obligation.....	169
Institutionally driven.....	170
Reciprocal.....	171
The holistic view.....	172
Relational Influences.....	173
Personal attitudes, beliefs, and values.....	174
Alumni.....	175
Professionals.....	177
Student experiences.....	180
Learning.....	180
Support.....	184
Activities.....	186
Connections.....	187
Relationships.....	187
Personal connections.....	188
Like family and friends.....	192
Involvement.....	195
Alumni participation.....	196
A seat at the Verrazano family table.....	197

Competition for time.....	198
Is altruism dead?	199
Communication.....	200
Future.....	202
Networking.....	203
Timing the engagement.....	204
Relational Roles.....	209
Alumni.....	210
Connection to the community.....	210
Sharing success.....	211
Professionals.....	214
Alumni association.....	215
Current status.....	216
Relational Impact.....	218
Economic.....	219
Alumni employment and workforce.....	220
Giving back.....	223
Community college value.....	227
Social.....	230
College pride.....	231
Transformation.....	234
Cultural.....	238
Community colleges versus other types of institutions.....	239
Verrazano community.....	242
Institutional philosophy.....	244
Political.....	245
Alumni advocacy.....	245
Alumni representation.....	248
Marginalized populations.....	249
CHAPTER SUMMARY	250
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA	251
INTRODUCTION	251
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	253
Finding #1: The community college-alumni relationship develops through interpersonal relationships between individuals or a group of individuals.....	254
Interpersonal relationships.....	255
Key influencers.....	258
Relational types.....	260
Finding #2: The community college-alumni relationship is socially constructed through meaningful individual and interpersonal interactions built upon trust and commitment.....	261
Relational characteristics.....	263

Trust.....	267
Commitment.....	269
Obligation.....	272
Satisfaction.....	273
Linking to other studies.....	274
Finding #3: Personal transformations as students give meaning to the community college-alumni relationship that results in a more profound affinity for the institution.....	276
Transformation and learning.....	277
Connection to transformative learning theory.....	277
Adult learners, transformation, and the relational connection.....	281
The community college student difference.....	282
Student engagement fosters alumni affinity.....	283
Alumni affinity.....	284
Alumni engagement.....	284
Finding #4: Institutional culture, communication, timing, and dedicated resources are critical to the successful advancement of the student and college relationship.....	286
Institutional culture.....	287
Leading the way.....	288
Understanding the importance of alumni.....	289
Communication.....	290
Time.....	292
Timing the engagement.....	292
Relationships take time.....	294
Worth the investment of time and resources.....	295
Dedicated resources.....	296
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	297
CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH... 298	
IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY.....	301
Relationship Management and Qualitative Research.....	302
Relational Lens and Community College-Alumni Relationships.....	302
Interpersonal Relationships and Community College-Alumni Relations.....	304
Transformative Learning and the Community College Student to Alumni Experience.....	304
Recommendations for Theory.....	306
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.....	306
DEFINITION OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE-ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP.....	307
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP CYCLE MODEL.....	307
Phase 1: Recruitment – Information.....	311
Phase 2: Application – Orientation.....	312
Phase 3: Registration.....	312
Phase 4: Participation.....	312

Phase 5: Graduation.....	312
Phase 6: Lifelong Dedication.....	313
Recommendations for Practice.....	313
Institutional culture and representation.....	313
Communication and Timing.....	316
Dedicated Resources.....	318
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	319
Expanding the Understanding of the Community College-Alumni Relationship Lifecycle.....	319
Recommendations for Future Research.....	320
Limitations.....	321
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	322
REFERENCES.....	324
APPENDICES.....	352
APPENDIX A: IRB APPLICATION.....	353
APPENDIX B: LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT.....	363
APPENDIX C: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS SEEKING PARTICIPATION.....	364
APPENDIX D: LETTER TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROFESSIONAL PARTICIPANTS SEEKING PARTICIPATION.....	365
APPENDIX E: CONFIRMATION OF INTERVIEW DATE, TIME AND LOCATION TO PARTICIPANTS.....	366
APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH.....	367
APPENDIX G:ALUMNI PARTICIPANT PROFILE.....	369
APPENDIX H: PROFESSIONALS PARTICIPANT PROFILE.....	370
APPENDIX I: ALUMNI PROTOCOL.....	371
APPENDIX J: COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROFESSIONALS PROTOCOL.....	373
APPENDIX K:CHART OF THEMES AND FINDINGS, INTERPRETATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS.....	374
APPENDIX L: PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK PROTOCOL.....	375

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1 - RELATIONAL THEMES.....	149
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LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1- PARTICIPANTS ROLES.....	86
FIGURE 2 - PHASES OF DATA ANALYSIS AND THE IMERSION PROCESS.....	93
FIGURE 3 - RELATIONAL INFLUENCES THEME.....	146
FIGURE 4 - RELATIONAL ELEMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE – ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP	147
FIGURE 5 - COMMUNITY COLLEGE ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP RELATIONAL ELEMENT I: RELATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS.....	150
FIGURE 6 - COMMUNITY COLLEGE ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP RELATIONAL ELEMENT II: RELATIONAL INFLUENCES	173
FIGURE 7 - COMMUNITY COLLEGE ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP RELATIONAL ELEMENT III: ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP RELATIONAL ROLES	209
FIGURE 8 - COMMUNITY COLLEGE ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP RELATIONAL ELEMENT IV: RELATIONAL IMPACT.....	219
FIGURE 9 - KEY COMPONENTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP	264
FIGURE 10 - RELAATIONAL ELEMENTS LEAD TO SATISFACTION.....	266
FIGURE 11 - THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT TO ALUMNI RELATIONSHIP LIFECYCLE MODEL.....	310

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Contrary to university settings, most community colleges are in their infancy in reaching out to graduates. Though alumni are the largest single constituent group for any educational institution, community colleges have struggled to begin the process of developing relationships with and connecting graduates back to their alma mater. Why? For one, community colleges have long been viewed as a “stop-off” in students’ quests for higher education. Angelo (2005) writes, “Community colleges are seen as places from which students move on, often after taking a series of courses that may not even add up to a degree”(p.64). Secondly, leadership and oversight for alumni programming are often organizationally structured under the umbrella of foundation and development functions. These foundations are also very much in their infancy. Most are focused primarily on raising funds for scholarships and are lacking in strategic focus and the capacity to build a comprehensive advancement program (Carter & Duggan, 2010). It is surprising too that the alumni function is not more developed in the community college context and that alumni have not been sought after more aggressively. This is particularly true given “that there is such a natural connection between the community college, its alumni, and the community in which they both reside” (Starace, 2012, p. 1). In research and practice, the four-year setting is very different. Community college students oftentimes juggle career, family, and educational priorities simultaneously. Enrollment patterns for these students have been noted as being inconsistent as the demands of life bring academic interruptions. According to Crosta (2014), “Community college students clearly make choices about enrollment intensity in response to a range of personal, financial, and academic consideration” (Completion by Design Blog,

June 12, 2014). Meanwhile, four-year students typically reside on campus or in nearby housing that afford them very different experiences and opportunities to gain valuable connections and engage socially. In terms of the degree of sophistication within alumni relations programming and outreach, community college, with their ties to the local economy and workforce, should enjoy a distinct advantage over their four-year peers.

The alumni relations discipline, and particularly alumni giving, has been a topic of interest in terms of the four-year higher education setting for some time. Empirical research, thus far, has focused on primarily four areas: individual alumni donor characteristics, fundraising practices, external environment, and institutional characteristics (Gunsalus, 2005). Though the research thus far has provided good insight into behaviors and practice in the four-year context, the profession still struggles in terms of developing communities of practice that provide “a shared definition of alumni engagement and common taxonomy for alumni engagement [that] ultimately provides the foundation for assessment, growth, and innovation” in the field (Forbes, 2014, p. 3). Forbes (2014) goes on to write:

Alumni relations practitioners need a unifying definition and taxonomy of alumni engagement that reflects the diverse and vibrant tapestry of alumni relations work. We cannot lead and manage without a common language and lexicon, at least at a high level. With a strong foundation of core concepts in place, innovation and professional practice will grow and thrive. (p.3)

In an attempt to accomplish the need for a definition, Indiana University alumni relations practitioners and alumni volunteers conducted a card-sort exercise in 2010, categorizing over 1,000 activities and programs related to alumni relations. This activity resulted in

determining prominent areas of how alumni are involved with institutions. The outcome was alumni engagement as being defined as:

activities and experiences designed to identify, cultivate, steward, solicit, and manage gifts of time, talent, and treasure from former students and graduates of a given institution or enterprise in service to the needs of both alumni and the alma mater. (Forbes, 2014, p.1).

While a body of literature exists for the four-year context, little is known about the community college setting (Williams, Leatherwood, Byrd, Boyd & Pennington, 2010). Nevertheless, alumni engagement is increasingly becoming a topic of discussion among two-year colleges with many colleges reporting being in various stages of instituting and sustaining alumni programs as a strategic part of their overall community college advancement programs (Starace, 2012). Community college leaders and development practitioners throughout the nation, and professional organizations such as Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) and Council for Resource Development (CRD) are directing energies toward furthering the conversation regarding alumni relations. In a recent study conducted by CASE in 2012, major findings about the current status of community college alumni relations programming included a better understanding of the complexities of this particular sector of higher education. The results were: 1) among community colleges alumni definitions vary greatly; 2) most programs are small and/or nascent; 3) the better the collection and maintaining of alumni data, the higher the donor rate, and 4) regular communication increases the likelihood of giving (Goldsmith & Heaton, CASE Conference Presentation 2012). With two recent dissertations (Skari, 2011; Starace,

2012) and ongoing research being conducted at the national level (CASE, 2012), it is favorable the alumni relations function is beginning to gain some much needed momentum in the community college setting. A force of this magnitude would open colleges to an entirely new sector of donors. Engaged constituents, whether alumni or otherwise, who are actively involved with the institution to the point of making a personal investment is something that would decidedly be welcomed at two-year campuses nationwide. These constituents, community college alumni, are already familiar with the institutions. The issue now is informing them of the needs of their alma maters and involving them at a new level of engagement as advocates, donors, mentors, and volunteers (Starace, 2012).

Problem Statement

Traditional sources of funding are steadily diminishing and institutions across the nation are finding that they are no longer *state supported* but *state assisted* (Grant, Shatzberg & Northcross, 2005). “This statement is far truer today than it has ever been, for a number of reasons: There are fewer resources available from governmental sources; there are more students to serve; and there are more defined expectations for student certificate and degree completion” (Duncan and Ball, 2011, p. 61). Faced with dwindling support from state and federal sources (Katsinas, Tollefson & Reamy, 2008), institutions of higher education are confronted with balancing enrollments while experiencing “withering financial support” (Howard, 2014). As a result, institutions are intensifying their attention to private fundraising (Drezner, 2011). As colleges and universities become increasingly reliant on private resources, the role of fundraising and the resulting contributions from the private sector are quickly rising as areas of strategic focus (Chung-Hoon, J. Hite, & S. Hite, 2007; Elliott,

2006; Holmes, 2010; Proper & Caboni, 2014). “The role of philanthropy as an ingredient in funding higher education,” writes Holmes (2010), “remains an essential part of fulfilling the mission of access and quality in public higher education” (p.36). On the contrary, St. John, Daun-Barlett and Moronski-Chapman (2012) claim, “Research on the problem points to the conclusion that money from these alternative sources generally is not reinvested in the academic side of the university enterprises or at least not in the subsidizing of the costs of educating students” (p.34). Whatever unresolved issues there may be, there is no denying these institutions have compensated higher education mightily by building advancement programs that fund everything from multi-million dollar scholarships campaigns to billions of dollars for capital projects. As reported in the Council for Aid to Education’s (CAE) annual survey, the situation is immeasurably different for most community colleges.

Each year, the CAE conducts an annual Voluntary Support of Education (VSE) survey as a means of determining statistical information regarding private giving to higher education. In the organization’s most recent news release dated January 28, 2015, results demonstrate higher education giving increased by 10.8 percent in 2014, totaling \$37.45 billion – the second highest on record since 2000. Gifts for current operations, an area not traditionally supported by private resources, rose 7.9 percent. It is speculated that this too is due to the decline in established resources which have long supported the operational functions of higher education (Kaplan, 2015; Skari, 2011). Of the various segments presently giving to higher education, alumni giving increased by 9.4 percent, contributing \$9.85 billion in 2014, or 26.3 percent of all constituents reported. Though 2014’s community colleges data was not readily accessible from the abbreviated VSE survey report released, in

2013, of the \$33.8 billion contributed, only \$212.6 million was given to two-year public institutions. This year, all alumni giving increased 25.2 percent with the average alumni gift reported to be \$1,535. Alumni participation in terms of actual numbers of alumni who gave decreased. This was reported to be due to the readily available advanced internet and social technologies that easily allow one's contact information to be located. Institutions are locating former students at a rapid pace, thereby increasing the total number of alumni on record which is weighted against those who give (Kaplan, 2015). Therefore, alumni giving, in term of actual number of contributors, continue to decline for four-year colleges and universities, while the return in terms of dollars given continues to grow and the connections to former students escalates (Council for Aid to Education, 2015 News Release). Finally, four-year public and private colleges and universities continue to be the greatest benefactors of alumni's charitable contributions.

The outcome for community colleges is vastly different. Of all funds contributed in 2013, only 1.3 percent was designated for two-year public institutions with community college alumni making up only 1 percent of the total donors contributing (Kaplan, 2013). This disparity can be described as nothing short of discouraging, particularly given that community colleges educate nearly half of all of the nation's undergraduates (Lanning, 2008; Paradise & Kroll, 2013). The reluctance on the part of community colleges has been reported as being due to the transient nature of community college students. Community college students' social lives too are not linked to the institutions and community college students "do not follow a linear attendance pattern in pursuing a degree; they swirl" (Bontrager, Clemetsen & Watts, 2005, p. 4) from one institution to another with gaps in enrollment.

Lastly, many community college students transfer their allegiances to the four-year universities (Akin, 2005; Perkins, 1990). However, for the community colleges who are stepping into this unchartered domain, results, are surfacing as examples that community college alumni are “worth the effort” (Dollar & Zucker, 1991; Perkins, 1990) and a constituency that deserves attention. Though later than other institutional types with regard to building comprehensive philanthropy programs, community colleges across the nation are now realizing the benefits of various ways to seek new sources of advocacy and support. Data from a survey recently conducted by CASE indicate community colleges that intentionally and systematically track and engage their former students can expect a corresponding increase in philanthropic support (Paradise & Kroll, 2013). It appears the problem does not lie in whether community college alumni will respond favorably once engaged, but more so in defining and refining what will “re-attract” alumni in the first place.

In view of this, how do community colleges begin the process of engaging alumni? The challenge it seems lies in initiating and cultivating the relationships to begin with – something advancement practitioners readily know well as integral to the cultivation process. Burnett (2002) writes, “Relationship fundraising is an approach to the marketing of a cause that centers on the unique and special relationship between a nonprofit and each supporter. Its overriding consideration is to care for and develop that bond and to do nothing that might damage or jeopardize it. Every activity is therefore geared toward making sure donors know they are important, valued, and considered, which has the effect of maximizing funds per donor in the long term” (p. 38). Community colleges possibly need only look outside the front door to find individuals who have the potential, because of experiences as students, to

become major ambassadors for and supporters of the institution. Though some community colleges are embarking on the alumni endeavor in practice, the issues cited are further compounded by the lack of empirical research that currently exists. Few studies have been conducted on community colleges within the development and alumni context, and the research conducted thus far is focused primarily on practice-based issues, such as current funding practices of advancement operations. The exception is Skari's 2011 study *Who Gives? Characteristics of Community College Alumni*, whereby she surveyed community college alumni to identify factors of community college alumni giving (Paradise & Kroll, 2012, Skari, 2011). Among the findings, relationships were found to be meaningful and increase the likelihood of community college alumni giving (Skari, 2014; Skari, 2011). Therefore, the need exists for taking the next step in understanding community college alumni to determine not only who gives, but to ascertain a clearer picture of why they give. What would bring community college alumni back to their institutions? Who influences the return and reconnections the alumni make to the institution? These connections and relationships that are formed – what do they mean to alumni, those influencing the alumni, and the institution?

As community colleges face increasing cutbacks in federal and state funding, it seems the time has come for more sophisticated, strategically planned outreach efforts to graduates. By now, most community colleges have reached milestone anniversaries (Fast Facts, AACC 2015) with countless graduates from which to recruit. Alumni, whether graduates of universities, private institutions, or community colleges, are the institutions' largest and most permanent constituency. According to Pastorella (2003):

Community colleges are particularly and favorably positioned to obtain support from their alumni. Alumni recognize the value they received as students. Most live in the vicinity of the college and take dual pride in knowing that their gift in support of the community college is also an investment in their community. (p.75)

Given the competition for alumni's dollars, along with the static number of alumni actually giving, researchers are working to conduct studies to provide practitioners with information to use in the field to not only predict who will give, but determine the factors that lead to the greatest likelihood of giving (Waters, 2008). To better understand alumni and their giving patterns, alumni giving studies have been grounded in altruism, utility maximization theory, and social exchange theory and explored mostly through the lenses of behavioral, economic, and social perspectives (Skari, 2011). Though these studies have provided better understandings of alumni giving within these various perspectives, the vast majority, as noted earlier, is in the context of four-year colleges and universities. Although Skari's 2011 study answered the question of "who gives" within the community college alumni community, the question left unanswered is "why they give?" And searching more deeply beyond "why they give" is the exploration of defining what relational aspects of the alumni-institutional relationship spark the connection in the first place? The desire is that this study will bring new understanding to the developing context of community college alumni relations programming and further extend the concepts of relationship management theory and alumni-giving decision-making.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to further extend the community college alumni relations conversation by investigating and seeking to better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study sought to explain how graduates and key leaders of the community college perceive the relationship-building process, their perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, and beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. Employing an explanatory qualitative case study design, one North Carolina community college was studied as a means of developing a deeper understanding of how community college alumni, development practitioners, and leadership define the relationship in the context of a community college alumni relations program. The following research question served to guide the overall design and development of this research study:

From the organizational-public relations management perspective, how do the experiences and perceptions of community college alumni and professionals explain, define, and extend the meaning of the community college-alumni relationship?

The research question was significant in that its role served to guide the development of the study, the data collection and analysis processes, and what was learned from the study.

Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative explanatory case study approach to explore the phenomenon of the community college-alumni relationship and the role of alumni and professionals in the alumni relations function. According to Merriam (2002), “understanding

qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p. 3). Due to the probing nature of this research study, qualitative research was selected as an appropriate research approach. Qualitative research emphasizes the “holistic treatment of the phenomena” where issues are complex and are intricately linked to personal contexts and historical, political, and social constructs (Shkedi, 2005; Stake, 1995). Qualitative research creates and emphasizes the characteristics and processes of meaning of the particular phenomenon being studied when the goal is not to measure or quantify what is being researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Understanding the varying dispositions of community college alumni - the affinity for, and the connections to their institutions required a more in-depth approach that situates the study within the context of the alumni’s environments where they learned and created their own knowledge. I speak not of the academic knowledge one would expect a student to emerge with once their studies are complete, but knowledge that is constructed by learning to navigate and define oneself within the cultural, political, and social interactions of a community college. Merriam (2002) offers:

The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in a positivist, quantitative research. (p. 3)

Paramount to a qualitative approach is the objective to make sense and meaning of a lived and “real-world” experience (Creswell, 2007). Wolcott (1988) writes, “The attraction of

qualitative approaches is that they offer other ways of looking. They invite us to look at things not ordinarily looked at, from perspectives not ordinarily taken” (p.15).

To better understand the implications and influences of community college alumni, we must first understand and make meaning from the perspectives of the participants of this study. How do community college alumni define the relationship they have with their college? What experiences shape the meaning they come to know? How do the perspectives of alumni differ from those of college leaders?

Conceptual Framework

Relationship management theory was selected as the conceptual framework to guide the data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. Relationship management theory has recently emerged as an area of exploration with the theory being used to better define the relationship and determine necessary elements that should be in place for the public-organization relationship to form. Though some studies have been conducted with for-profit and nonprofit organizations, there is no existing literature of this nature addressing community college alumni. In fact, minimal community college alumni research exists with even less focusing on the alumni programming context, though the reasoning for this potentially lies in the fact that community colleges are delayed in their development of alumni programming.

Relationship Management Theory is a developing field that first surfaced in the literature and practice of public relations in the early 1990s. Once perceived as a management concept, public relations and the conceptual framework of Relationship Management Theory is evolving into “an important change in the primary mission of public

relations” (Ehling, 1992). According to Ledingham (2003), “The relationship management perspective holds the public relations and balances the interests of organizations and publics through the management of organization – public relationships” (p. 181). Central to the development of any philanthropy program, regardless of the context, is the ability to establish, develop, and sustain long-lasting relationships. Defining relationships, Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) write, “relationships, then, reflect the conjoint purposive behaviors of the actors in the relationships” (p.15).

According to J. Grunig and Huang (2000), *trust, control mutuality, commitment* to a relationship and *satisfaction* with a relationship “are four focal characteristics representing the quality of organization-public relationships” (p.42). The four dimensions are distinguishable, yet inter-correlated, and “can be used to conceptualize and measure the quality of relationships between organizations and publics” (J Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 47).

For this study, I focused on all four of the elements of relationship management as described by J. Grunig and Huang (2000): commitment, control mutuality, satisfaction, and trust. In my methodology chapter, I report my interest and reasoning for the selection of the theoretical framework for this study and explain the relevancy at it applied to the relational connection between community college alumni and their institutions.

Significance of the Study

The study of philanthropy has occurred for little more than thirty years. Research in the context of higher education giving has transpired even more recently with most being atheoretical and practice-based resulting in few empirical studies being conducted to extend theories presently existing (The Association for the Study of Higher Education - ASHE,

2011). Specifically, quantitative studies permeate the research that has been conducted with primarily the exploration in the qualitative tradition nearly nonexistent. As such, my interest was in explaining and making meaning of the perspectives of the community college alumni and institutional leaders in such a way as to allow their perceptions to contribute to future efforts to enhance alumni-community college relationships. A better understanding of how alumni, leaders, and professionals perceive their interactions and relationships with the college will more substantively inform community college leaders about how to extend the relationship with alumni once they leave the institution. According to a report published in 2011 by the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE):

By further understanding donors' motivations and successful fundraising strategies from a theoretical standpoint, future research on philanthropy and fundraising will allow practitioners to enhance their advancement programs, expanding them to new prospect pools by better understanding how donors choose to participate in a pro-social manner. (p.60)

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview and discussion of the elements directing the development of this study and the corresponding problem that is driving the purpose and direction of this research. The purpose statement and research question were presented to establish the boundaries of what was studied. The conceptual framework, relationship management theory, guided the overall research design to include protocol development,

data collection, and analysis, and presentation of the findings. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the significance of conducting this research in the community college alumni relations context.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Community colleges have had “an unprecedented amount of attention” in recent years focused on the colleges’ role in “helping people and the government respond to the current economic crisis and meeting widely articulated goals for college completion” (Mullin, 2014, p. 223). Though an awareness of what community colleges do and the populations they serve has been elevated by national attention, community colleges continue to be challenged to achieve the same level of funding allocated to other sectors of education. According to Mullin (2014), “community colleges received just 27 percent of total federal, state, and local revenues (operating and non-operating) for public degree-granting institutions in 2007-2008 while serving 43 percent of undergraduate students” (p. 223). The status of philanthropic support is just as unfavorable. Only one percent of the \$8 billion donated on average by higher education alumni is contributed to community colleges (Kaplan, 2015, Council for Aid to Education). The disproportionate share is appalling, particularly given that these institutions educate half of all undergraduates in the nation (Akin, 2005; Brown, 2012; Skari, 2014). The responsibility for this situation is complex and is situated in the historical practice of community colleges not readily embracing fundraising as a significant function of the overall organizational structure. Brown (2012) writes:

Traditionally, community colleges have been at a disadvantage when it comes to raising funds. The community-college model presents some inherent challenges in this regard. For example, the diversity of the community-college student population and the transient nature of students “swirling” in and out of college, often without obtaining a degree or certificate, have undermined the success of traditional alumni-

giving programs in community colleges. Alumni giving programs have been the “bread and butter” of traditional higher education private giving and resource-development strategies. While the number of community-college foundations has grown to meet increasing resource needs, community-colleges as a sector fall well short of traditional college and universities when it comes to leveraging private funds. (p.92)

Misperceptions abound as the general public often view community colleges as not as “needy” as and less prestigious than universities. Institutional prestige is a topic that has been widely shown to influence private giving, particularly among young alumni giving (Holmes, 2009; Liu, 2006; McDearmon, 2010). The disparity for community college fundraising programs, while alarming, presents an abundance of opportunity for two-year institutions. Though most community college alumni programs are just now beginning, there are some colleges who are embracing the alumni constituent realizing the value in building programs to satisfy this gap in the existing community college advancement model. With the “open door” philosophy long instituted and valued, why have community colleges figuratively “shut the door” once students graduate or transfer? What elements are considered necessary in order to keep the relationship developing and the “open door” open?

The purpose of this study was to further extend the community college alumni relations conversation by investigating and seeking to better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study examined how graduates and key leaders of the community college define and perceive the relationship building process, their perceptions of

key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. Employing an explanatory qualitative case study design, one North Carolina community college was studied as a means of developing a deeper understanding of how community college alumni, development practitioners, leadership, and key employees describe the *relationship* in the context of a community college alumni relations program.

Research Question

The following research question guided the overall design and development of this research study:

From the organizational-public relations management perspective, how do the experiences and perceptions of community college alumni and professionals explain, define, and extend the meaning of the community college-alumni relationship?

The aim of this chapter is to provide a literature review of three primary bodies of knowledge that inform this research including: 1) the theoretical framework – organizational-public relationship management; 2) higher education and alumni with an emphasis on what is known about community colleges; and 3) community colleges with a brief focus on the North Carolina Community College System, of which one college was the setting for this study.

Public Relations and the Relational Perspective

Relationship management theory is the first body of literature to be reviewed and was the conceptual framework for this study. Relationship management materialized from the public relations field which got its beginnings during the late 1800s and was initially viewed as publicity (Wilcox, Ault & Agree, 1992, p. 41). However, by the early 20th century, public

relations was becoming a powerful tool for corporations “as industrial and business leaders, under attack by a new breed of investigative journalists termed *muckrakers*, sought to shape public opinion and stave off governmental interference by hiring experts in ‘public relations’” (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. xi-xii). These actions caused the practice of public relations and its practitioners to be viewed as *resident journalists* in their corporate role charged with the task of making the corporation or industry appear favorable in the eyes of the public. The practitioner’s role was seen as that of a set of actions - producing and managing communication to the media – in so much so that the field of public relations was initially defined as publicity (Cutlip, 1994). Early contributors and visionaries to the field of public relations - Edward Bernays, Arthur Page, and Harwood Childs, “saw public relations as a way of balancing the interests of the organization and their publics” seeking a better understanding of the field (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. xii). The perspectives though of these early contributors were ignored as practitioners sought “free” and favorable publicity (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Seitel, 1995). The field of public relations has and continues to be in a state of continuous change in terms of perspectives, roles, and evaluation. Though newer roles for practitioners of public relations broadened the scope to include those of counselors who serve as the “social conscience” of their organizations, advising clients on matters of public policy and beyond, the practice and contributions to organizational goals are often misunderstood by corporate leaders (Hon, 1998). Public relations practice is more often characterized by what it does than what it is. Professionals in the field have perceived production and dissemination of communication messages as an answer to all public relations issues. The tendency has been toward measuring programmatic initiatives in terms of

communication output as opposed to relational or behavioral outcomes (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

Relationship Management

An important change in the primary mission of public relations has shifted to focusing on building, nurturing, and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships as its core function (Broom and Dozier, 1990; Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Ehling, 1992; Hon, 1998; Jo, Jo, Hon & Brunner, 2005;). The relational perspective has emerged from consisting of one-way communication and management functions to two-way exchanges that are more holistic in nature and that take into consideration the desires and needs of the organization and public.

Definition and Theoretical Background. The relationship management perspective was first introduced when Ferguson (1984) reviewed nine years of research published in the *Public Relations Review* concluding public relations practitioners and scholars should shift the focus away from the organization, the publics or the communication process as being the unit of analysis to studying the relationship between organizations and their publics as a new paradigm in order to develop a productive theory for the public relations field (Grunig & Huang, 2000). In 1985, Cutlip, Center and Broom broadened the relational focus by offering a definition of public relations as “the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (p.4). Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) credit Pavlik’s 1987 book Public Relations: What Research Tells Us as postulating the discussion when the authors noted public relations research typically

studies individuals or organizations without consideration of the role of relationship as a unit of analysis. In 1990, Broom and Dozier acknowledged the fact that few researchers actually measure the organization-public relationships writing,

Conceptually, public relations programs affect the relationships between organizations and their publics, but rarely is program impact on the relationships themselves measured. In practice, impact measures are made on one or both sides of relationship and then inferences made – sometime explicitly, usually implicitly – about how the relationships change. (Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 82-83)

Next, Grunig, Grunig and Ehling (1992) suggested researchers and practitioners begin to use reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding as key elements for organization-public relationships. Center and Jackson (1995) describe effective public relations within an organization as being one with outcomes centered on the development and sustainment of positive relationships. Bruning, a major contributor to the relationship management framework, along with Dials and Shirka (2008) further outlined the chronological and historical developments across the field of the relational paradigm:

- Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) proposed that relationships have measurable properties that are distinct from their antecedents and consequences and independent of the parties in the relationships.
- Ledingham and Bruning (1999) suggested that an ideal organization–public relationship is the “state that exists between an organization and its key publics that

provides economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterized by mutual positive regard” (p. 62).

- Kovacs (2001) reported that identifying the common interests between an organization and public is imperative to effective relationship building.
- Ledingham (2003) focused the study, teaching, and practice of public relations on relationships when he noted “it is the management of these relationships – through both communication and behavioral initiatives – that is the appropriate framework for . . . public relations” (p. 195).

As cited in Bruning, Dials and Shirka (2008), the second wave of relationship-based scholarship sought to quantify the influence of public relations activity on important organizational outcomes:

- Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison, and Lesko (1997) examined 17 dimensions of organization–public relationship quality that were derived from personal relationships, public relations, and marketing literatures. The authors reported that many of the factors that influence personal relationships likewise affected organization–public relationships. This finding served as the basis for a series of studies examining the positive influence that trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment have in organization–public relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998, 2000a; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000).
- Bruning and Ledingham (1999) then created a multi-item, multi-dimension scale that showed that organizations and public have personal, professional, and community relationships. Application of that scale showed that organization–public relationship

- attitudes affect perceptions of satisfaction (Bruning & Hatfield, 2002; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000b; Bruning & Ralston, 2000), behavioral intent (Bruning, 2000; Bruning & Ralston, 2001; Ledingham, 2001), and actual behavior (Bruning, 2002; Bruning & Lambe, 2002). (As cited in Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008, p. 25- 26)
- Bruning and Galloway (2003) expanded the 1999 scale and reported that organization–public relationships focus on anthropomorphism, community improvement, personal commitment, comparison of alternatives, and professional benefit/expectation attitudes.
 - Application of that scale has shown that public member relationship attitudes affect evaluations of satisfaction and behavioral intent (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004; Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Bruning, Langenhop, & Green, 2004).
 - A third stream of research built upon the work of Hon and Grunig (1999) quantifies relationship quality by measuring the relationship indicators of control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, the exchange relationship, and the communal relationship.
 - Jo, Hon, and Brunner (2004) reported that the scale was an effective diagnostic tool for measuring relationship effectiveness.
 - Huang (2001a) adapted the Hon and Grunig (1999) scale to measure crosscultural organization–public relationships by focusing on control mutuality, trust, relational satisfaction, and relational commitment and a dimension that reflected eastern culture – the notion of face and favor. Application of the crosscultural adaptation has been shown to be helpful in mediating conflict (Huang, 2001b).

- Kim (2001) developed a scale to measure relationship quality by incorporating information gleaned from the interpersonal communication, relationship marketing, and public relations literatures. Kim (2001) initially hypothesized that ten relationship dimensions – including trust, mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, communal relationship, openness, community involvement, affective intimacy, relationship termination cost, and reputation – were central to organization–public relationships. The results from this investigation showed that four dimensions emerged from the analysis – trust, commitment, local or community involvement, and reputation.

According to Bruning, Dials, and Shirka (2008), “The research that evolved from these investigations has focused on (a) defining organization–public relationships, (b) relating organization–public relationships to important organizational outcomes, and (c) quantifying relationship quality” (p. 25). As chronicled above, public relations scholars struggled to define and characterize the relational perspective in public relations theory and practice.

However, in recent years scholars have come to some general agreements on the characteristics of relationships. According to the major contributors to the field, relationships can be defined as dynamic (Dougall, 2005; Seltzer, 1999), measurable (Seltzer, 1999), based on shared perceptions of both parties (Dimmick, Bell, Burgiss & Ragsdale, 2000; Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; Seltzer, 1999), and involve an exchange of resources and information (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000). Hon and J. Grunig (1999) propose relationships as involving two or more parties within situational and behavioral contexts and Toth (2000) prescribes each relationship as being unique. With a clearer understanding and acceptance of the definitions of relationships, scholars set about to define the organizational-public relationships with the

two of the most prominent being distinguished by Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) and Ledingham and Bruning (1998). The first from Broom, et al. (2000) states:

Organization-public relationships are represented by the pattern of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics. These relationships have properties that are distinct from the identities, attributes, and perceptions of the individuals and social collectivities in the relationships. Though dynamic in nature, organization-public relationships can be described as a single point in time and tracked over time. (p.18)

The second definition was contributed by Ledingham and Bruning in 1998. The authors write, “An organization-public relationship is the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other” (p.62).

With understandable definitions of the organization-public relationship, scholarly literature and research is redirecting the attention to advancing the notion of public relations as that of being *relationship management*. The opportunity for theory-building and cross-discipline integration provides a structure for relating public relations strategies and organizational goals in ways that can be understood and appreciated thus serving as the conceptual overview for demonstrating the value of public relations within the larger organizational environment. This shift in focus to the relational perspective is helping the public relations field finally achieve the level of recognition it deserves as a valuable and integral component of organizational function (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). According to Jo, et al. (2004), “The contribution of public relations is captured as the value of relationship

quality between organizations and their publics and the supportive behaviors from stakeholders that are more likely to result when organizations and publics have a positive relationship” (p 14).

Theoretical Influences. The development of Relationship Management theory has been influenced most predominantly by social exchange theory. Beyond the central notion of social exchange, the management of organization-public relations has been shaped by interpersonal communication and systems theories.

Social exchange theory. Relationship management has theoretically developed primarily through social exchange theory (Broom, et al., 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000). Social exchange theory suggests that mutual benefit and goal attainment for both parties can be brought about through voluntary exchanges. “Individuals typically expect reciprocal benefits, such as personal affection, trust, gratitude, and economic return when they act according to social norms” (Shiau & Meiling, 2012, p. 2432). Social exchange theory is depicted as “one of the most useful interpersonal theories for explaining why and when relationships begin, are maintained and end” (Thomlison, 2000, p. 184) with the relationship between organizations and stakeholders likened to that of a courtship (Heath, 1993). Social exchange theory informs organizations of the vital role of the relationship adaptation that must occur to changing needs, expectations, and environmental demand on its relationship with key stakeholders (Thomlison, 2000).

Additional theoretical influences. Beyond social exchange theory, interpersonal communication theory has contributed to the relationship management paradigm bringing to light the interdependency of organizations and the resulting exchange of resources with its

publics (Bloom, et al., 2000; Dougall, 2005; Hon and J. Grunig, 1999). Systems theory has also been discussed as contributing relational perspectives as it seeks to show how units interact with each other within the context of the relationship. According to Broom, et al. (2000), in systems theory, the “structure of the system is defined by the relationships among the units” (p.13). Additionally, relationship management scholars have drawn from the theoretical frames of psychotherapy (Broom, et al., 2000; Dougall, 2005), conflict resolution (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999), and resource dependency theory (J. Grunig & Huang, 2000).

Significant theoretical connections to the emerging concepts of relationship management can be linked to the existing excellence/management paradigms of public relations. Grunig and Huang (2000) write, “Public relations makes organizations more effective by building relationships with strategic publics” (p. 30). Through four main approaches: goal attainment, systems, strategic constituencies, and competing values, organizations are able to strategically communicate with their publics in order to effectively manage the relationship (J. Grunig, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The management paradigm shifts away from a one-way to a two-way communication strategy allowing for a two-way symmetrical view within the relationship. This perspective adds value to the entire organization by using well-planned communication strategies to further develop the relational aspect between organizations and their strategic publics (J. Grunig, 2002; Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). In 2007, Hung pointed to the spectrums of relationship types based on the interests of the involved parties finding exploitive, exchange, and communal to be the overriding themes. Of these three, the communal is explained as being one where benefits are given in order to please the other. While the communal concept is more closely aligned with

familial and personal relationships, Hung suggests it is necessary for organizations to foster the communal relationship in order to be effective and responsible to its publics (Hung, 2007, p. 12).

Measuring Relationships. With a clearer understanding of the context, definition, and role of relationships, theorists have subsequently set about to determine definable and measurable dimensions to support the theory as a means of advancing the paradigm and the applicability to practice (J. Gruning & Huang, 2000). Ledingham and Bruning (2000) state:

In terms of theory building, the relational paradigm offers alternatives to traditional measures of communication efficiency or programmatic output. It also supports an argument that models of the organization-public relationship should include relationship dimensions as both building blocks of organization-public relationships and as indicators of relationship quality. (p. 66)

In 1992, Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling did not find research being conducted on the relationships paradigm nor could agreement be found among public relations scholars on defining the essential nature of relationships that could assist practitioners or scholars in measuring the phenomenon in the empirical world. In response to this, the trio proposed a mix of attributes, perceptions, and constructs to measure the quality of the strategic relationships of organizations. The concepts served as a critical point in establishing a better understanding of the relational perspective as reciprocity, credibility, openness, trust, mutual legitimacy, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding were identified as being meaningful and attributing to the organization-public relationship. While the academic discussion of relationship dimensions have produced a long list of dimensions used by

scholars to measure organization-public relationships, the ones theorized by Hon and J. Grunig (1999) and J. Grunig and Huang (2000) have been popularized as the most generally accepted and tested. According to J. Grunig and Huang (2000), *trust*, *control mutuality*, *commitment* to a relationship, and *satisfaction* with a relationship “are four focal characteristics representing the quality of organization-public relationships.” The four dimensions are distinguishable, yet interconnected, and “can be used to conceptualize and measure the quality of relationships between organizations and publics” (J. Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 47).

Applications of Relationship Management. Relationship management calls for a shift from purely effective communication strategies to the holistic development of relationships (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2006) with the fundamental goal being long term relationships (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). According to Jarratt (2004), “an organization’s relationship infrastructure capability, relationship learning capability and relationship behavioral capability are the key dimensions of an organization’s relationship management capability” (p. 297). The relational perspective has been successfully applied to issues and practices such as management, crisis management, community relations, media relations, and public affairs (Ledingham, 2006). In addition to traditional public relations practices, scholars are using relationship management to assist nonprofit organizations in determining ways in which to define and use the relational perspective to further their organizations.

Relationship Management and Fundraising. Increasingly fundraising literature has focused on the growing importance of relationship cultivation. Relationship management

is central to Kelly's (1998) definition of fundraising as "the management of relationships between a charitable organization and its donor publics" (p. 8), while Stauch (2011) claims, "effective fundraising is, after all, relationship building" (p. 151). Burnett (2002), who first championed the relational fundraising concept, defines it as:

Relationship fundraising is an approach to the marketing of a cause that centers on the unique and special relationship between a nonprofit and each supporter. This overriding consideration is to care for and to develop that bond and to do nothing that might damage or jeopardize it. Every activity is therefore geared toward making sure donors know they are important, valued, and considered, which has the effect of maximizing funds per donor in the long term. (p. 38)

Burnette (2002) goes on to say fundraising would be more palatable to staff and volunteers if they only viewed it as courtship and viewed their roles as that of matchmakers realizing the need for patience and the time and effort that it requires to build the trust and respect that leads to not only meaningful relationships, but to increased return on investment (ROI) for their organizations. According to Waters (2009), "When relationships are cultivated and managed properly, nonprofit organizations are more likely to experience fundraising success with their donors" (p. 144). Of Grunig and Huang's (2000) four defining characteristics of relationship management, trust is by far the most significant to the relational paradigm.

According to Tempel (1999):

Trust is what the traditional professional have or have had in common... Similarly, as donors or philanthropists, we trust the fundraiser to protect our interests as donors, to

help us structure gifts in the most efficient way, to make certain our intentions are carried out, that the promises are kept. (p. 57)

Waters (2009) claims, “For nonprofit organizations to continue the provision of programs and services to the community, it is vital that they dedicate resources into relationship cultivation with its donors” (p.146). Drezner (2013) claims, “Relationship building stands out as a key component for building constituencies and for fostering future donations at any institution of higher learning or charitable organization” (p.64).

Overview and Analysis of America’s Community Colleges

Developed as upward extensions of the public school systems, community colleges were started by elite university administrators whose ideas were to develop junior colleges “with the hope that it would enable them to divert from their own doors the growing number of students clamoring for access to higher education” (Brint & Karabell, 1989, p. 10).

Community colleges transformed the elitist higher education philosophy into a democratically and socially efficient system of learning presenting universal opportunity for reasonably priced public education without distinction of social class, family income, ethnic, racial, or religious prejudices (Monroe, 1972; Pederson, 2000). Community colleges served as a way to boost the local community and economy as the demands grew to train workers beyond high school. Since 1901, community colleges have served more than 100 million people (Wyner, 2014). The first community college, Joliet Junior College, opened its doors that same year beginning as “an experimental postgraduate high school program” and continues to operate today (Joliet Community College website, 2015). In 1921, California’s social, political, and economic “climates” were favorable and legislation passed for two-year

colleges. That same year, California Legislature had passed laws authorizing the establishment of independent junior college districts with individual colleges within the districts being governed locally. The model holds today where California's 112 colleges, 72 districts, and 76 educational centers served over 2 million individuals during 2013-2014 (League of California Community Colleges, 2015 Fast Facts). Fifty-two percent of students who began at a California community college successfully graduate from a public university. Of the students who transfer, their GPA (grade point average) equals or succeeds those "native" students' grades who spent their freshman and sophomore years at either University of California or California State University (Community Colleges League of California website, 2015). By the 1930s, community colleges began offering occupational programs as standard components of curriculum. With the introduction and passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1944, higher education was positioned to be a right for all citizenry. Subsequently in 1947, the President's Commission on Higher Education for American Democracy, also known as the Truman Commission, "endorsed the concept of a series of two-year colleges within commuting distances for most Americans – 'community colleges'" (Weisman & Longacre, 2000, p.361). Post World War II, comprehensive educational institutions were established as relationships strengthened with business. The resulting influence and needs of the business and industries of that time necessitated a shift in focus from serving primarily as preparations for four-year colleges and universities to establishing vocational focused curricula. By the 1950s, community colleges fully separated from secondary education and were established as a part of higher education. Values of access and opportunity proliferated as the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided funding for citizens unable to pay. Locally

governed and providing affordable and relevant curriculum close to home, the nation's community colleges add value and "community prestige" for the populations served (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Weisman & Longacre, 2000).

America's community colleges embraced the wave of social change occurring during the 1960s providing opportunities to underserved populations (Dassance, 2011). It was during this time the growth of the nation's community colleges exploded. According to Dassance (2011), there were 412 community colleges in the nation in 1960 who were serving 645,527 students. Just one decade later, the colleges had grown to 909, more than double, and were serving a reported 2.5 million students. Brint and Karabel (2014) write:

In terms of sheer numbers, no other twentieth century organizational innovation in higher education even begins to approach the success of the two year college, which grew from a single college in 1901 to over 1200 institutions in 1980, representing almost 40 percent of America's 3,231 colleges. (p.50)

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, *Fast Facts*, 2015), there are 1,123 community colleges located throughout the nation. Of the over 1,000 colleges, 992 are public, 96 are independent, and 35 are tribal (ACCC, *Fast Facts*, 2015

Mission. America's community college missions are not static and were originally based on local conditions and local interests varying greatly by geographic regions – a tradition that continues today (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006; Vaughan, 2006). In the 1910s, the focus was on workforce and economic development while the 1930s witnessed a shift to adult education and community services. In Florida, the preparation for four-year transfer has always been a focus where most recently the state conferred their own baccalaureate degrees.

While in states such as North Carolina, workforce and occupational training is considered paramount where changes in structure of economy have demanded new skills training for its workforce (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006).

Philosophically grounded in the belief that education should be *open* and *accessible* to all, community colleges' missions are multifaceted and are organized by five major goals and themes: career or occupational education, collegiate and transfer education, developmental or remedial education, adult and community education, and student services (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). However, the multiplicity of these missions are challenging institutional leaders to remain accessible while maintaining academic excellence along with employers' desires for narrowly defined skills tailored to their particular needs.

For many students (particularly low income) seeking jobs, the mission has been instrumental in their ability to obtain an education leading to employment. Gilroy (2006) writes, "Open access to higher education is a win-win situation because these workers fill a need for the economy and, in turn, they obtain meaningful employment and higher wages" (p. 19). However, a growing concern has surfaced with the economic realities of recent years placing community colleges in a difficult situation to balance the people's need to return to work alongside the demand for student degree completion. The fact that less than one-third of community college students ever receive any kind of certificate, diploma, or degree has resulted in a call for community colleges to focus missions to better align with improving and expanding student learning that will lead to student success (McPhail & McPhail, 2006).

Wyner (2014) claims:

Simultaneous recognition of community colleges' importance and poor student outcomes translates into enormous pressure. State funding is increasingly being tied to graduate rates... To attract students and public dollars in an era of accountability, transparency, and competition, community colleges must deliver significantly more degrees of higher quality at a lower per-pupil cost to an increasingly diverse student population – an equation that adds up to an immense challenge. (p.2)

Community colleges are a vital link in the delivery of postsecondary education. These institutions provide open access to postsecondary education, prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions, provide workforce development and skills training, and offer a multitude of noncredit programs (AACC College Trends and Statistics, AACC Website, 2015).

Profile. America's community colleges are spread throughout the nation and number 1,132 with 986 being defined as public, 115 independent, and 31 tribal institutions (AACC, Fast Facts, 2015). Community colleges have strong connections with the communities they serve and “have extensive knowledge of and sensitivity to the social, economic, technological, and political forces that shape the environment of its community” (Boone & Associates, 1997). According to Milliron, et al. (2003), “They have burst onto the national and international scene as key players in the educational, economic, and social milieu” (p. 90).

Locally governed but publicly supported through state tax revenues, community colleges are defined based on characteristics that include their “open door” accessibility, their *embeddedness* within the communities they serve, and the vast diversified educational

opportunities offered (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). In North Carolina and Vermont, community colleges bring higher education to within a 30-minute commute for all of their citizens (AACCC, Fast Facts, 2015).

Along with academic offerings, community colleges' student support services include personal and career counseling, financial aid and financial counseling, library and learning resources, and group and individual tutorial services (Boone et al., 1997). Individual community colleges embrace the personalities of the communities where they are with auxiliary services such as an art gallery residing on a campus with a strong appreciation for the arts. Dassance (2011) writes, "Difference in size, program mix, governance, and statewide coordination are among the elements that distinguish one community college from another" (p.33). Bogg (2008) claims, "Of all of the segments of American higher education, community colleges have been the most flexible, the most responsive to the educational needs of communities, and the most resourceful, taking calculated risks and leveraging scarce resources to accomplish their educational missions" (p. vii). Even in the midst of an economy still recovering from the Great Recession, community colleges have responded to the call by: a) retreading the American workforce, b) training displaced workers, and c) helping to develop new industries. The impact of the nation's community colleges extends well beyond our native boundaries. In recent years, the American community college model has been globalized with colleges now existing in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Republic of Georgia (Bogg, 2010).

Community colleges across the nation serve a reported 12.4 million students with 7.4 million enrolled in credit and the remaining five million in noncredit courses. Women

outnumber men consisting of 57 percent of the total population (American Association of Community College (AACC) Fast Facts, 2015). The nation's community colleges presently serve nearly half of all of undergraduate students (Barnett, 2011). Of those students, 61 percent attend part-time as compared to 22 percent at four-year public universities (AACC Fast Facts, 2015; Cohen & Brawer, 2014). According to Cohen, Brawer and Kisker (2013), community college students are older with 46 percent being over the age of 24 and the average age of community college students is 28 years old. Additionally, half of the community colleges are racially and ethnically diverse (AACC, Fast Facts, 2015).

Current Trends and Issues

Today, the economic strength of America hinges on its ability to maneuver in the increasingly competitive world market. With the projection of jobs growth to minimally require associate degrees growing twice as quickly as those requiring no college, United States President Obama is challenging community colleges to properly educate and train “an additional 5 million students with degrees, certificates, or other credentials by 2020,” thereby making it the nation with the highest number of college graduates in the world (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012, p. 3).

To meet the president's agenda, an initiative known as the *21st Century Initiative* is being led by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates and Kresge Foundations. This effort seeks to determine how the association can help community colleges address critical issues such as accountability, budgetary constraints, and student success. Though not the first time these institutions have been charged to realign their mission in efforts to meet the nation's needs, the challenges

facing today's community colleges are daunting, but not insurmountable (AACC, 2015). At the center of this initiative are the nation's more than 13 million students presently being served. The Commission believes that community colleges must change their institutional characteristic from focusing solely on *access* to focus on student *access* and student *success*. In the most recent report released by AACC Community College Completion (2015), the authors claim:

The original need for the commitment has not abated. The need for increasing levels of educational attainment in our country has not subsided, and to remain a competitive economy, more individuals need to attain postsecondary credentials of value. Education continues to be the entrée to the middle class, and individuals without secondary credentials will become increasingly marginalized in the 21st century economy. (p. 2)

Community colleges must begin a movement away from offering fragmented courses to creating clear, coherent educational pathways. A commitment to eradicating achievement gaps as opposed to tolerance for meeting the status quo. Lastly, community colleges must move from a culture of only accepting anecdotal evidence to building a culture of defining hard evidence that points to the successes (AACC Reclaiming the American Dream, 2012).

Collins and Couturier (2008) write:

States that combine their policy development efforts with the development of robust data and performance measurement systems are in the best position to improve student success by benchmarking outcomes and leveraging the lessons of the highest performing institutions across their respective states. (p. 15)

Roueche, et al., (2008) view the situation as dire claiming, “Our education system needs major disaster management before our students become its future victims or survivors, rather than its champions” (p.2). Their success, along with those of future students, will depend greatly upon community colleges’ competence in increasing student achievement – an area under increasing criticism and scrutiny.

Student Achievement, Persistence, and Completion. While community colleges are recognized for serving nearly half of the nation’s college students, the first year retention rate has hovered around 50 percent for decades with fewer than two-fifths of the students having received any kind of certificate or degree within six years of enrolling (Bailey, 2012; Barr & Schultz, 2008). Crisp and Mina (2012) claim, As the largest and most important portal to postsecondary education, improving retention rates and other measures of success among community college students is critical to the welfare, both economic and educational of the United States. (p. 147)

Many issues are attributable to the retention and completion issues and most experts agree community college students most closely possess those factors that serve as barriers to student achievement and completion (Cohen & Brawer, 2014). As discussed earlier, community college students are older with nearly half of all being served considered adult learners (Barr & Schultz, 2008; Capps, 2012). In fact, community colleges serve the highest number of adult learners of any higher education sector (Capps, 2012) and the percentage of racially and ethnically diverse students is nearly half (AACC, Fast Facts, 2015). With Latinos fast becoming the largest minority group in the nation, their needs for education will have a significant impact on the United States economy. As community colleges solidify their place

as the primary point of entry into higher education, they are well positioned to ease this burden; however, they are challenged to enroll and serve the Latino population as many are undocumented immigrants who under federal regulations are ineligible for student financial aid – a practice that further widens the educational gap between Whites and many minorities (Roueche, Richardson, Neal & Roueche, 2008). In addition to serving a large minority population, community colleges serve a reported 40 percent of the nation’s *first-generation* students, meaning they are the first in their families to ever attend college. Compounded by the challenges faced with economic and social issues, these students arrive onto campuses grossly underprepared and in need of developmental education (AACCC, 2015). However, research in recent years has prompted ascertains of reforms that appear achievable and impactful, yet in practice, most are disjointed and isolated solutions (Bailey, 2012).

According to Bailey (2012), “Perhaps the most important conclusion is that reforms must be ambitious and concerned with the entire student experience at college, including opportunities to transfer to four-year colleges. Reforms that focus on only one stage, such as remediation or counseling for course selection, will have, at best, only modest effects.”

Remedial - Developmental Education. Multiple sources of data on students needing remedial education suggest the magnitude of the problem (Bailey, Jeong & Cho, 2010; Fonte, 2011). Nationally, half of all undergraduates and 70 percent of community college students take at least one remedial course (Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Mangan, 2012). “Historically, community colleges have provided the only college access available for students with low academic skills” (Roueche, et al., 2008, p.11). These numbers further compound the problems with student persistence and retention as students who are required

to take a sequence of remedial, or developmental courses often get discouraged and drop out before they can sign up for credit-bearing ones (Jenkins, Wachen, Kerrigan & Mayer, 2012; Mangan, 2012; Roueche, 2008). According to Mangan (2012), “Remedial courses meant to get underprepared students ready for college-level work are often not an on-ramp but a dead end ” (para. 1).

Current systems for assessment are not working well with placement testing “woefully lacking” and the need for effectively supporting students for traditional college readiness is paramount now more than ever” (Community Colleges Issues, Trends, and Strategies, AACC, 2015). Barr and Schultz (2008) write, “Learning how to accommodate the reality of underprepared students is a strategy community colleges must embrace and explore at the institution level if there are to be any significant shifts in student outcomes” (p. 7). Jenkins et al. (2012) claim, “For community colleges, the implication is that to achieve substantial improvements in student outcomes, they will need to make systemic changes in programs and services” (p. 7).

Embracing the diversity of community college students and their needs, colleges across the nation are adopting practices to better support students. Barr and Schultz (2008) suggest student support services such as reading centers, writing centers, counseling, tutoring, and supplemental instruction as interventions that can assist in aiding student success. Capps (2012) advocates the establishment of learning communities on campuses where developmental education courses are combined with college level content to support student learning and retention. In 2010 Boggs wrote, “If we are to meet the 10-year challenge issued by President Obama and make good on the commitment to increase the

numbers of student completers, educators much build on and expand program and practices that reduce student barriers” (p. 6). The challenge becomes how to more clearly define and facilitate student learning.

Successful concepts being pioneered at community colleges include flexible scheduling with colleges offering early morning and weekend classes (Capps, 2012; Mellander, 2007). In addition, factors such as increased student support services and policy and procedures revisions that are learning-centered are all having positive impacts on student success (Culp, 2005). Gateway courses and clearer career pathways are two of the interventions being explored. By creating pathways for students with stackable credentials that lead to associate degree attainment and transferability to four-year institutions, students are enabled to academically progress and less likely to drop out. All of these interventions require resources of time and money to implement as well as a dedicated faculty and staff. With the advent of part-time faculty being used to lessen the constraints of limited budgets, the execution of academic and support programs presents unique challenges for community colleges.

Adjunct and Part-time Faculty. For the past three decades, one of the most significant changes in delivery of postsecondary education has been the dramatic increase in the use of part-time faculty with community colleges utilizing even more adjunct faculty than four-year universities. This practice is an important consideration given that “college graduation and persistence studies emphasize the vital importance of student integration and engagement” with faculty (Jacoby, 2006, p. 1082). According to Jacoby (2006), part-time faculty now provide 63.9 percent of all instruction at community colleges. In fact, Jacoby’s

study results, using three different measures to test for validity, showed the increases in the ratio of part-time faculty at community colleges to “have a highly significant and negative impact upon graduate rates” (p. 1092). Admittedly a consequence of budgetary economics, the use of adjuncts is viewed as being counterproductive to the goal of increasing graduation rates for community college students.

Funding. Federal and state support for all of higher education is declining while the costs increase, and pressures to educate students are rising (Amey, E. Jessup-Anger, & J. Jessup-Anger, 2008). Community colleges must do more in terms of advocacy for support in order to address issues such as remediation and retention. Community colleges receive most of their revenue from federal, state, and local tax sources. Historically underfunded, community college funding models are structured in ways that support growth in numbers, but not necessarily student success – a practice that further perpetuates issues of achievement and has potentially devastating effects for low-income and students of color. Wyner (2014) claims, “For far too long, community colleges have been funded at much lower levels than other higher education institutions, and the recent criticism of developmental education results seems to some like a setup for further funding cuts” (p. 59-60). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2012), community colleges have received no increase in funding per student; yet, enrollments have expanded by 1.6 million students in the last decade alone. Roueche et al., (2008) write:

These challenges should not blindside U. S. schools. However, they should wake up politicians who want to prevent our nation’s losing more ground in the global economy. Community colleges are poised to be a part of the

solutions to these problems. Flexible in their identities, true to their missions, and accessible to millions of Americans, community colleges are reliable, responsible institutions ready to forecast the future and adapt to the country's needs. Community colleges can, have, and will continue to create, shape, and reshape these challenges into opportunities – if they choose to be creative. (p. 9)

Student Aid

In addition to decreased institutional budgets, community colleges students receive a disproportionate amount of financial aid as compared to students at other higher education institutions. In contrast, Simmons (2011) reports that community college students do not take advantage of the *Free Application for Federal Student Aid* (FAFSA), with the ones who need it most, such as the Latino population, most resistant to seek aid. With fears of government interference, Latinos are distrustful suggesting the need for better and increased outreach to the communities in efforts to educate and inform potential students of resources available to them. According to Simmons (2011), the Connecticut community college system addressed this issue by going out into the communities in which they serve holding events about financial aid to assist citizens in completing the FAFSA. Outreach efforts such as these bring the community college back to being the “people’s college.” In addition to assisting and recruiting students, outreach efforts are important to community colleges’ ability to communicate the needs and seek new sources of support.

Private Fundraising

An area under increasing development is the emphasis on private fundraising. Private and public colleges and universities have long embraced the role of private philanthropy and have in response built substantial fundraising programs to support and fund critical institutional functions. However, according to Wong (2007):

Fundraising has never been a strong suit for most community colleges. But in recent years, it's become a major focus. Forced to offset a decrease in government funding to help pay for student scholarships, capital improvement projects, and additional personnel to launch new educational programs, community college leaders have been forced to generate more homegrown funding. (p. 22)

As community colleges face increasing cutbacks in federal and state funding, the time has come for more sophisticated, strategically planned outreach efforts to graduates. Community colleges are known for not being static and with the increased media coverage, are finally being respected for what they do. With the President's charge embraced, leaders are setting about to focus on not only accessibility, but student success. By moving away from fragmented course-taking to creating clear and coherent educational and career pathways, colleges are hopeful that issues such as achievement gaps and attrition will be eradicated. According to Roueche et al. (2008), "To align with this century, community colleges must adapt, forecast changes, and be creative with their solutions to higher education in an incongruous world. Our history of flexibility and innovation tells us we can and we will..." (p. 1).

In order to provide a better understanding of the issues facing community college alumni and fundraising programs, I will first address what is known about alumni giving in the context of higher education and will explain what has been discovered in a study recently conducted with community college alumni.

Higher Education Alumni Giving

According to research conducted by Jenkins and Glass (1999), Harvard alumni were the first to display any interest in their alma mater when in 1643 graduates began returning to the university to attend commencements. However, it was not until 1821 when the first alumni fundraising effort occurred when a group of alumni formed to save Williams College, a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts, when the president, faculty, and students suddenly left to launch what would ultimately become Amherst College (Terry & Macy, 2007).

Organized alumni groups in the United States, reminiscent of the alumni associations we know today, trace their history to 1792 when Yale University alumni came together as an organized group (Terry & Macy, 2007). Yet, it would be decades before “the first permanent alumni fund was established at Yale in 1890” (Jenkins & Glass, p. 595). These early alumni associations required members to pay annual dues creating a philosophy of support early in the life of these institutions.

Since the early beginnings of university resource development, university alumni relations divisions have dedicated significant resources and staff time to sustain the attention and garner the support of alumni. The return on investment from this focused attention on graduates appears to have paid off handsomely for universities across the nation with the

most recent announcement made on January 26, 2013 when former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a \$350 million gift to John Hopkins University to support a transformation academic initiative. According to a university news release, the recent gift is the largest in the university's history and brings the total lifetime giving by Mayor Bloomberg to over \$1 billion – thought to be the largest gift ever made. In February 2003, Dr. Fred Eshelman, a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, donated \$20 million to the institution's School of Pharmacy. While this is an extraordinary gift for any institution of higher education, Eshelman's commitment is not uncommon in the university environment. A Google search identified 71,700 hits using the keywords, 'largest individual gift to university by graduate'. While only minimal time was devoted to researching the validity of the results, the number of hits does not seem unreasonable given the fact that you can virtually pick up any nationally syndicated newspaper and locate articles almost on a daily basis reporting that individuals, very often alumni, have made significant contributions to universities and private colleges.

Initial efforts at alumni fundraising in colleges and universities centered on generating support scholarship support for students marginalized by economic and social issues (Terry & Macy, 2007). In the 2011 Voluntary Support of Education (VSE) survey conducted by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE), contributions to colleges and universities rose 8.2 percent to \$30.30 billion. Of the \$30.30 billion raised, alumni contributed \$7.80 billion representing 25.7 percent of the total contributors and the largest sector of individuals represented. Historically, alumni and foundations have always contributed the largest portions of private giving to education.

Aside from the fact that universities are reaping the benefits of educating many individuals who have the capacity to make significant financial contributions, alumni programming for universities is grounded in long-standing traditions such as athletics, career services, homecomings, and travel programs.

Factors Leading to Giving. Several studies have explored a variety of factors that influence giving in higher education. Commonly, all of the factors can be placed in one of four categories: individual donor characteristics, external environment, institutional characteristics, and fundraising practices (Gunsalus, 2005; Weerts & Ronca, 2007).

Individual Donor Characteristics. Institutions are constantly seeking to better understand the behaviors and characteristics of current donors and those individuals they seek to be donors. Developing donor relationships require an understanding of what characteristics most likely lead to charitable giving. Sargeant and Jay (2014) claim, “Donor development techniques are used to maximize the profitability of every donor relationship” (p. 166). Nonprofit organization and institutions of higher education are using predictive modeling and moves management practices to successfully cultivate and retain donors (Perry, 2015). Understanding the specific characteristics of an organization’s donor base leads to a greater rate of donor retention and aids in predicting the lifetime value (LTV) of specific donors (Sargeant & Jay, 2014). Specific characteristics have been identified to align with alumni donors.

Age. As the leading predictor of alumni giving, age has been found to be statistically significant in several studies researching individual giving behaviors of alumni donors. Findings of these studies revealed the longer alumni had been graduated, the higher the

participation rate and the higher the average amount contributed (Grant & Lindauer, 1986; Gunsalus, 2005). In addition to the physical age of the alum, giving is positively influenced by reunion years with significant increases for milestone anniversaries such as the 25th and 50th among the highest noted (Belfield & Beney, 2000; Bristol, 1991; Clodfelter, 2003; Grant & Lindauer, 1986; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Willemain, et. al., 1994). Weerts and Ronca (2007) too discovered age to be an important variable in determining those most likely to be categorized in their work as *supporters*— those alumni who give and volunteer. With the capacity to give and volunteer, supporters were identified as being at a life-stage conducive to giving of both resources and time and tended to give at greater levels as they aged. For example, Bruggink and Siddiqui’s 1995 study at a private college found that for every one-year increase in a donor’s age, the gifts to the institution increased by five percent.

Lifecycles and family status. In addition to age, the life stage of alumni plays a significant role in the ability and likelihood of giving. Lifecycles “play a significant role in changing patterns of time use and are based on four factors: age, marital status, presence of children and employment status” (Zuzanek & Smale, 1999). Interestingly, Gunsalus (2005) noted statistical significance in the probability of single donors being more likely to give than married individuals – even in cases where both spouses are graduates of the institution.

Gender. Research to date has been inconsistent in reporting the significance of gender as it relates to alumni giving. While women have been found to have a higher probability of giving (Belfield & Beney, 2000), McDearmon and Shirley (2009) showed little difference with 48.5 percent of males contributing as compared to 50.4 percent of females.

Charitable giving. Alumni's overall propensity toward philanthropy positively affects giving and strongly predicts the probability of support. Furthermore, the charitable giving behaviors of parents, corporations, and foundations also positively impact alumni giving with the reason being the giving patterns of others serve as a signal of increasing quality within the institution and therefore causes alumni to also contribute (Gottfried, 2008). Studies have shown a larger percentage of alumni donors also make contributions to other charities (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Okunade, 1993; Weerts & Ronca, 2008). Of the 231 respondents surveyed by McDearmon and Shirley (2009) who gave to other colleges or universities, over 86 percent also made gifts to the institution where their research was conducted, with those who gave to the university reported giving more frequently to other charities as compared to alumni non-donors.

Student experiences. Donations made by alumni are highly correlated to their expressed satisfaction with their own college experience (Clodfelter, 2003). Research indicates several key factors of the student experience that influence alumni contributors. Strong predictors of giving include in-state and residential status, receiving financial awards, as well as overall positive experiences toward the university (Gaier, 2005; Laguilles, 2008; Marr, et. al., 2005). Monk's 2003 study reported the most statistically significant factor for alumni giving directly correlated with the positive satisfaction with one's undergraduate experience. In addition to these factors, studies have linked participation of academic and social activities to alumni giving. For example, graduates of honors programs at two British universities were found to be much more likely to give (Belfield & Beney, 2000) and

Harrison, Mitchell, and Peterson (1995) pointed to the positive influence that past membership in fraternities and sororities had on alumni giving.

Alumni experiences. The importance of alumni involvement with the institution after graduation has been shown to significantly impact the giving rates of alumni (Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Gaier, 2005; Lindahl & Winship, 1992; Taylor & Martin, 1995; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). Engagement activities are highly significant in the ability to connect with alumni, and therefore initiate the relationship to begin receiving gifts. Studies show alumni who are actively engaged, communicated with, and invited back to campus tend to give more frequently and more significantly (Pastorella, 2003). Beyond the individual characteristics that influence giving, internal and external considerations such as the economy or institutional culture impact giving.

External Environment. External factors can negatively or positively affect giving. When times are good and the economy is strong, researchers witness increases in the giving participation rate (GPR) as well as the average gift size of alumni (Bristol, 1991; Willemain, et. al., 1994). Using the New York Stock Exchange Index and the Consumer Price Index, Bristol (1991) examined both over a period of five years showing a direct correlation between the state of the economy and increased levels of alumni giving. Likewise, changes in major tax laws for charitable giving and tax rates can also sway levels of alumni giving (Clodfelter, 1980).

Institutional Characteristics. Few studies have directly looked at the role of institutional characteristics as it relates to alumni giving (Bristol, 1991; Weerts & Ronca, 2007). However, in 2005 Gunsalus engaged in a study to look specifically at institutional

characteristics, not directly related to fundraising practices, to determine what, if any, predicted higher giving participation rates (GPR) among alumni. Of particular significance were the results as they relate to the benchmarking to other universities highlighting some of the dangers this practice could have when many characteristics are outside of the control of both the advancement staff and the president. Furthermore, Gunsalus' research found that first year retention, graduation rates, the percentage of students living on campus, and tuition price all positively correlated to donor participation. "The fact that graduation rate was consistently explanatory and had the highest correlation with GPR suggests that those same institutional factors that motivate students to persist in their pursuit of a degree seem to also inspire higher percentages of those students to give back after graduation" (Gunsalus, 2005, p. 167). Schools with higher levels of endowment, higher enrollments, and higher educational and general expenditures tend to also raise more private funds (Leslie & Ramey, 1988).

Fundraising Practices. Private and public colleges and universities have long embraced the role of private philanthropy and have in response built substantial fundraising programs to support these critical functions. With major schools situated within these institutions academically concentrated on studies like education, engineering, journalism, law, medicine, and science, many of these institutions employ hundreds of fundraising professionals whose positions are focused on raising funds for particular schools within the institution. In terms of the cost to raise a dollar, decentralized fundraising operations such as these described above are deemed to be no more or less efficient than those universities with centralized advancement offices. However, decentralization of these functions was

determined to be overall more efficient - most likely due to the greater numbers of staff dedicated to fundraising (Grunig, 1995; Gunsalus, 2005).

The practitioners who operate from university alumni relations offices have models they can refine and replicate. Through the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), an international organization focused on university and college development and alumni relations issues, subscribers are afforded resources to assist in various components of alumni relations programming. While the CASE resources are beneficial, the organization has only in recent years included community colleges in their support of higher educational philanthropy.

Community College Fundraising and Alumni Relations

It was not until the early 1900s that community college foundations first appeared. In 1906, a private school in Kentucky, Midway Junior College, was the first institution of its kind to establish a fund raising foundation (Jenkins & Glass, 1999). Although Joliet Junior College (JJC) in Illinois is America's oldest public community college, having been established in 1901, there is no indication on the College's Web site as to when JJC's Alumni Association was formed. And while two-year colleges have been around for over 100 years, many of the publicly funded community colleges in America were not established until the mid-60s. Of those colleges, partnering foundations were often established some twenty or more years later.

Until the mid-2000's, scholarly research that addressed community college alumni programming was nearly non-existent. Until Herbin, Dittman, Herbert, and Ebben published their report in 2006, little to no data existed that focused on the status of alumni development

programs in America's community colleges. An affiliate organization of the American Association of Community Colleges, the Council of Resource Development (CRD), "is the only professional organization concerned exclusively with fundraising for two-year colleges." (CRD Web Site). In July 2006, CRD hosted its first-ever Alumni Development Workshop in Park City, Utah of which the researcher attended. Patty Herbin, a senior consultant for Performa, Inc.'s Higher Education Division, opened the workshop by conveying results of the research CRD and Performa had partnered to fund. Herbin, former executive director of Alamance Community College (ACC) Foundation in North Carolina, knows first-hand the challenges and opportunities presented to community colleges who want to engage graduates. She initiated and strategically led efforts for ACC to offer alumni programming such as ACC's Distinguished Alumni Awards and the College's successful Phone-a-thon campaign.

As community colleges face increasing cutbacks in federal and state funding, the time has come for more sophisticated, strategically planned outreach efforts to graduates. Funderburk (1999) writes, "Alumni are part of the institutional family and should be treated as full members of that family. Alumni deserve the right to be taken seriously in their opinions about the institution's directions" (p.vi). Funderburk encourages alumni relations practitioners to determine ways for alumni to connect and reconnect to institutions and other alumni. Alumni, whether graduates of universities, private institutions, or community colleges, are the institutions' largest and most permanent constituency. According to Pastorella (2003):

Community colleges are particularly and favorably positioned to obtain support from their alumni. Alumni recognize the value they received as students. Most live in the vicinity of the college and take dual pride in knowing that their gift in support of the community college is also an investment in their community. (p.75)

Milliron, de los Santos, and Browning (2003) write, “The third wave is about institutional advancement, entering into full partnerships on the economic and educational landscape and developing the relationships necessary to support our institutions more fully on the road ahead” (p.82). According to Skari and Ullman (2012), “Community colleges for a long time have operated under the misguided assumption that they should not waste time or resources prospecting and cultivating their alumni in hopes of generating philanthropic support” (p. 20). According to Wong (2007):

Fundraising has never been a strong suit for most community colleges. But in recent years, it’s become a major focus. Forced to offset a decrease in government funding to help pay for student scholarships, capital improvement projects, and additional personnel to launch new educational programs, community college leaders have been forced to generate more homegrown funding. (p. 22)

In Herbin, Dittman, Herbert, and Ebben’s (2006) *Status of Alumni Development in America’s Community Colleges*, the vast majority of community colleges across the nation either had fledgling or nonexistent alumni programming. Only 179 of the 1,157 community colleges within the United States and Canada responded to the group’s 2005 survey. Gose (2006) writes, “Historically, community colleges have not put much effort into tracking their alumni. Nor have they had much financial incentive to do so” (p. B7). Nevertheless, Joanna

Brown, director of Alumni Relations at Holyoke Community College in Massachusetts says, “Alumni are your [community colleges’] greatest untapped resource” (CRD 2006 Alumni Development Workshop Presentation). Though facing stiff competition from four-year universities and non-profit organizations, community colleges have much to offer those seeking to make a philanthropic investment (Wong, 2007). From workforce development, academic transfer programs, vocational-technical curriculum, athletics, and cultural outreach programming, community colleges offer a broad range of services that should resonate with areas of interests for prospective contributors.

Recent Community College Alumni Giving Research. Research recently conducted by Dr. Lisa Skari on community college alumni donor characteristics dispels some of the myths often associated with community college alumni giving. In her 2011 dissertation titled *Who Gives? Characteristics of Community College Alumni Donors*, Skari finds community college alumni giving comparable for both types of institutions citing giving being at 15 percent for both types of institutions. Her work found the predictors for alumni giving at two-year colleges are very similar to studies conducted at four-year institutions.

The community college alumni donors surveyed by Skari were older and wealthier and expressed generally positive feelings toward their alma mater. In addition, statistically significant predictors were discovered for alumni who gave to their four-year institutions. Those who made gifts to their university were much more likely to contribute to their two-year institutions - dispelling beliefs that community college transfer students also transfer their allegiance. These “findings suggest community college alumni are the largest untapped

resource available to our institutions” – they only need to be asked to give (Skari & Ullman, 2012, p. 22).

In order for community colleges to attract alumni donors, Skari suggests the following initiatives – institutional support, opportunities for socialization, and good and credible alumni records. Unlike many four-year institutions of higher education, community colleges uniquely personify the communities’ culture and are positioned to meet and respond to the needs of the communities in which they are located.

Community Colleges Best Practices and Alumni Outreach. Successful alumni relations programs function optimally when developed based upon the needs of the alumni while also educating the alumni of the institutions’ needs. The vast majority of university alumni programs have been around for hundreds of years while the vast majority of community colleges are just now getting started in formalizing outreach to alumni. Gardner (2013) claims:

Four-year colleges have long made a high priority of maintaining relationships with their alumni, who offer a durable source of support for their alma maters. That hasn’t been as much the case at two-year colleges, where even what constitutes an alumnus—someone who earned an associate degree? a guy who took a class once?—varies from institution to institution. (NP).

The alumni programming selected for inclusion in this research is in no way intended to be comprehensive; however, the concept of alumni programming is so new to the community college setting, only a few of the colleges have moved forward into uncharted territory as leaders within this particular arena.

Holyoke Community College – Phone-a-thon Campaigns. While it is the intention of all alumni programs to go far beyond the fundraising aspect of programming, most certainly it is expected that alumni are viable prospects, and possessing special affinities for their alma mater, they should be asked to donate back to the institution. Established in 1946, Holyoke Community College (HCC) is situated on 165 acres in rural Massachusetts where the institution currently serves 9,000 students annually. In 2000, the College hired Joanna Brown as the institution's first Director of Alumni Relations. Brown launched the effort by devoting the first year to obtaining data on the more than 26,000 alumni in a format that would be electronically accessible and manageable. Once the alumni records were put into an electronic format, Brown hired a third-party company to provide updated mailing and phone records for HCC's graduates. Lastly, Brown sent the updated information to a different agency to process the data for wealth prospecting. Once the information was in place, Brown established a phone-a-thon campaign that resulted in \$30,000 in first time contributions from alumni. The Alumni Relations Division at HCC employs a part-time phone-a-thon manager and student employees who do the phoning. Under Brown's guidance, a comprehensive phone-a-thon training manual was developed for use by the manager and students. Brown, during CRD's Alumni Workshop in July 2006, advised participants to:

Be realistic in predicting the number of dollars you will raise or number of donors for a start-up annual fund effort...In the first four years of your effort, you'll likely be spending more than \$1.00 to bring in each \$1.00 you raise, and that is to be expected. The actual length of time it will take you to reach the break-even point (of all alumni and annual fund expenses, including your salary) will depend on the sophistication of

the software you have available, whether the addresses and phone numbers are up to date, whether the list has been screened for wealth, and how much staff and volunteer assistance you have. After year four or five, you will see a profit above all expenses, and each year after, that profitability will increase. Don't let slow progress dissuade you – you are building a long term success strategy” personal correspondence, (July 2006).

According to Baxter (1992), “Alumni usually provide the first level of giving in the gift-giving pyramid” (p.1). Colleges that undertake the formation of an alumni relations effort should realize it will take time to develop relationships and to build substantial giving from graduates. That said, HCC's efforts have paid off. During the 2006 fiscal year, 1,500 alumni contributed nearly \$300,000 - an amount that is no small pocket change for any community college.

Monroe Community College – Alumni Hall of Fame. Monroe Community College, located in Rochester, New York, is a member of the League for Innovation in the Community College, one of only 20 selected from all community colleges in the United States and Canada. MCC was established in 1961 and the MCC Foundation was founded in 1983. The Monroe Community College (MCC) Alumni Council is governed by 19 graduates of the College, acting as the Alumni Relations arm of the MCC Foundation. MCC's Alumni serve as ambassadors, board members, donors, and mentors. Mark Pastorella, Director of Alumni and Planned Giving at MCC Foundation, (2003) writes, “Involved alumni are alumni who will give, and then ask how they can do more. If a college knows how to cultivate and engage its alumni, it is well on the way to financial health and growth” (p.75). Monroe

Community College offers a comprehensive listing of services, benefits, events, and giving opportunities for alumni through the College's Web Site. Annual events include the Scholarship Open, a golf tournament that funds student scholarships and program innovations, and an Alumni Hall of Fame. According to Baxter (1992), "Many institutions have established an Alumni Hall of Fame at which distinguished graduates are recognized for their achievements..." (p.4). Since 1992, MCC has annually honored four distinguished alumni through the Alumni Hall of Fame program as a means of recognizing "alumni who have made exemplary contributions to their profession and their community" (MCC Web Site). Alumni Hall of Fame or Distinguished Alumni Awards create opportunities for community colleges to not only recognize graduates of the institution, but offer reasons to further educate and inform about the value of a community college education. Further, if the awardees are influential and highly recognizable in the community, the college is able to capitalize on this association by showcasing the honorees in advertising campaigns, publications, and solicitation materials. If individuals see that a CEO of a reputable business in the community was educated at MCC, it is highly probable that the image of MCC will be elevated in the eyes of the public.

Joliet Junior College – Alumni Connections to Student Body. "A greater return than equities, more secure than bonds – the greatest investment you can make in your advancement program is an investment in today's students," writes Brant (1999, p. 107). In Illinois, the Joliet Junior College Alumni Association has effectively identified ways for current students to connect with graduates. Coupled with traditional alumni programming such as a Donor Recognition Dinner and Distinguished Alumni Award Brunch, JJC's

Alumni Association offers opportunities for students to connect and establish relationships with graduates. The *Success Story Series*, as described on the College's Web site, is a sequence of presentations designed to introduce students to personal success stories of JJC alumni who are leaders in the community. In addition, members of the Alumni Association collaborate with representatives of the College's Financial Aid Division to sponsor a free Scholarship and FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Workshop. The College positions the workshop as a free community service as publicized in an attractive flyer that is on JJC's Web site. While staff members are working with students to complete the FAFSA, alumni assist students in completing applications for privately funded scholarships.

According to Jablonski (1999), "Success in the alumni field requires an understanding of student affairs and the potential synergy that exists for joint programs and services" (p. 101). Possessing an understanding of other divisions is simply not enough to ensure a successful alumni relations program. In order to provide students and alumni with exceptional opportunities for education, engagement and growth, a sense of shared responsibility, and collaboration must be present. "No alumni relations pro is a solo artist," states Salopek (2003). "Those who create show-stopping education programs do so in sync with faculty and administrators" (p.40).

Lenoir Community College – Travel Programs. In 2007, the Lenoir Community College (LCC) Foundation, located in Kinston, North Carolina, launched a Travel Program. The group toured Ireland for two weeks with two staff, the College President and Foundation Director, attending as College representatives. The Foundation Director hired a third party company who handled the logistical aspects of the trip. It was not the intent of the College to

offer the program as a means generating income, but to be more of a “friend raising event,” the College generated over \$10,000 beyond expenses for the benefit of LCC. A word of caution though from Beardsley (1999) who states, “...planning trips that cater solely to major donors can sometimes alienate other segments of your alumni base” (p. 21). Most participants in travel programs tend to range in age from the 60s – 70s. According to Beardsley (1999), travel programs can be for pure leisure or they can be structured to be educational travel. “Although leisure travel is designed for pure enjoyment, trips that also focus on learning about a destination or the culture of a region are viewed as educational as well as pleasurable experiences” (Beardsley, 1999, p. 22). Educational travel affords participants opportunities for personal growth while exploring and enjoying the area traveled. Some colleges even build introductory programs about the destination into their course offerings in order to better prepare the travelers.

Sinclair Community College – Membership Programs and Use of Technology.

Whether to require alumni to pay dues in order to become members of the alumni association is a source of varying opinions within the alumni relations business. Many institutions offer alumni benefits package based on their status as a member of the Alumni Association. One of the nation’s top community colleges, Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio offers comprehensive alumni programming through the dues paying alumni association. Graduates of Sinclair are afforded opportunities to participate in the College’s Travel Program, discounts for various businesses, short-term health insurance benefits, as well as a subscription to the *Sinclair Magazine*. Sinclair markets the Alumni Association via comprehensive and attractive web pages devoted to alumni programming. The Sinclair

Alumni Association is governed by a 15 member council that meets monthly. Through the association, scholarships are funded and like Monroe Community College, the association has a distinguished alumni awards program.

“Alumni Relations is a business based on nostalgia, driven by emotional bonds to alma mater, and deeply committed to educational values,” writes Bickel (2000). “However, some alumni associations develop institutional nearsightedness. They become unable to see that some of their program and services reflect only tradition, not their customers’ current needs.” Stone (2001) claims that in order for institutions to fulfill the purpose and goals of alumni relations, they should “own their alumni responsibilities and alumni relations requires an entire institution’s commitment to lifelong relationships” (p. 7). How does a community college begin the process of engaging alumni? The challenge it seems lies in cultivating the relationships with their students. According to Baxter (1992), “Once a community college foundation is well established, an alumni program can be developed, although the focus should be on making contacts and gaining supporters rather than raising funds.” According to Brant (2002), “Alumni programs reflect the unique histories, cultures, customs, structures, and environment of their campuses” (p.26). The fact that community colleges are so deeply embedded in their respective communities would seem to position community colleges nicely to gain significant benefits - if significant resources and time are dedicated to the alumni relations efforts. The benefits afforded to institutions that successfully reconnect with graduates are many. Not only do the colleges gain from the private and corporate gifts that come their way via alumni, there too are the implicit advantages of cultivating relationships with alumni. For example, advocacy work of an institution’s graduates during times of

legislative cutbacks or major bond referendums is priceless. According to Nielsen (2002), “While money may motivate the majority of organized alumni advocacy, many institutions long have been involved in other forms of legislative efforts and cause-focused outreach. Historically, alumni advocates have not only helped secure funding but also helped shape the institution in other ways” (p. 25).

Unique Characteristics of Community College Alumni. Once thought to be a waste of time and energy without a great deal of personal resources, community college alumni have been overlooked for their unique positions they hold within the communities served by community colleges (Pastorella, 2003). According to Dollar and Zucker (1981), “Early organizational failures caused many community colleges to behave as though the benefits of an active alumni association are either not attainable or not worth the effort” (p. 22). Community college advancement officers are reconsidering the potential of connecting to alumni with funded and supported alumni programs being developed nationwide (Jacobson, 1994).

Historically, community colleges have not been heavy solicitors of alumni due mostly to the lack of communication with students once they leave their institutions. Unlike four-year colleges and universities, most community colleges have no idea where their alumni are or where they work. Additionally, with community college students enrolling, re-enrolling, and transferring, colleges are often troubled with simply defining who alumni are (Ashford, 2011). According to the Kaplan (2010), in the Council for Aid to Education’s annual survey of that same year, only 0.8 percent of community college individual contributors reported being alumni. However, due to the underdevelopment of community college alumni

programming, the 34.5 percent of contributions received may very well include alumni donors who are just simply not identified as such (Ashford, 2011).

Implications though are great for those community colleges who do take the effort to make alumni a focus area for their campuses. Community college alumni are reported to live within a 90 mile radius of their alma maters and as viable members of the community workforce, there exist wonderful opportunities to have alumni serve as advocates, mentors, tutors, guest speakers, mentors, and subject matter experts in specialized programs (Adam, 2011; Herbin, Dittman, Herbert & Ebben, 2006). Skari (2011) who recently conducted a groundbreaking study of alumni donors claims community college alumni “represent the largest untapped pool of prospective donors” (p.24). A gift given by an alumnus not only directly impacts the quality of life for students, but has the potential to directly impact the quality of life for the contributor and the immediate community.

North Carolina Community College System

Presently serving 840,000 students, the North Carolina Community College System consists of 58 local community colleges providing multiple avenues of instruction including educational and workforce development training. With colleges located within a 30 minute commute of anywhere in the state, the NCCCS is third largest in the United States. Colleges vary in size with the largest college being Wake Technical Community College that serves over 66,000 students in comparison to the 1,899 students enrolled at Pamlico Community College (North Carolina Community Colleges Website, 2015). Led by former North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford, the General Assembly adopted and provided the initial funding for the system in 1957 and in 1963 established the Department of Community

Colleges to operate under the guidance of the State Board of Education. Dr. Issac Epps Ready became the state director in 1964 where student enrollment at the time as just over 79,000. During this same time, Dr. Dallas Herring was serving as the chair of the State Board of Education. Dr. Herring secured \$150,000 from the General Assembly to fund a program at North Carolina State University and led by Dr. Edgar Boone whereby community college professionals were offered professional development opportunities. Today, North Carolina State University's program is thriving with graduate degrees offered specifically in adult and community college education. Dr. Herring would go on to become a major influencer of the explosive growth of North Carolina's community colleges during the next three decades (North Carolina State University Website, 2015).

Presently, NCCCS is in the midst of a state-wide initiative *Success NC* in partnership with the North Carolina Association of Community College Presidents and the North Carolina Association of Community College Trustees. *Success NC* is focused primarily on areas of improving access to students, enhancing quality, and increasing success. Programs such as the Male Minority Mentoring program, development of common core curriculum, curriculum pathways with better defined articulation agreements with four-year universities, and career and technical high school programs that will easily matriculate into the community college curriculum are just some of the strategies being implemented.

NCCCS student demographics are different compared to national statistics with 46.3 percent ages 18-21. White students are slightly higher than the national averages making up 66 percent of the total enrollment. Students who attend full-time make up 40.8 percent of the total student population (NCCCS, 2015).

Chapter Summary

A recurring theme in all of the research previously discussed points to the importance of experiences shared that can positively affect, develop, and sustain relationships. Though alumni and development practitioners are charged with securing critically needed funding for their institutions, it is the relational aspect and development of those relationships that are at the heart of what fundraising really entails (Klein, 2003). As the contextual setting of fundraising and the theoretical development of relationship management increasingly converge, the advancement for both, in terms of refinements for theory and applications of practice, seem eminent (Waters, 2008).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The goal of this chapter is to describe and explain the plan used for conducting the research to better understand the phenomenon of the relational aspect of community college alumni relations. This chapter is divided into subsections detailing the course of the research study while presenting an overview of the research and defining the reasoning for the choice of research approach and methodology. Early on in this chapter, I explore my positionality and subjectivity as well as my assumptions as they relate to the research. Additionally, I address the questions of why the relationship management conceptual framework and the question proposed in this study are appropriate for qualitative research and in particular, explain the rationale for using the case study methodology. Next, I describe the research sample detailing the site selected for the study as well as the participants I interviewed and the role each played within the context of the setting and the study. In addition to an overview of the data I collected during this study, I describe the collection methods utilized and explain how the data was analyzed. Furthermore, this chapter addresses issues of rigor to include triangulation, biases, data handling, and detail issues of trustworthiness. Lastly, this chapter includes a discussion of the limitations and strengths of this study.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to further extend the community college alumni relations conversation by investigating and seeking to better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study described how graduates and key leaders of the community college define and perceive the relationship building process, their perceptions of key actions

and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. Employing an explanatory qualitative case study design, one North Carolina community college was studied. The research question which guided the overall design and development of this research study was:

From the organizational-public relations management perspective, how do the experiences and perceptions of community college alumni and professionals explain, define, and extend the meaning of the community college-alumni relationship?

I adapted relationship management theory, as developed by J. Grunig and Huang (2000), as the conceptual framework to guide the data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. As a framework, it offered a lens for understanding how community college alumni, development practitioners, and leadership define the relationship in the context of a community college alumni relations program.

Relationship Management Theory: A Conceptual Framework

Relationship management theory was the theoretical framework used to guide this research. Given the competition for alumni dollars, along with the static number of alumni actually giving, researchers are working to conduct studies to provide practitioners with information to use in the field to not only predict who will give, but determine the factors that lead to the greatest likelihood of giving (Waters, 2008). To better understand alumni and their giving patterns, alumni giving studies have been grounded in altruism, utility maximization theory, and social exchange theory explored mostly through the lenses of behavioral, economic, and social perspectives (Skari, 2011). From this research, relationship management theory has become an area of exploration as a means of better defining the

relationship and determining necessary elements that should be in place for the publics and organization relationship to form.

According to J. Grunig and Huang (2000), *trust*, *control mutuality*, and *commitment* to a relationship and *satisfaction* with a relationship “are four focal characteristics representing the quality of organization-public relationships” (p.42). The four dimensions are distinguishable, yet interconnected, and “can be used to conceptualize and measure the quality of relationships between organizations and publics” (J. Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 47). According to Jarratt (2004), “an organization’s relationship infrastructure capability, relationship learning capability and relationship behavioral capability are the key dimensions of an organization’s relationship management capability” (p. 297).

Relationship Management and Fundraising . Increasingly, fundraising literature focuses on the growing importance of relationship cultivation. Sargeant and Shang (2010) write, “At the core of relationship fundraising is the development and maintenance of long-term relationships with donors rather than simply a series of discrete transactions” (p.334). Organizations that effectively advance the relational concept in constituent management get to know and care about the opinions of their donors. Staunch (2011) claims, “Effective fundraising is, after all, relationship building” (p. 151). With relationship building at the core of the fundraising practice, Burnett (2002) defines it as:

Relationship fundraising is an approach to the marketing of a cause that centers on the unique and special relationship between a nonprofit and each supporter. Its overriding consideration is to care for and to develop that bond and to do nothing that might damage or jeopardize it. Every activity is

therefore geared toward making sure donors know they are important, valued, and considered, which has the effect of maximizing funds per donor in the long term. (p. 38)

According to Waters (2009), “When relationships are cultivated and managed properly, nonprofit organizations are more likely to experience fundraising success with their donors” (p. 144). Of Grunig and Huang’s (2000) four defining characteristics of relationship management, trust is by far the most significant to the relationship between donor and fundraiser. According to Tempel (1999),

Trust is what the traditional professionals have or have had in common... Similarly, as donors or philanthropists, we trust the fundraiser to protect our interests as donors, to help us structure gifts in the most efficient way, to make certain our intentions are carried out, that the promises are kept” (p. 57)

Waters (2009) claims, “For nonprofit organizations to continue the provision of programs and services to the community, it is vital that they dedicate resources into relationship cultivation with its donors” (p.146).

Research Design

This study on community college alumni relations was developed as an explanatory case study utilizing the qualitative approach. Radley and Chamberlain (2012) write:

Case study can give weight to the concepts required to frame what is special about these states for the people involved. In doing this, the case study approach is sensitive to the context in which information is gathered, so that when, where and how one

invokes the idea of illness or homelessness is entirely relevant to what might be discovered. (p. 393)

Qualitative Inquiry. For years, there have been ongoing debates within the academic community about the role and place of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; O’Driscoll, 1998). Social research has been described as being based on “qualitative knowing” that is crosschecked by quantitative tradition (Howe, 2003). Though several differences have been discussed amid the quantitative versus qualitative discourse, three major overarching differences have come to be generally distinguished as: (a) the distinction between explanation and understanding as the purpose of inquiry; (b) the distinction between a personal and impersonal role for the researcher; and (c) the distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed (Stake, 1995, p. 37). Quantitative research is relatively constant across time and settings with researchers developing knowledge by collecting numerical data on observable behaviors of participants and then subjecting this data to numerical analysis as a means of achieving generalizations. On the other hand, the qualitative tradition seeks meaning by looking at “interconnected thoughts or parts linked to a whole” (Creswell, 1994, p.95), while intentionally pressing for understanding complex interrelationships among all that exists in order to “establish an empathetic understanding for the reader”(Stake,1995, p. 39).

For this research study, the focus was solely on the qualitative tradition and specifically explored the study using the case study methodology. Case studies have been seen as viable methodological tools for three types of research; descriptive, explorative, and explanatory (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 1994).

Case Study Approach. The case study approach allows for in-depth exploration of complex issues. Case studies are “particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context” (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Guro, Avery & Sheikh, 2011, p. 1). According to Creswell (2007), case study research is:

A qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case), or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 73)

While Yin (2009) claims, “using case studies for research purposes remains one of the most challenging of all social science endeavors” (p.3), Merriam (1988) writes, “case study research, and in particular qualitative case study, is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of educational phenomena” (p. 2). Representing the educational phenomenon being studied, one community college’s alumni program served as the setting for this case study. The participants of the study included the voices of college administrators, alumni, and the professionals working directly with the alumni program.

While the use and term *case study* is likely familiar to most, it is not standardized and is often misunderstood as being associated only with social scientists to describe case studies in areas such as business, healthcare, law, and psychology (Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano & Morales, 2007) or to examine specific *cases* as an instructional and teaching tool (Henning, et al., 2005; Kells & Koerner, 2005; Merriam, 2002). In the qualitative research tradition,

there too appears to exist some confusion as to whether the case study is best described and used as a research design (Bergen & White, 2000), a research method (Jones & Lyons, 2004; Stake, 1995), a research strategy (Yin, 2003), or a data collection method (Gangeness & Yurkovich, 2006). Merriam (2002) attributes this confusion to “the conflation of case study as being ‘both the unit of study’ (the case) and the product of this type of ‘investigation’” (p. 27). To gain a better understanding of the qualitative case study, it is appropriate to turn to the scholars whose contributions on this topic have become most widely accepted and whose work is regularly cited in the empirical literature.

Several scholars, most notably Creswell, Merriam, Stake and Yin, have contributed to the tradition of qualitative research, with Stake and Yin paying specific attention to perfecting the case study methodology. While Stake (1995) claims the case is an integrated system with “systematically established procedures for case study research being cited extensively in his example of ‘Harper School’” (Creswell et al, 2007, p. 246), he is hesitant to delineate a specific definition claiming, “We cannot offer a precise definition of cases or case studies because practices already exist for case study in many disciplines...It is important for us to recognize that others will not use the words or methods we do” (Stake, 1995, Footnote 2, p. 2). In contrast, Yin (2003) refined his definition of case study as being, “An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Creswell (2007) perceives case study as a methodology defining it as:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (case) or multiple-bounded systems (cases) over

time, through detailed, in-depth data collective involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 73)

All (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2000; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) agree that case study methodology is best for describing, exploring, and understanding a phenomenon in its real-life context. Tellis (1997) writes:

Case studies are multi-perspectival analyses. This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interactions between them. This one aspect is a salient point in the characteristic that case studies possess. They give voice to the powerless and voiceless. (p.80)

Philosophical Framework for Case Study

Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) base their approach to the case study methodology from a constructivist paradigm. Constructivists claim that truth is relative and is dependent upon one's perspective where reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Searle, 1995). This paradigm "recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn't reject outright some notion of objectivity" (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 10). Stake (1995) claims, "Of all the roles, the role of interpreter, and gatherer of interpretations, is central. Most contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (p. 99).

Defining Case Study Characteristics. Qualitative case studies allow researchers to focus on complex situations while taking into consideration the context of the situation capturing the holistic and meaningful characteristics of the case (Casey & Houghton, 2010; Yin, 1999; Yin, 2003). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), “Studies focusing on society and culture in a group, a program, or an organization typically espouse some form of case study as a strategy” (p. 55). Case study methodology is *bounded* within an individual, group of individuals, an organization, or multiple organizations. Situated with the theoretical framework, the phenomenon of interest is bound through the choice of research problem and questions. The appropriate setting and/or sample are selected carefully in order to allow an in-depth understanding and a thick and rich description to emerge. Case studies are always *embedded* within larger systems with a significant part of the case being defined and uniquely characterized by the contextual nature of *who* or *what* is being researched. The case study methodology is *multivariate* typically examining the interplay of multiple variables as a means of gaining complete understanding and *multi-method* as numerous activities such as observations, interviews, documents reviews, and reflection come together to form the basis of collection and analysis. Case studies can be *multidisciplinary* calling on multiple perspectives as a means of guiding and shaping the case. (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Positionality and Subjectivity Statements. The next section addresses my positionality and subjectivity as the primary researcher for this project. As the primary collector of the data, it is important for me to disclose any elements that may influence the process and research.

Positionality. Qualitative research differs greatly from the quantitative approach, particularly when considering the role of the researcher. The values of the researcher are strongly embedded in the qualitative tradition and reflexivity is a hallmark of qualitative research (L. Grunig, 2008). Through the reflexive process, the researcher must maintain a sense of neutrality or disclose biases, and be aware of the dynamics of power and role during the collective exchange with participants while at the same time utilizing their experience and knowledge base to guide the inquiry.

As the primary instrument of data collection for this study, it is important for me to disclose my worldview as that of being a social constructivist whereby my beliefs and values are grounded within the context that “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42-43).

The relationship building inherently witnessed on four-year university campuses has only recently begun to be cultivated in community colleges and my institution is no exception to this. I believe relationships are the lifeline of a nonprofit’s existence and given the impending changes in funding, I foresee the relationship management paradigm becoming increasingly important to higher education with particular promise for community colleges to connect to their former students. My positionality within the context of this research sparked my interest in my research area and is influencing the decisions and actions I took throughout the various processes of my study.

I am a white female in my forties, a first-generation college student, and have been employed in higher education for over 25 years working predominantly in the area of institutional advancement although in various capacities ranging from public information

officer, grants writer, annual giving, and alumni relations. Over the last twelve years I have been employed by a community college and since 2008, I have served as executive director of a community college foundation. My role is to lead the nonprofit 501(c)(3) public charity whose mission is to raise private funds to support the needs of the college and its student body.

Developing and sustaining relationships are central functions that I engage in on a daily basis, and for me, they are the most enjoyable aspects of my profession. Crosby (2012) writes, “Relationship management is the core process of donor-centered fundraising” and “focuses on managing the quality of interactions between the nonprofit and the donor over time” (p. 11-12). Being the executive director of a community college foundation, I am the primary professional in charge of all functions of the organization. As such, it is extremely important to me that I conduct myself in such a way as to ensure to the college’s alumni, donors, friends, and leaders that I am ethical, diligent, motivated, responsible, and trustworthy – all values I contend are important to my personal as well as professional lives. Not only do I feel I need these attributes in order to function well in my role, but the organization too must have the same attributes in order to fulfill its mission. As a current student in a doctoral program and fundraising professional working in a community college setting, I am interested in the establishment of relationships with community college alumni. I feel strongly that relationships are the cornerstone of any successful development program, and I am baffled as to why alumni programming is not a more integral part of community college advancement programs. Established from day one as “open door institutions,” the community college allows all students to attend with little regard to considerations such as

SAT scores or GPA. We close the proverbial door once students leave the institution with little to no contact beyond following up to make certain everyone is passing their exams – something that makes the colleges look good when the pass rate is high.

Subjectivity. My professional experiences as a researcher played a central part in the development of this study. As an advancement professional at a different institution of higher education, I am interested in the development of alumni relations programming within the context of community colleges. I view my role in this study as being that of both an “insider” and “outsider.” Though I have taken occasional classes at community colleges, I do not have the first-hand experience of being a graduate or the identity of a long-time attendee of a community college. Nonetheless, I bring assumptions regarding my “insider” knowledge to the research process. In the midst of initiating an alumni program at my own institution, I feel a kinship with these individuals and know first-hand the challenges and opportunities engaging constituents can bring. Lastly, I believe intensely that the community college alumni constituent group has been long overlooked, and I am perplexed as to the reasons why the development of community college alumni program is such a difficult task. Over the last three years, the institution where I work has undergone a significant project to migrate over 20,000 alumni records dating from 1982 to present over to our foundation constituent management system. The foundation has organized publication mailings, invitations to special events, and the president’s annual report to be mailed to several tiers of alumni. Additionally, I have a member of my foundation team assigned a portion of her duties to develop an alumni relations program at my institution as I feel this constituent group has been long overlooked. While my research was conducted at a different institution than where

I work, my present experiences working to build an alumni relations program are certainly influencing my own desires to understand and establish relationships with alumni.

Research Process

For this qualitative explanatory case study design, one community college was studied in-depth to allow a deeper understanding of how alumni and key leaders within the institution define the relationship and to reveal the extent the relationship with the college influences their beliefs and actions toward the institution. Alumni relations programming continues to be a relatively unexplored area of development within the community college setting. As such, I made the decision to conduct an explanatory single case study because though relationship management has been explored in other contexts of higher education, the community college setting has yet to be investigated. The choice of explanatory qualitative case study methodology allowed for an in-depth examination of the experiences of alumni and community college professionals explaining what is learned in this context.

Context. The site selected for this study was a community college located in North Carolina. I elected to choose a college within the state where I live due to the constraints of time and travel and because of my familiarity with the inner workings of North Carolina's community colleges. As one of the nation's largest community college systems, North Carolina Community Colleges presently consists of 58 colleges. Though the number of community colleges from which to choose in North Carolina is great, there are specific characteristics regarding the site I used to determine the selection. According to Sigglekow (2007), "it is often desirable to choose a particular organization precisely because it is very

special in the sense of allowing one to gain certain insights that other organizations would not be able to provide” (p. 20).

To meet the criteria for my selection, I sought a community college located within North Carolina that met at minimum three of these specific criteria. Sites were prioritized based on the highest number of criteria met with utmost consideration extended to campuses with an established alumni association and/or alumni program existing for three or more years.

Criteria 1: Have an alumni relations program in existence for a minimum of three years. Given the nature of fundraising and the time involved in the cultivation and development of constituents, the data necessary for this study was expected to come from an established campus site. A newly formulated program would be unable to provide the depth of established connections and experiences with alumni, while a developed program could provide a sufficient number of alumni engaged with the institution so as to provide an adequate pool of participants to interview.

Criteria 2: Have an active alumni relations council or alumni association in existence. Institutions with established alumni relations councils or alumni associations speak to the specific strategies the institution has put into place in order to formalize the alumni program as a means of engaging former students.

Criteria 3: Have an alumni director, coordinator, or other professional for whom the responsibilities of alumni relations constitutes at minimum thirty percent (30 percent) of their job duties. Institutional commitment is extremely important in establishing an alumni relations program. It is assumed by virtue of having a person dedicated to the development of

the alumni program, the institution's leadership is acknowledging the importance of the program to the overall health and progression of the institution. The dedication of the institution is communicated clearly to alumni as well as the internal and external community when precious funds are allocated to fund a program of this nature.

Criteria 4: Have a structured annual giving program that appeals directly to alumni constituents. Relationships are reciprocal with defined and shared goals of the relationship being a central part of the process. Relationship management has theoretically developed primarily through social exchange theory (Broom, et al., 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000). Social exchange theory suggests that mutual benefit and goal attainment for both parties can be brought about through voluntary exchanges. A primary goal of any alumni relations program is to engage and inform alumni to the point that they are willing to give financially to, and be supportive of, the institution.

Criteria 5: Have a community college foundation, working either independently or interdependently, with the alumni relations program. Community college foundations are public charities chartered and operated as tax-exempt nonprofit corporations subject to the provision of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and the laws of the states in which they operate. Community college foundations typically exist as per the authority of the Board of Trustees of the institution which the foundation serves. Most community college foundations are administered and governed by an independent board of directors who serve voluntarily and without compensation. Community college foundations serve primarily to secure and receive funding and to ethically and legally manage and disseminate funds according to the wishes of donors and as prescribed by the laws of public charities.

Additionally, alumni relations programs serve as vehicles to enhance annual giving while senior foundation staff members are more readily poised with the knowledge to progress donors through the donor movement process toward major and planned gift obtainment. This was an important measure for me as it shows the collaborative process of relational development work and the various components necessary to have this level of programming in place for the institution.

North Carolina Institutions. Of the 58 community colleges in North Carolina, more than a dozen have an alumni initiative in various stages of development as identified by the institutions' Web sites. The college selected for this study met all five criteria detailed above with no consideration given to the size of the college or whether the college was located in a rural or urban area. Based on the criteria developed for the site selection, there was a presumption the relationship was established sufficiently enough in order to ensure the campus was actively engaged with alumni. In order to assess the suitability of the site, I used the knowledge I have gained in my role as the executive director of a community college foundation and the professional contacts I have made through the years. In addition to the selection criteria, the site was selected based upon the institution's agreement to participate, and the convenience and accessibility of the site for the researcher. Upon further research of institutions and exploration phone calls, I made the decision to base my study at one specific institution that met all criteria.

My initial communication was sent via email which was followed up with a conference call with the president, the vice president of advancement, and the director of alumni and annual programs. As follow-up to the phone call and as a means of gaining

formal entry into the site, I sent a formal letter of request to the college's president explaining fully the intent and design of my study to include the formal approval I obtained from N.C. State's Institutional Review Board.

Upon obtaining approval to gain entry to the site and as agreed upon with the president, I contacted the director of alumni and annual programs via telephone and email to a) arrange gaining access and suitability of time to conduct fieldwork whereby I would have access to institutional documents; b) arrange times for their personal interviews, and c) to determine plan for assistance in identifying and obtaining access to alumni and college professional participants.

Participant selection. Random purposeful sampling was used in this study to identify specific participants whose professional and personal roles were representative of the nature of the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The vast majority of the professionals were selected predominantly based on their position, or role at the institution.

Participant criteria. The researcher interviewed 19 individuals, seven of whom were community college administrators and staff and the remaining 12 consisting of alumni. The Director of Annual Giving Programs and Alumni Relations served to connect me to the alumni and professionals participants. The selection was guided by the participant criteria. The Director of Annual Giving Programs and Alumni Relations sent requests to alumni identified by the institution as having a level of engagement with the institution based on having established a connection as an alumna(us), who are members of the alumni association, or who volunteer with the organization. Other criteria such as age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status were not considerations for this particular study.

Regarding the campus administrators and staff, I interviewed the following individuals at the selected institution: 1) the president of the institution; 2) the executive director of the college foundation; 3) the alumni director or person for whom alumni relations constitutes a minimum of 30 percent of his or her position responsibilities, and 4) various professionals at the college to include faculty and student services representatives. I again sought the assistance from the advancement staff in identifying other professionals that they knew to be actively engaged with the foundation and the alumni initiative. The goal for this group was to select seven to ten participants in order to have a balance of alumni and professional participants. The participants' selection for this study was based purely on their professional role at the institution.

The resulting numbers of participants are detailed in Figure 1 and were as follows: 1) initially 20 participants; however, one professional participant had to remove herself from consideration due to retirement and the restrictions according to North Carolina law. An interview of one alumni participant was deemed not to be sufficiently audible from either of the recorders due to the speaking volume of the participant; however, this participant's feedback was sought when ; 2) of the remaining 18 participants, 11 participants were graduates of the college and the remaining seven participants were strictly employees of the institution; 3) of the 11 who were graduates, five were also employed at the institution; and lastly 4) of the 18 participants, 15 were graduates of either the research site or another community college. Though the one participant's interview was not audible on either of the digital recorders used for the interviews, her feedback was sought when the findings were triangulated with the participants through the reflection exercise.

Alumni	Professionals
11	7
Number of alumni who also worked at Verrazano	Number of professionals who attended community colleges other than Verrazano
5	3

Figure 1- Participants Roles

Data Collection. Various sources of data were collected during my case study research. According to Yin (2012), “Case study research is not limited to a single source of data, as in the use of questionnaires for carrying out a survey. In fact, good case studies benefit from having multiple sources of evidence” (p. 10). As such, I used various resources to include publications, electronic resources, internal documents, and personal interviews to capture data that was useful during the analysis process of my research. Additionally, I employed analytic memorandums throughout the collection and analysis phases as a means of capturing my personal reflections throughout the processes.

Informed consent. All participants of my study were presented and thoroughly explained their role in the research process. They were presented an informed consent form that was verbally reviewed with each participant by the researcher. Upon acceptance to participate, participants were required to sign the consent form. These forms were scanned and stored electronically on my secure computer. Hard copies are stored in the fire-proof, locked file cabinet I mentioned earlier. In addition, I created a folder for each participant that includes the hard copy of the informed consent form, the transcribed interviews, and a copy of the short profile sheet that details the participants’ educational experience.

Participants contact. I initially contacted the prospective participants via telephone or email to confirm interest and willingness to participate in the study (Appendix C). Once participants agreed to be part of the study, a formal letter of introduction and confirmation (Appendix D) was sent via email with the date, time and place of interview. Included in this communication was the informed consent form (Appendix E) for participants to review prior to the interview being conducted. At the time of the interview, I presented two copies of the informed consent form in order that both I and the interviewee had a signed original copy. Lastly, I included a personal profile form (Appendix F) seeking personal information that was used in the development of the participant profiles. I asked the participants to complete the profile form asking that the form be returned to me either prior to or at the time of the interview.

Participant interviews and protocols. Participants were interviewed using a protocol developed with semi-structured questions as a way to guide the interview process and in order to keep the interviews grounded in the research's purpose. According to Merriam (2002), "The semi-structured interview contains a mix of more and less structured questions" (p. 13). I approached this study and in particular the interview process in this manner due to my desire to elicit as much information as possible with the time I had available with the participants. Secondly, as a novice researcher, I appreciated the order and structure provided by the semi-structured format. Not only did the protocol keep the participants grounded, but it served to keep me, the researcher, on track.

Appendix G outlines the questions asked of alumni and Appendix H is the interview protocol I developed and used for the college representative interviews. Due to the varying

roles each bring to this study, the questions were required to be different and representative of the roles and experiences each possess. Additionally, the protocols are linked to the relationship management and alumni-giving decision model frameworks undergirding this study.

Interviewing. The following section details the pilot interviews conducted for this study. Additionally, data collection specific to participant interviews and member checks are discussed. Participants of this study include alumni and employees of one North Carolina community college. Interviews were conducted primarily on the college's campus with the exception of three alumni. The remaining three interviews were conducted at the alumni's places of work.

Pilot interviews.

Prior to formally gaining access to the institution where the research was conducted, two individuals, both senior level administrators at a North Carolina community college, participated in pilot interviews. Upon formal approval from my university's institutional review board to conduct my research study, I interviewed two peers at my institution in order to conduct pilot interviews to assess the appropriateness of the questions being asked, and to determine where areas might potentially be clarified or strengthened. I used the personal connections I presently hold with these individuals in order to seek and obtain their participation. One alumni member was interviewed and one college representative, the college's president, was interviewed. In particular, the researcher was seeking an understanding and comparison of the institutional and alumni relationship as it relates to the familial relationships most all individuals share with close family and friends. The initial

reaction, once the question was asked during the pilot phase, was one of confusion. During the second interview, the question was modified adding a better description of the comparison being sought. The small adjustment resulted in a seemingly better understanding from the study participants. I used the information I gained from these pilot interviews to better refine my protocol and as a means of becoming more comfortable in the researcher role prior to actually engaging with my participants. The data obtained was utilized for refinement purposes only and was not a central part of the proposed research study's data analysis.

Interview collection methodology. The interviews were digitally recorded with two recorders, the second serving as a backup. Interviews were initially going to be transcribed using Dragon Naturally Speaking software. Due to Dragon's limitation of only recognizing one voice for which the software has been "trained," I "parroted" the recorded interviews directly into the Dragon software. Initially, the intent of this process was to not only serve to transcribe the recordings, but to allow the researcher an opportunity to interact with the data very early on in the process. However, due to the time consuming nature of this process, there was only one transcription that was captured in this manner. The remainder of the transcriptions were outsourced and transcribed by an individual hired by the researcher.

Member check-transcripts. Interview transcripts were sent to participants for member checking requesting participants to: 1) check for accuracy of the data, 2) make any additions or edits to the data, and 3) provide any additional insights they may have had since the interview.

Member check-findings. Upon completion of the data collection and analysis phases, I summarized my initial findings providing an executive summary to the members for their review. I emailed a copy of the executive summary to each participant asking for additional feedback from participants. This process did not reveal any additional or new information to the study; however, it did serve to triangulate and confirm the findings.

Document review. Documents and publications, along with the college Web site and other electronic resources (i.e. Facebook page), were assessed to the extent and ways in which the division markets activities and fundraising efforts to alumni, and to assess the positioning of the alumni program's overall structure within the greater context of the community college. Other documents reviewed were the college's strategic and long range planning documents. The researcher was provided copies of any documents allowed to be taken from the college. Using the document analysis form (see Appendix A), all documents were assessed and analyzed to become a part of the resulting collection of data.

Research journal. Throughout the data collection phase, I made notes on the profile sheets and subsequently kept notes of any reflections in a journal. I kept the journal with me during the interview process and explained to participants that I might be writing field notes of the interview as we spoke and engaged in the process. Upon the conclusion of each interview, I spent time to deconstruct and make my own meaning from the encounter. Spending quiet time for reflection enhanced my ability to describe the experience and allowed me to report in greater detail the observations made during the interview and the personal interpretations I had gained from the interview.

Perceptual information was obtained from the interviews conducted with the participants. The perceptions of each participant served to explain and describe meaning in relation to how the participants view or frame the world - knowledge constructed and based on their experiences and the understandings each brought to the study.

The demographic element was addressed by my direct observations of the interviewees (such as gender) and by the initial questioning I used as a means of introduction and to make the participants feel comfortable and welcome (such as, how long did you attend community college?). Additionally, I emailed to participants, prior to the interview, a participant personal profile form to be completed prior to the interview.

Institutional Review Board Approval. Prior to any contact with the institution I selected to study, I submitted to and obtained approval from N.C. State University's Institutional Review Board. (Appendix A) to conduct this study as designed and outlined by me and as approved by my dissertation chair and committee members.

Data Handling. The confidentiality of participants and security of research data was maintained throughout the data collection process. To ensure rigor during the course of my study regarding data handling, I established various parameters to ensure the data was handled ethically, safely, and securely. In order to achieve this, I stored data on my computer that requires a specific username and password known only to me. Secondly, a back-up copy of all data, to include digitally recorded interviews, interview transcripts, institutional documents, and data storage devices such as USB drives, is stored in a fire-proof, locked file cabinet owned by me and stored at my home office.

Data Analysis and Strategies. The data analysis and strategic phases of the qualitative research design process were well planned and prescribed; however, the researcher remained open to being flexible as well as open to new discoveries and ideas as they emerged from the data. According to Stake (1995), “Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations. Analysis essentially means taking something apart” (p. 71). Merriam (2009) writes, “Data analysis is one of the few facets, perhaps the only facet, of doing qualitative research in which there is a preferred way” (p. 171). According to Green, et. al (2007), “High-quality papers demonstrate four key steps: immersion in the data, coding, creating categories, and the identification of themes” (p. 546). For this purpose of this section, I will use Green, et al.’s (2007) four-step process to explain my data analysis and the strategic steps I took during the course of my study. I have created a graphic (**Figure 2**) to detail the analytic phases as a means of providing a visual that indicates the steps I took during this process of the research design and implementation. The process was meant to be managed as an iterative and repetitious cycle. As new data was added throughout the process and with multiple processes occurring simultaneously, the cycle of analysis was on a continuum. Multiple sources of data were handled in an encompassing fashion with the researcher thoroughly immersed in the data. Once all of the data had been transcribed and added to the repository of transcribed interviews and documents, the analytic full cycle of analysis began all over again.

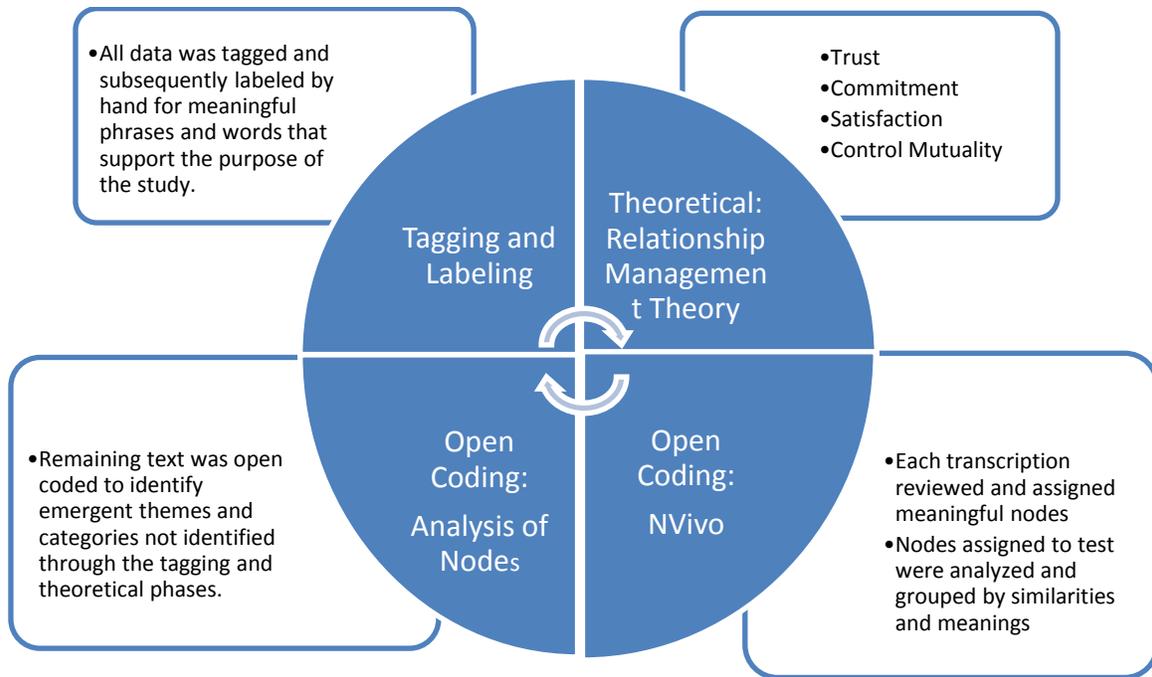


Figure 2 - Phases of Data Analysis and the Immersion Process

Data immersion and analytic memorandums. Merriam advises the analysis process should begin immediately upon the collection of the first data; otherwise, if the researcher waits until such time as all data is collected, the data “can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” (p. 171). Upon completion of my first interview, I immediately wrote an analytic memorandum in order to capture the context of the interview, any particular nuances witnessed during the interview process, and to document my own impressions of the interview and interviewee. Green, et al (2007) write, “Being able to draw on an understanding of the interview context brings depth to data immersion and enables subsequent interpretation to fully account for the research context beyond the interview transcript” (p. 548).

Once the analytic memorandums were written, the interviews were transcribed into a workable document. Then, I engaged in reading and re-reading the document as a means of immersing myself early into the data while listening to the interviewee. Green, et al (2007) write, “Repeated reading and re-reading interview transcripts and contextual data and listening to recordings of the interviews is therefore the first step in analysis” (p. 548). This became an iterative process for me so that as each interview was conducted, I captured my impressions through the analytic memo writing, sent the recording to be transcribed, and began the immersion process by reading and re-reading the transcription once the transcription was received from the transcriptionist. The next phase I engaged in was the coding processes with the first being tagging and labeling.

Phase 1 Coding: Tagging and Labeling. Baptiste (2001) explains the tagging process by writing, “Tagging refers to the process of selecting from an amorphous body of material, bits and pieces that satisfy the researcher’s curiosity, and help support the purpose of the study” (p. 1). Upon reading and re-reading the first transcription, I began to tag the data for passages that appeared meaningful to me and that aligned with the role of this study in determining the nature of the community college alumni relationships. Key words, phrases, and major passages were tagged in this phase. After tagging all of the initial data, I began the labeling process to identify data with similar characteristics and put into the same group or category the data that emerged from this initial phase. This process forced me to begin early on in making judgments as I assigned descriptive labels as they are identified by segments of the transcripts.

Phase 2 Coding: Theoretical Coding. As I completed the tagging and labeling for each transcript, I began the process of theoretical coding. I assigned four codes directly relating to the dimensions of the framework as they are situated within the context of the theoretical framework relationship management theory. The codes I assigned for relationship management theory are those described and theorized by J. Grunig and Huang (2000) as being: commitment, trust, satisfaction, and control mutuality. By assigning the theoretical codes, I was able to engage in a selective process to theoretically saturate the data and to identify core concepts as they related to the theoretical framework. According to Holton (2010), “theoretical saturation is achieved through constant comparisons of incidents in the data to elicit the properties and dimensions of each category (code)” (p. 1).

Phase 3: Members Check. Upon completion of the final analytic process, I synthesized the findings identified from the data to develop an overview. I emailed to each participant a copy of the executive summary seeking additional feedback and insight they sought to provide.

I engaged in these processes thoughtfully as each new piece of data was added to the collection. I read and re-read and re-read the data to ensure I was emerging myself and as a means of gaining insights into the discoveries being made through the data. I viewed these processes as iterative and reflective. Iteration is a significant part of the qualitative study process being advocated during the collection, analysis, and synthesis phases. According to Srivastava and Hopwood (2009):

The role of iteration in qualitative data analysis, not as a repetitive mechanical task but as a reflexive process, is key to sparking insight and developing meaning.

Reflexive iteration is at the heart of visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, professionally leading to refined focus and understanding. (p. 77)

Once the initial assessment of patterns investigation was thoroughly exhausted, the process began for of establishing themes of the study. After this process had been conducted, I begin refining the themes that emerged and explored subthemes for each to determine where the findings best exemplified the findings of the data. The final analysis phases of synthesizing and compiling the findings began during the preparation of writing the final report.

Phase 4: Open Coding. Upon completion of this initial coding and analysis phase, I conducted open coding (Saldana, 2013) whereby all data was analyzed for any common patterns or themes not situated within the major elements discussed earlier, or the labels determined during the initial tagging and labeling phase. I began the aggregation of thematic or elemental instances within each participant's transcription until such time as new themes began to emerge (Stake, 1995). This process allowed a basic coding to occur while providing filters that led me to identifying new codes or categories (Saldana, 2013).

NVivo Software. To assist me with the data gathering, analysis, and synthesis processes, I purchased and used NVivo software. I used the NVivo software to assess not only participant interviews, but also to capture and assist me in my analysis of analytic writings and memorandums, published documents, electronic and social media sources, field notes, observation notes, and researcher journal notes. Basely (2007) supports the use of technology to assist in the qualitative research study process writing, "The use of a computer is not intended to supplant time-honored ways of learning from data, but to increase the

effectiveness and efficiency of such learning” (p. 2). Additionally, she encourages the use of technology and advocates it as a way to ensure rigor during the analytic process, but notes that technology cannot substitute for the interpretative coding.

As a novice researcher, I welcomed the opportunity to work with technology that helped me to manage the various phases of the research project. I used NVivo to manage my data, manage my ideas, query the data, create graphically supportive visual aids, and to manage the creation of findings to use in writing my final report. As I moved from the discussion of data analysis and synthesis, I will now discuss the issues of rigor and the multiple steps I took to ensure a quality research study.

Issues of Rigor

Issues of rigor are sometimes referred to as validity and reliability in the qualitative tradition and are important considerations for the researcher to make in designing a study. Regardless of what terminology is used, the investigator should work to provide evidence that the approach, collection, analysis, and reporting of the data will appropriately portray the participants and situation studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Ensuring validity and rigor throughout the study assists the researcher in providing a study that can be presented confidently and enhance existing literature. Several techniques are offered in the literature to ensure validity. The first one I discuss here is triangulation.

Triangulation. I devised my study so that various pieces of the process worked collectively to ensure validity and triangulation of the data (Patton, 1990). One way that I ensured this triangulation was to compare what participants say with what I observed and documented through my personal observations during engagement with the site and the

process of keeping my own personal research journal. Documents, observations, and participants' transcriptions were viewed separately and compared to assess for categories and themes.

Bias. I chose to study community college alumni programming because of my strong desire to know more about how community college alumni view their alma maters and specifically, to better understand the various aspects and dynamics of the alumni-institutional relationship. I do not feel that I possess any biases that will negatively influenced this study. I am proud to work in the community college environment and believe strongly in the role of these institutions. I came to this study as a professional who is interested in learning more about the possibilities of relationship development and am hopeful my study enhances the current literature on relationship management theory.

Trustworthiness. To guarantee the trustworthiness of this research project, a number of strategies were put into to place during the development of the study, data collection, data analysis, and the reporting of the findings. Initially, I conducted a pilot study to assist with refining and identifying any potential areas that should be strengthened prior to conducting the actual data collection. The analysis phase began once the first interview had been transcribed. Once I analyzed this initial interview, I engaged a peer to review my work to include the interview protocols, and discussed the initial coding results. These processes served as a way to assess my interpretations in light of the overall questions guiding the research. Utilizing multiple data collection methods (interviews, participants' checks, and documents), enabled me to warrant the trustworthiness of my analysis and triangulation of the findings.

Limitations of the Study. I gave careful consideration to potential study limitations and worked hard to limit their impact whenever possible. Viewed by the researcher as an appropriate approach to focus solely on one site to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of relationship development, these are limitations which were discovered through this process.

Novice researcher. The quality of qualitative research relies heavily upon the individual skills of the researcher and is easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies. As a novice researcher, I have conducted very few interviews; however, by utilizing a semi-structured protocol for each participant, keeping a research journal, engaging in analytic memorandum writing upon completion of each interview, and adhering to each of the coding phases, I feel I was well prepared and able to conduct a quality study. In addition, I feel my personal biases and positionality did not negatively impact the study in significant ways. In fact, I believe my personal connections to advancement and community colleges and my passion for the community college context only served to enhance my ability to accurately portray the voices of the participants.

College culture and philosophy. The limitations of narrowly focusing on one site and the subsequent results of this study are limited by the context in which the study took place. One community college's culture or philosophy of cultivating relationships with alumni may differ greatly depending upon the actions, beliefs, and ideas of the college leadership, faculty, and the student body. The extents to which alumni are valued typically drive the resources, both in terms of human and capital that are allocated to such programming. For this particular institution, the value placed on students and on customer service elevates the

probability of success as their culture is driven by “doing whatever it takes.” Other institutions without similar philosophies may have greater difficulties.

Giving “voice” to participants. The researcher’s role to share the voices of the participants within the context of the researcher’s own positionality and subjectivity is a tremendous responsibility. As I conducted this study, it was important for me to remain reflexive throughout the process and not just simply report the “facts,” but to “actively construct interpretations” (Hertz, 1996) alongside my interviewees as co-creators of new knowledge.

Theoretical limitations. Lastly, the theoretical framework, Relationship Management Theory, limited the study to one lens from which to view this particular phenomenon. The intangible nature of relationships and the difficulty in defining exactly what the “relationship” in relationship management means continues to persist among theorists (Gruning et al., 1992). While the desire of this researcher was to gain a better understanding of defining the *relationship* within the framework of Relationship Management Theory, assessing this phenomenon through the experiences of community college alumni limits the definition to the context from which these individuals make meaning.

Strengths of the Study. There are several strengths to this study. First, to the best of my searching ability, I have identified only two other studies specifically studying community college alumni from the context of alumni relations programming have been conducted thus far (Skari, 2011, Starace, 2012). Skari studied the factors of alumni contributors utilizing a quantitative approach to survey hundreds of community college alumni nationwide. Groundbreaking in terms of studying the community college alumni

population, Skari points out that “while quantitative studies are useful in describing characteristics of populations, they provide no insight as to why these characteristics exist” (p. 140). Starace (2012) studied Pennsylvania’s community colleges to determine and assess the engagement status of community college alumni programs.

A major benefit of my study was the addition of an in-depth qualitative study of this nature examining the community college setting and participants, thereby giving voice to a population where research has been grossly ignored in the context of alumni relations programming. Thirdly, I believe this study extends the theoretical development of relationship management theory. By asking questions and using the relationship management factors of commitment, trust, satisfaction, and motivation for participants’ protocol, I learned more about the extent to which these factors are important to the development and sustainability of the relationship. Due to the emergent nature of the relationship management theory, the community college provided a unique and valuable context to explore through the relationship management lens. Based on the limited knowledge we have regarding community college alumni, this study adds to the empirical knowledge and literature assisting future researchers whose interests reside in the areas of relationship management, community colleges, and alumni programming.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines and provides a detailed plan of the choices I made regarding the overall research approach, research methodology, data collections procedures, and data analysis strategies for this study of community college alumni relations. Additionally, I discussed the ethical considerations and issues of rigor as well as the limitations and potential

benefits of this study. As a means of providing a foundation for understanding the phenomenon of community college alumni relationships, discussions were presented regarding the purpose and research question, conceptual framework, research design, research process, and data analysis. The specific processes and procedures for each of these areas were presented in detail in relation to the development of this study. Additionally, a discussion of issues of rigor including data handling, trustworthiness, researcher bias, and the perceived limitations and strengths of the study was included. This chapter serves to expand and build upon the foundation of understanding established in the literature review of Chapter II. The three primary bodies of knowledge that informed this study include: the community college, higher education giving and alumni programming with an emphasis on community colleges, and the theoretical framework relationship management. Coupled with the understanding gained from the literature and the detailed plan for the research design and procedures I adopted for this study, I was able to conduct a study that is relevant to the issues, rigorous in its design, and discerning in terms of what was learned about the “relationship” in community college alumni relations.

CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to explore and better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study explored how graduates and key leaders of the community college define and perceive the relationship building process, their perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. Employing an explanatory qualitative case study design, one North Carolina community college was studied as a means of developing a deeper understanding of how community college alumni, development practitioners, and leadership define the relationship in the context of a community college alumni relations program. The following research question served to guide the overall design and development of this research study:

From the organizational-public relations management perspective, how do the experiences and perceptions of community college alumni and professionals explain, define, and extend the meaning of the community college-alumni relationship?

Profile of Community College Research Site

Verrazano Community College (VCC) is a two-year comprehensive community college and the sixth largest community college in North Carolina now operating in its 56th year. Accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the college serves as a major partner in the economic development of the southeastern portion of the state. Serving two counties, Verrazano consists of two campuses and two centers and for 2011-2012 had an annual operating budget of

\$105,631,508. The college is governed by a board consisting of 13 members with those being appointed by the Governor's Office, local county commissioners, and board of education. The Student Government Association (SGA) president also serves on the Board of Trustees as the student representative. Presently the college employs over 500 full-time employees and at any given time, employs between 600 - 800 part-time faculty and staff making it the sixth largest employer in the largest county the college serves.

The college serves over 28,000 individuals annually through credit courses, continuing education classes, customized employee training and lifelong learning opportunities. Offering over 60 degree programs, Verrazano touts an excellent graduate placement rate of 98 percent. Equally impressive, the college's programs requiring state certification exams boast high passage rates. Year after year, the healthcare programs have successfully had 100 percent passage for all graduates. Keystone programs of Verrazano Community College are: marine technology, boat building, nursing, surgical technology, film/video technology, and computer integrated technology.

The average age of the Verrazano student is 27 and the entire student population consists of 75 percent white and 25 percent non-white. Females slightly outnumber males by 53 percent compared to 47 percent. A major economic development partner in southeastern North Carolina, VCC is dedicated to providing world-class workforce training and quality higher education for the citizens of the two counties for which it serves. Presently, the college has three major strategic initiatives as focus areas: communication, customer service, and cutting-edge technology. Its mission statement reads, "Building a future-oriented world-class workforce and a community of lifelong learners in partnership

with regional businesses and agencies.” Most recently, Verrazano Community College has been named one of the nation’s top 150 community colleges as identified by the Aspect Institution College Excellence Program. Verrazano was chosen as one of the 150 from a pool of over 1,000 community colleges competing nationwide (college website).

Established in 1980, Verrazano Community College Foundation (VCCF) is a tax-exempt corporation under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code operating as a legally separate entity, but for the support of VCC. The organization exists solely for the benefit of the students, instructors, programs, and mission of the college. Historically, the foundation’s focus has been primarily on raising funds for scholarships. According to VCC Foundation’s 2013 IRS 990 documents (Guidestar, 2014), the organization has \$6.4 million in assets with over \$5.4 million in endowment funds. The total income for 2013 was \$1.1 million with \$770,000 being allocated for student and institutional support and \$393,000 awarded in scholarships; \$10,625 in mini-grants for faculty and staff; \$292,332 given directly to the college for educational and programmatic support; and \$73,324 for tangible donated items such as equipment.

VCC’s alumni relations program is located within the college’s foundation. Though VCC had an alumni relations program in the past, the alumni relations effort had been abandoned and was stagnant until being reinvigorated in the mid-2000’s. With Verrazano’s 50th Anniversary as the driving factor, Verrazano Community College Foundation staff began efforts to resurrect the alumni relations program in 2006. Using the next two years to plan and update the database, the college re-launched the alumni relations program in 2008 as part of the institution’s anniversary celebrations. Initiating an online portal for alumni to

update their personal information, the first alumnus to respond was living in Venezuela at the time. Today, the college has over 1,000 alumni association members. In addition to the online component, alumni relations welcomed back over 200 alumni to the college's campus during the 50th Anniversary celebration and open house.

Led by a volunteer group of alumni, the Verrazano Community College Alumni Association is free to join and is open to anyone who has taken classes or has obtained a degree, certificate or diploma. According to the college's Website:

The Mission of the Verrazano Community College Alumni Association is to form partnerships and strengthen relationships between the community, the College, and its alumni. Initiatives will be based on the association's core values of giving back through involvement, fellowship, and service. The association will be a positive, goal-oriented steward for VCC, its mission and goals.

Since its re-inception, the group has led efforts, with the support of staff, to initiate an Alumni Endowed Legacy Scholarship. In 2013, the group started the True Blue Fund, an investment opportunity for graduating seniors to make an annual gift in the amount of their graduation year. Proceeds are used to support the alumni scholarship fund. To date, the Alumni Endowed Legacy Scholarship fund is fully endowed. Additionally, VCC's alumni association is working with staff to establish an alumni business network, consisting of VCC alumni business owners. Annually the association hosts annual events and concerts to connect with alumni and to serve as a means of encouraging graduates to return to campus.

Participant Profiles. Eighteen participants were interviewed for this study consisting of nine females and nine males. The ages of the participants range from 30 being

the youngest and 65 as the oldest. Of the eighteen participants, sixteen are White, two are Black, and one is an immigrant from Haiti. Sixteen of the participants are graduates of Verrazano, graduates of a different community college, or attended a community college prior to transferring to a university. Thirteen of the participants are married, one was engaged to be married at the time of the interview, one was divorced and another widowed. Three participants are single. Of the 18 participants, 11 identified themselves as being first generation college students.

Alumni. Of the 18 participants interviewed, 12 are graduates of Verrazano. This group consisted of seven males and five females. At the time of the interviews, the alumni ranged in age from 34 to 55 years of age. All but two of Verrazano's alumni identified as being engaged with the institution and actively involved. Of the remaining two, one is a new mother who has significant travel time to Seaport daily for her work, and the other alumnus is a young attorney working long hours to establish his practice. Though not actively engaged, he has expressed a desire to begin a mentoring and apprenticeship program with the paralegal program and is also interested in eventually pursuing some teaching at the college.

A subgroup of alumni consists of individuals who are also employees of the institution. For the purposes of this study, the main focus was their role as graduates of the institution. However, because they so closely identify as being associated with the institution, the alumni employees often answered from the perspective of a graduate and then in turn, answered or considered the question from their role as an employee. Of the eighteen individuals interviewed for this study, five are alumni of Verrazano alumni *and* employees of the institution.

Professionals. Seven individuals were interviewed who were solely employees of the college. Of the seven professionals, four are graduates of community colleges other than Verrazano. As with the Verrazano alumni, the four individuals who attended community colleges felt strongly about the value of the community college educational experience. All are supportive of the alumni efforts and all identified as having a strong level of involvement with the Foundation and the alumni relations program. Of particular note, Dr. Fitzgerald, the president of Verrazano who has been at the institution for less than two years at the time of the interview, is a community college graduate. He actively stays involved with his alma mater and expressed a real desire to learn more about how he and his team could work collectively to determine ways to engage alumni and sustain relationships with the graduates.

Individual participants. The eighteen participants of the study were selected with the assistance of the person presently serving in the role of a significant development position in the Foundation office for which alumni program development is a portion of her responsibility.

Amanda. Forty at the time of the interview, Amanda is a petite African American woman who is a graduate of the college. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Amanda's parents were both native North Carolinians who grew up in the coastal area where Amanda, her husband, and two daughters now reside. Frustrated by the cold winters, Amanda and her mother left her father and two older siblings to move back to North Carolina when Amanda was only eight years old.

My mother hit the ground one too many times and she just had had enough. And she said, 'Before the next snow fall I will be home where I don't have to worry about

this.’ And she came home and my father stayed in Philadelphia and my two sisters stayed. So, they were up there. I would always visit and I remember like clockwork since I was eight years old, I would say, ‘As soon as I get grown, I am going to get out of all these bugs, and bugs and dark down here.’ I went back there the year I was eighteen; my father died that year when I was in high school, in December. He died on Christmas Day. I remember I went back and I went to stay with my aunt and I was there for six months and then I told her I was coming home because that did not feel like home anymore. I didn’t realize it, but I had become a country girl at heart. I came back and I have been here ever since.

Though persistent in her studies during her time at the community college, Amanda struggled to complete earlier collegiate efforts. Upon graduation from high school and as a first-generation college student, Amanda was encouraged strongly by her grandparents to pursue additional studies in order to obtain a degree. Her grandmother, a sewing instructor at the community college at the time, wanted her to attend Verrazano or to go work in a bank. “Now I never wanted to go to college and me being independent, I went to work...and I should have listened.” Enrolling in a for-profit trade and technical school a few years after graduation, Amanda was three courses from obtaining her degree when she went to work for a neighboring county. “I was so excited and I remember my granddaddy saying, ‘Don’t you do that! If you don’t finish your school, you won’t finish because money always outweighs education.’ And he was right, I did quit school.”

Experiencing a difficult pregnancy with her second daughter, Amanda was forced to be hospitalized for the vast majority of the time. Though it was a challenging experience for

Amanda, she fell in love with the hospital environment and applied aggressively for positions there once her daughter was ready for daycare. It was at the hospital where Amanda would receive another push to reapply herself to college.

I'm tenacious and I applied and she [Amanda's boss at the hospital] interviewed me and I sent a thank you card and I called because there was something about that lady and it was something about that job. I knew that that was where I was meant to be. Just to stop [me from] calling, they hired me and I went to work there. After two years, she said, 'You should not be anybody's secretary, I love you being my secretary, but you need to go to school. There is a lot more in that... you need to get a degree.' I sat on it and thought about it and I was like well she said we will do all we can to make it work. I took a day off and I came down to Verrazano... So for two years on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I would go to classes and then I would go to work. It was a long two years, but I did it! And by the grace of God, with my husband and my mama, I got through it. Then I applied to be an Ambassador so that was my third job. So, I had school, work and being an Ambassador and I loved every minute of it. I loved every minute of it, I loved the college. I believed in what the college did and they were wonderful instructors. They were awesome.

A self-confessed helper, Amanda's pride in the institution is clearly evident. In addition to being a graduate, Amanda is presently employed at the institution where she works as a payroll technician. Though she says she never once would have imagined herself working at the college and would by virtue of her personality prefer to work more closely with the students, she truly loves the college and is thrilled to be a part of the educational setting.

If I am being honest and I mean being honest with my own self, it gives me great joy to be associated with the college because I have...there is not a time that, at least when I have someone calling or stopping or my mother calling and saying so and so's grandchild wants to attend Verrazano or my son wants to go to Verrazano. Can you tell me who to contact? Or what can I do? Because I am a helper, I get a lot of joy in being able to help people and having that knowledge that I can share with the community.

Amanda's connection to the institution is influenced by the feelings she has for her peers with whom she attended classes while at Verrazano. Amanda views the alumni relationship as something that needs to be developed earlier and built upon throughout the students' time at the community college. "I see them all the time from my classes and I want to know how they are doing and where they are working at now. And you know, we need to keep track of them the whole time. I made a connection with them and we don't see each other every day or talk to each other every day, but there is that connection."

Amber. Amber is a White 34 year old woman with long flowing hair. She works at a local credit union. Other than a brief time at another financial institution, the credit union serves as Amber's only real source of professional experience. "I have been with the credit union for 12 years and I love it. I started out as a teller and moved up quickly to be a loan processor and to manager, and now I am business relations. You just go with the flow."

A 2010 graduate of Verrazano Community College, Amber attended the college part-time for five years while working full-time with the credit union. Coming to higher education much later in life, Amber had wanted to attend North Carolina State University in

Raleigh upon graduating from high school. However, her plans were derailed when her father died suddenly when she was 19 years old.

I graduated high school and I did plan on going to college. I had planned on going to N.C. State in Raleigh and then my father passed away when I was 19. I decided not to pursue that opportunity and did not pursue my college degree. I never went back. I did end up going back part-time at Verrazano in 2005 at night. That is when I pursued my degree. I went part-time and finished my degree in 2010.

A degree was not the only thing Amber obtained during her studies at Verrazano. While she grew academically, she also discovered a newfound confidence personally and professionally, particularly with regards to her husband. Formally educated, Amber's husband encouraged her to go back to school and was very supportive during the entire time.

My husband is an alumnus of [named university] and I feel like I am more on his level than I was before. He is a very smart man, well-worded. Going back to school just gave me the confidence to feel like I was on his level. My husband never made me feel like I was not smart or anything like that. But you are more diverse, you have more of a vocabulary, and can relate more. It prepared you both professionally and personally for the outside world.

Attending Verrazano was according to Amber a wonderful decision for her as she stated the college "offered me what I needed when I needed it." In addition to her degree and the confidence she gained, Amber says her studies afforded her the opportunity to build lasting relationships with her fellow classmates and instructors.

I went back to school probably about seven, eight, or nine years after I graduated from high school, to get an associate's degree and after that time lapse, you are like...How do I write a paper? How do I do this, how do I do that? So I was nervous that I would not understand what was being taught or I would just be behind. I love knowledge and my brain still works and once you start it you just want more. After I got my associate's we had just gotten married and I wanted to take a semester off and then I got pregnant and then we had Emma so my plans have been put on hold for a while but I do want to take more courses then transfer to [names university] to get a bachelor's degree in communications. It is my goal and I will get that. It builds confidence being successful here. Going back to school is intimidating. There are all these new students and you just have to learn how the professors teach and test, and it just builds confidence.

With a young child and living an hour away from the community college's campus, Amber says she struggles to actively participate in the college's alumni and extracurricular activities though she does stay connected through email. Nevertheless, she does give back by lending support during the college's Gift of Education luncheon. For the last three years Amber's company has provided a \$1,000 annual scholarship for a student enrolled in the business programs.

Ben. A native of Haiti, Ben came to the United States in 1982 when he was just 19 years of age. He married his high school sweetheart at a young age and when she joined him in the United States, they quickly began to start a family. As an immigrant and with little

education, Ben was forced to work jobs as a laborer being employed as a fast food server, a gas station attendant, and as a carpenter. Seeking a better way of life and a more viable means to make a living, he attended night school to learn English and complete his high school equivalency. On the day he received his legal residency, Ben joined the United States Marines. After four years with the Marines and with a wife and son for whom to provide, Ben again began working in construction, real estate, trucking, and as a mortgage officer. With the economy crash of 2008, Ben found himself without a job. By this time, he and his wife had two daughters who were finishing high school.

Uh, when the market crashed that's when my kids were, had graduated from high school. And we all decided to go back to school. Me, my two girls, and my wife went to school part-time. We all went back to school and it was a...ah...a beautiful experience. Being at the campus with my daughters...here calling me dad. I said, 'No, don't call me dad...[laughing]. You make...you make me sound old.' But it was a different experience and uh it was a beautiful experience. In two and a half years, I was able to enjoy and go back and learn other things simply because within my heart I knew I could do better. I came over here, I tried to get a G.E.D and from that point on, I took off and then uh I realized I had to go back and learn the basics uh so to be in school it was...it was a beautiful feeling, beautiful feeling. Better than anything I could have expected...I wish I would have done a long time ago. But, when the market crashed you know I had to reinvent myself to find something uh what can be compatible with the near future.

During his time at Verrazano, Ben applied for and was accepted to serve as a student ambassador. Gaining much from this experience, he says he fell in love with the college and sees many ways in which the alumni can stay involved. Today, Ben works at a major company in the area which provides the stability he needed so greatly after the decline in 2008. On an alumni profile on Verrazano's web site, Ben says this about his experiences, "Verrazano was my bridge to prosperity and stability," he says. "The American dream starts with education."

Carter. An attractive White male in his early thirties, Carter is an attorney presently practicing real estate law in Seaport. Upon meeting him, it is obvious Carter is a Type A personality. He keeps me waiting for a few moments as he finishes work with some of his clients, but Carter apologizes as he escorts me to the boardroom where we are to conduct his interview. Once we enter the board room, Carter inquires as to how long the interview will take place and seems a little distracted and hurried before he begins to settle into the interview. By his own admission, he was not a "stellar student" and was ecstatic to learn he could be admitted to the community college without having to take the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) prior to enrollment.

Born in Ohio, he has lived in North Carolina his entire life since age three with the exception of a year outside of the country and his law studies in South Carolina. Education was not a focus point for his parents and they really didn't care about the grades. His father, a cabinet-maker, was a self-made man and though his mother took some college level classes, "they were never the ones to ride me into the ground about grades" and says he "was never one of those kids that got it." By the time Carter realized he needed to get prepared for

college, his high school studies were nearly over and he was faced with the realization of having not made good enough grades to be accepted to a four-year university upon graduation.

Relocating from Raleigh, Carter moved to Seaport when he was years old coming to Verrazano to live at the beach and to, by his own admission, “drink and party.” “I came for all of the wrong reasons,” he says. Beginning his studies at Verrazano, he realized he would have to at least maintain some semblance of good grades, or his parents would make him come back home. To his surprise, he wound up enjoying his newfound freedom and enjoying his classes at Verrazano. He enrolled in the transfer program for communication studies and after two years, transferred to [named university] Seaport University to complete his bachelor’s degree. “The transfer program to [named university] Seaport University was amazing!”

Upon completion of his bachelor’s degree, he relocated to the Virgin Islands where he worked as a server waiting tables and living in St. John. After a year, Carter returned to the states and North Carolina enrolling in Campbell University where he went on to earn a master’s in trust and wealth management. This resulted in his going to work professionally as a financial advisor at Wachovia Securities. About a year into his job, the now notorious plunge in the economic market sent the financial industry plummeting and Carter found himself jobless. On a whim, he decided to take the LSAT (Law School Admission Test) studying for two weeks in preparation for the exam. Successfully passing, he was accepted into two programs, Campbell University and Charleston School of Law. Choosing Charleston, Carter worked aggressively on his studies completing the program in two and a

half years. Though he says his time at the community college was “the best time of his life,” he views his time in law school as more akin to a business transaction.

Attributing his success to his start at the community college, Carter says, “I think a lot of kids don’t believe in themselves and I would never have thought in my life I would be sitting here today as a lawyer...that is something that never crossed my mind.”

Clark. Presently the student recruiter at the institution, Clark is a dynamic White male in his early thirties. Prior to working in the community college setting, Clark worked in educational sales and says the relationships he formed while there were what led him to want to work in the community college.

Well, um I have been working here at Verrazano Community College for the past five years. But prior to that, I was in educational sales. That is how I came to my role here at the college, um through the relationships I built through that. And uh, prior to that, I was a student here at Verrazano so I attribute much of my success as a student affairs professional to my time here.

Clark completed two years at Verrazano prior to transferring to the local university where he obtained a bachelor in business administration. Presently he is enrolled in a new master’s program at the university in the first cohort of the newly formed higher education program. Once he completes that program, he had his sights set on obtaining a doctorate.

As Clark recalls his time at Verrazano as a student, he remembers a very different institution from what the college is today. A student during the early 1990s, the college was much smaller serving only 4,000 curriculum students – a fifth of the over 20,000 presently being served today. As part of his work responsibilities, he conducts tours of the campus.

He says he always finds individuals who are amazed at the amount of educational opportunities being offered and in addition, the student-centered amenities more often found on major four-year college and universities' campuses such as the student meal card implemented in recent years. Two key roles for Clark are his work with the Ambassadors program and conducting tours to prospective students.

I conduct campus tours twice a week and then I train the Ambassadors to conduct them as well. Um...I interact with faculty, staff and students. I get to know a bunch of people and one of my favorite parts of my daily routine, is not only engaging with students, but also with my co-workers and faculty on campus.

Though Clark predominantly serves as recruiter, he also processes applications, transcripts, and placement testing. Critical for his function are the meetings he conducts with laid off workers upon industry closings.

Asked about his own participation as an alumnus of the college, Clark feels he should do more. Yet, due to his busy schedule as he juggles family, work, school, and instructing martial arts, he finds his time is grossly limited. Clark does faithfully attend the annual homecoming basketball game where alumni have a significant presence and he feels this is one of the best events the college hosts. Clark expresses his desire to have the alumni more intimately involved with his division and he wonders aloud how he might go about engaging the group to assist with student recruitment. Clark mentions the [community college mascot club] to [university mascot club] – a collaborative effort between the community college and its sister university. Given the strong community college and university systems within the state, Clark begins to consider the applicability of implementing a program of that nature

state-wide across all community colleges and the University of North Carolina's sixteen universities. As we are conducting the interview, Clark becomes visibly excited. He says he has all of these ideas just coming to him as we are talking – ways that he thinks the college can engage alumni and recruit future students.

Drew. I met Drew at the university where he is presently pursuing his master in education in higher education with a specialization in student services. It was pouring rain that afternoon and as I entered the College of Education building, Drew greeted me and asked me to wait momentarily as he finished a discussion and tour with a prospective student and her father. Presently a graduate assistant in the department of educational leadership, Drew anticipated graduating soon with a master's degree in higher education.

Age 30 at the time of our interview, Drew is a native of Louisiana and a veteran of the United States Marines. Stationed at Camp Lejeune, Drew decided to stay in North Carolina once he decided to leave the Marines.

Beyond his studies, Drew is involved and actively engaged in various organizations on his university's campus. Personally, he self-identifies as being bisexual and is engaged to be married to a woman. Currently serving as a graduate assistant in the LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex and allied) Resource Office, Drew's goal is to work with the LGBT and other marginalized student communities in a higher education setting.

Drew says he did very poorly in high school and “just didn't get it.” He came to Verrazano to break out of the restaurant industry where he had worked for years. Drew says he was drawn to the community college because he didn't have to take the SAT (Scholastic

Aptitude Test) and could begin taking classes without having too many obstacles to overcome. Once he began his studies at Verrazano, he thrived.

After I was out of the Marine Corps, I was in restaurant management for a few years and then marketing. I decided...well, I might have more to give to the world than just a good dining experience. So, I'm going back to school. And...that's where I decided to go to get there. I didn't do well in high school, I just...I didn't really...so I went to Verrazano here because I knew that it was going to be an experience I could just jump into and I wouldn't have to worry about SAT scores and I could just begin immediately and things like that.

And jump in, he did. While a student at Verrazano from 2006 - 2009, Drew excelled academically. He was a member of the student ambassadors program serving as the group's first president. Drew was the vice president of Verrazano's Phi Theta Kappa chapter. As a Verrazano alumnus, he has served two years as president of the alumni association. For Drew, getting involved as a student and staying connected as an alumnus is driven by the personal relationships he has formed, particularly with the alumni relations and foundation staff. His motivation is fed by these relationships and the realization that education would position him to make changes in his personal life as well as impact the lives of others.

I think the real reason... the biggest motivations for doing that was that I realized that you know, getting the education was something that um, could get me in the place where I can make a change in the, the world...to be kind of broad [laughs]. To be able to make a change to do something I like. To do something that I wanted to do instead of something I was good at um, was ah...that was the impetus. I'm a first

generation college student, my...um, my brother didn't even graduate from high school so I had no motivation to go from any kind of legacy or family to anything like that. I had to figure it out all on my own. And I have funded myself as well...so I um...I think it was just wanting to do something for myself and wanting to go in and knowing like, if I don't do this, it's not because anybody else, it's because of me. So if I don't do well, it because of my own fault. So I just, I think I went in with a mindset like, 'I'm going to be successful.' So I'm going to be successful. Um, and I built...I want to be this person who has a degree. I want to be, I want to be an educated person. I don't want to just go along in life and go on and just do something well. I want to be respected and I want to do, I want to have an education.

As a first generation college student and given Drew's brother's lack of formal education, I wondered if Drew's academic success had positively influenced his brother. Instead of his brother, Drew is focusing on his brother's children and hopes to influence them.

Not really...no. Um, my *hope* is that his kids, he has two kids...that I'll be an influence to them. Um, more than him, you know, he uh, yeah. I mean it's, I've tried to say you know, here, the community college may be stellar, but you know in Louisiana...their community college system is much different [laughs]. I wouldn't feel confident enough in, in their ability to perform the way that I know North Carolina community colleges perform say, it's where you can get confidence up to doing that so. If he were here, I would feel very confident, in the 55...58 community colleges that he would have a good experience at some level, so yeah...

Emma. I arrived onto North Campus on an extremely rainy day. Not knowing exactly where to park, I pulled my vehicle up alongside the campus police officer and rolled my window down to speak to him. “Sir, can you please tell me where Emma’s office is located?” His face lit up and he directed me to the best parking spot and entrance to her office. He went on to say what a fine lady she was. The officer’s comment only added to the multiple other comments I had heard about this woman and what had led me to interview her in the first place. Working in Admissions as a records technician in a position most would consider as not being particularly high profile, Emma is revered by alumni, students, and her peers. After the fifth participant mentioned Emma as the “go to person,” I knew she had to be a part of my study.

Arriving to her office, I introduced myself and waited briefly for her to finish her work with a student. When she was ready, Emma escorted me over to a small conference room located in the North Campus’ library.

An attractive and petite White 60 year old woman, Emma was welcoming and yet very deliberate in her approach with me. She had already completed all of the necessary paperwork such as the informed consent and was ready to jump into the interview.

A minister’s daughter, Emma, graduated from high school at a time when higher education was not necessary to obtain a decent job and the social norms and expectations for any good Southern lady were to successfully graduate from high school, marry a decent man, and either get a job or begin raising a family – or both!

Well....one of the questions asked [on the demographic profile sheet] was about my educational background and what that is... I do not have a college

education. I graduated high school; I took secretarial courses back then. Then of course it was more, you know...you finish school, you get married and you raise a family. And...um I worked in the office while I was there because I took the secretarial courses, but of course I was never talked to about college. My parents worked in a mill. I don't even know if there was financial aid then, and college was something that was never talked about. I never thought I would be in this profession...you know, working here with the college.

Emma's first professional experience was working in a neck tie factory in the payroll and personnel divisions. She worked there for over 14 years, but after the company's workforce went from over 300 employees to 60, Emma realized she needed to begin seeking other employment. Relying strongly on her Christian faith, Emma sought and applied for multiple positions at the community college. Learning she had been offered the community college position, Emma recalls her boss at the factory telling her she was leaving a company as a "big fish in a little pond," but would be going to the community college as a "little fish in a very big pond." Unfazed by her employer's remarks, she began work at the community college the day after registration.

I am a Christian and I believe God opens doors for you and um...I had a choice to work in the registrar's office or the financial aid here. And when I was told I would work more with faculty and students in the registrar's office...I said, 'Well, that's what I want.' And the crew....the first day, it was right after registration. And it was before we had call waiting and voicemail.

And I went to work as a secretary and I remember on my first day I went looking for my office and there were all these windows. Because you know downtown, you stand....and they said, 'Oh, that's where you are going to be.' And the phones rang and rang, and the girl there said, 'You can answer that phone there if you want to.' I had no idea about college. I didn't even know what a transcript was. And I thought to myself...well, they really want me to come back and they really didn't want me to leave at my other job. And I said, "'Do I go back, or not?'" And I decided to stay and I don't regret it...not for one day.

Emma is very customer service focused as are all Verrazano's employees. She says she "mothers the students" and gets emotional as she speaks about some of the students she encounters. She gives "100 percent plus" to the students and makes certain students' questions get answered, whether the question pertains to her area or not. One of her greatest joys is attending graduation each year and seeing students who she has encouraged walk across the stage successfully completing their degrees.

Dr. Fitzgerald. Dr. Fitzgerald arrived in November 2012 in what is his second community college presidency. He had served predominantly in administrative positions in community college settings and has taught graduate level classes. Dr. Fitzgerald, a first generation college student and community college alumnus, knows firsthand the impact a community college education can have on someone's life. In a news release dated at the time of the announcement of his Verrazano presidency, Dr. Fitzgerald stated, "Going to a community college changed my life...It inspired me to further pursue my education which

opened up a whole new realm of possibilities.” Dr. Fitzgerald’s experiences as a community college student clearly set him on a lifelong pathway of dedication to education.

Dr. Fitzgerald’s early experiences at the community college also served as the backdrop for forming lifelong relationships with faculty members. While he has attended three other institutions, he says it is the connections he made at the community college that he treasures most. Dr. Fitzgerald routinely receives correspondence from the institution and actively stays connected to faculty. As president at his former institution, he actively engaged former students to come back to honor faculty members. Dr. Fitzgerald sees the community college alumni relationship as something that takes time and requires many individuals engaged in small, intimate groups.

I had five of our alumni come back and didn’t tell the faculty...Then, I told them that I have people here who really want to talk to you. I opened up the curtain a little bit and one of the alumni walked out onto the stage. It took about five minutes for the faculty to realize what was happening. It was unbelievable. They started talking about the impact faculty and staff people like Mary had on them...And I had a Vietnam Veteran...there was not a dry eye in the place. He tore that whole place up. These were alumni...you know what I am saying? It was moving and those people were connected and that is the kind of thing that you are talking about. That give and take, that’s the relationship... That level of contact is the only way to make that kind of relationship strong, between the alumni and the school. Again it is not about 10,000 people...it is about several little groups and then you know have the staff

finding good people who reach out to their friends in college...that encourages them to do the same kind of thing.

The alumni program is an area Dr. Fitzgerald he says he wants to focus more attention to as he begins to strategically plan the next steps for the institution. A collaborative leader, he wants to get the input of the graduates, the faculty, and staff, as well as the community, as plans are developed.

Grace. As the director of annual giving programs and alumni relations, Grace plays a pivotal role in developing programming for graduates of Verrazano. No stranger to higher education and resource development work, Grace came to the college after working in different capacities for nine years at the local university. While she is not a community college graduate, Grace's experience as the coordinator of commuter and non-traditional students at the university level prepared her well for dealing with the diverse population served at Verrazano. A non-traditional student herself, she knows well the challenges faced by older students.

So, I um...I attended...went to college at [named local university]. But at the time, I was like everyone else. I wanted to go to Chapel Hill. I was accepted at Chapel Hill, but it didn't work out. Um...my parents had been recently divorced and with all of the financial things involved with that and then my dad...He was laid off from his job and that was a real impact. So we decided the best thing for me was to stay here and do my first two years and then transfer to Chapel Hill after two years. I wanted to get a degree...I thought I was going to be a journalist...um, that didn't worked out and I was there [local university] for two years to get all my basic studies. And then,

didn't really know what I wanted to do for with my life. So I took time off, worked in a warehouse, um, at a local distributing company. And then decided that, um, then I married the gentleman that worked at the warehouse with me. And, um, then I was like I need to decide what I am doing... So, I'm 24 years old, I need to have a plan. So, I went back to [local university] and actually started working at [local university]. My first professional job, um, worked as a secretary for the dean of development in the arts and sciences department. And I started taking classes as I was working. And it took me a very long time. But, by the time I had graduated, I had to do promotions with two different departments at the college. So by the time I graduated with my bachelor's in communication studies, I worked in, um, the dean's office for the College of Arts and Sciences. And I was an assistant to an events professional that was there. And, I kind of always enjoyed the events and fundraising and, um, then went a different course ... went to the dean of the students' office and worked in the job that was me....the perfect job for me – coordinator and recruiter of nontraditional students. So I worked with all of the [local university] students that were undocumented, or were considered nontraditional students. And at that time, 80 percent I think were commuters [living off campus] and about 40 percent of our students were non-traditional in some way. So that's what I did working at [local university] there for about seven years. And with that job, I did a lot of event planning, a lot of, you know, fund raising for my unit; like working with apartment complexes to put advertising into our publications...that sort of thing.

Beginning employment with Verrazano in 2008, Grace was asked to reinvigorate an alumni relations program that had been started some years back, but that had grown static. On the job for approximately a month, she launched a new website targeting alumni of Verrazano in an effort to get graduates re-engaged with the college. Her first alumni member to sign up was a graduate living in Venezuela working for an oil refinery. “That was so random, but also so neat. Because we could then announce our first alumni association member signing up from Venezuela...it was so neat!” Since the initial re-launch of the alumni association, Grace has worked with a core group of volunteers to develop plans and programs to attract alumni back to the college and to reach out to young graduates as a means of staying connected.

Jay. Jay makes me feel immediately at ease though I am late after having stayed at my previous interview with the president much longer than I had intended. He appears to have an easy going manner and his youthful appearance clearly emanates the seaman that he is. He grew up some 200 miles away, and Jay spent his first two years in college at home where he played basketball. Realizing he had to make a choice, he left home and came to Seaport where he finished his first two years of his bachelor’s degree at the university. Upon completing his bachelor’s degree, he went on to obtain his master’s degree in marine science. A member of the Verrazano faculty since 1999, Jay oversees the highly successful marine technology programs. The marine technology program has existed at Verrazano for over 50 years. In addition, there are two boat-related curriculum programs, the boat building and boat manufacture and service program, both being led by highly successful Verrazano alumni.

Though a department chair with administrative duties, Jay enjoys the direct student contact he has through his teaching which encompasses anywhere from eight to ten contact hours with students. He also spends a week per semester out at sea with students.

Additionally in the summer, Jay launches a cruise that is an integral part of the seagoing component of the curriculum. The seagoing component of the program strengthens the connections to faculty and students where bonds and emotional connections are formed.

...after two years or just three days of being at sea with somebody on a small boat, you get to see the best and worst of them [snaps fingers] like that...For the people that you really have an emotional connection to, it doesn't seem like work at all. It's easy to be there with them and to help them on that path.

With alumni widely dispersed due to employment, Jay and his team stay connected to former students predominantly through the use of social media. Specifically, Jay and his group communicate with graduates through the use of a Facebook page a member of his faculty created. This use of the technology has become a life source for Jay and the marine technology program when the state has in recent years threatened to decrease or eliminate allocation of funding for the marine technology program. Specifically when the seagoing component funding has been challenged, Jay and his team have garnered enormous support through communicating the issue via social media to Verrazano's alumni.

Lee. Of all of the participants I interviewed, Lee has the longest association with the college. Age 55 at the time of our interview, Lee is attractive and laughs easily as we settle down into the interview. When I met Lee, she had been working at the institution for 25 years. Presently, she serves in the college's Foundation office where she is the executive

assistant. In addition to her professional role, she is a wife and mother to two grown boys. It is evident that family is extremely important to Lee as she talks about her sons and extended family. For the last two years, Lee's weekends are spent mostly traveling back to her childhood home to care for her ailing mother. She does this in her efforts to assist and relieve other family members who care for her mother throughout the week.

You can tell Lee really enjoys working at Verrazano and her dedication to the institution is clearly communicated. Beyond her professional association, Lee is also a graduate of the institution. Though she had attended another community college prior to locating to [named town] some 37 years ago, she quit prior to completion because she did not know what she wanted to do. Once she settled into her first job with the college, she began taking classes.

I actually had gotten a job here and they had the program where you could take one class here. And I had started at [named college] when I was younger and at home, but I dropped out because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't want to be there. Then I started working here and they started that program. So I would take one class free on their time and then I would take a night class. I did that for a few semesters. And then...on the last...we were on quarter system then...I would take their free class, one on my lunch hour and one at night because I just wanted to get done. I was working and going to school and I did not have children then so... at that time so I was younger and had a little more energy. [laughs]... It [Verrazano] was very attentive to my needs. You know...we were not as large then...so the classes

were small...faculty were excellent and they were always willing to help you... at any time you needed help. So...I felt really good about it.

Were it not for her education, Lee feels she would have been stuck and limited in the positions she could apply for and obtain. She explains further by stating, “I may not have had a degree and my employment possibilities would have most certainly been limited. I think I got a really good basis for my field through my education.”

As an alumna and a member of the Foundation staff, she is well aware of the activities of the alumni association. Lee participates in the alumni activities as she is able given her caregiving role for her mother on the weekends. She is proud to be a graduate of Verrazano and says she feels Grace and the other staff members are doing a great job in getting the information disseminated out to the other alumni members.

It is a wonderful college and provides people with the opportunity to move forward with their lives and get their first degree. It helps move them forward in the workforce. I think it is an asset to the community.

Madeline. Madeline has worked at Verrazano Community College for over 16 years having come to the college from a very nontraditional route – both professionally and as a student. Prior to her arrival to the community college setting, Madeline worked in professional football serving as the administrative assistant to the head coach for Wisconsin’s Green Bay Packers. From there she traveled to Indiana where she was again the administrative assistant for the head coach of University of Notre Dame.

Upon her marriage, Madeline relocated to Illinois where she began working at a local community college. Because her previous positions did not require a degree, she had not

obtained any formal education beyond high school. Realizing she needed to further her education, Madeline enrolled at the community college as a nontraditional adult student obtaining her associate's degree. "My vice president for Student Services encouraged me to go. And so I did and I graduated from there...from the community college where I worked." Having successfully completed her associate's degree, Madeline did not stop. She continued her studies obtaining bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees. Madeline says she realized the community college was her destiny the first day she stepped onto the college's campus.

So I realized that I wanted to stay at the community college. The first day that I stepped foot onto campus... I had stopped working at the University of Notre Dame and when I first came to the community college, I thought this is - this is where I want to be. I think I am a person that has a passion for helping no matter if it is at the community college or at the kennel...or someone's children...I just have a passion for helping. And so...this is where I landed [pause]...and this is probably the best place I could have landed.

And ah um so here I am.

Her love of education and specifically of community colleges led her to her current college when her husband retired and expressed his desire to move south. Applying for the role of registrar while still living in Illinois, Madeline was offered the position. A couple of years after relocating and settling into her new role, the Vice President for Student Services was taken critically ill and unable to fulfill her duties. Initially named the interim, Madeline applied for and was offered the Vice President for Student Services position she presently

holds today. She says her division is responsible for “what we call the department of ‘ations’ – application, orientation, registration and graduation.”

So we see them [the students] from the day they step foot onto our campus until the day we congratulate them off our stage during graduation with...with an educational certificate or degree of some type.

Madeline understands the importance of developing the relationships with students and with the alumni and views it as being critical to the life of the institution. On a personal level, she expresses the joy she shares in the personal interaction she has with students and particularly likes hearing from them and of their successes once they leave the institution.

I love having students come back. I just had a student to come back...she went off to a university...she was one of our PTK [Phi Theta Kappa] students...our PTK students are just...they are good examples of student success. A couple of our PTK presidents...I have had ones to go off to Chapel Hill and other places and I just love writing letters of recommendation for them and then seeing them go off and succeed.

Matthew. Born in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Matthew’s developmental years were spent living in various places due to his father’s career in the Air Force. When his father retired, the family was living in Goldsboro, but the family relocated to Seaport when Matthew was in ninth grade. While in high school, Matthew followed an academic track that was geared for going straight into the workforce as opposed to furthering his education.

It was pretty much...I mean at that time, it was the only option. I had no desire to go to [named university]. When I was in high school, I can remember when they had the

college and career day. I don't remember going much, but one time I did go and I talked to someone at Davidson and I ended up getting some mailers from them. But I don't know if that was something I could have pursued because I now know that pretty much they [Davidson] only accept those with high academic grades.

His plans of going straight to work full-time did change and once Matthew graduated from high school, he followed his best friend back to Goldsboro and began his studies at Wayne Community College. Working in retail, Matthew decided to pursue an associate degree in business administration. With his hours cut back after the Christmas holidays, Matthew decided to move back to Seaport where he enrolled at Verrazano and subsequently graduated in 1978. Upon graduation, Matthew earnestly pursued a career in industrial sales which he has enjoyed for over 27 years.

A lover of sports, Matthew became reintroduced to the college through their men's basketball program. "...because Verrazano has a men's basketball team. That is how I got involved essentially to even come back out here." Attending games, Matthew was introduced to Grace who is responsible for the alumni relations program. Matthew answered the call for service by agreeing to serve on the alumni association board. After serving for a few years, Matthew was again approached and asked to have his name offered in consideration for the presidency of the Verrazano Community College Alumni Association. Matthew was elected president of the organization. He and his fellow alumni worked hard to fully endow an alumni scholarship fund initiated by alumni. A strong believer in volunteerism and actively involved at not only Verrazano, but his church and community organizations too, Matthew says being involved with Verrazano has blessed him and he encourages other alumni to get

involved with the college. Personally, he would like to see more scholarships funded and is considering how he might personally honor his daughter by endowing a fund in her name to assist future students.

I would think it would be very nice one day to eventually have a scholarship in my daughter's or my name for a business student in order to help them achieve their goal. So I would just encourage anyone that has a connection to Verrazano to get involved and I would just suggest that alumni consider what they can do, and to just come out and visit to see what the campus is like today...and help...because it is always needed.

Matthew's experiences have also influenced his family. He has three nephews, two of whom had graduated from Verrazano and another who was still taking classes at the time of our interview. All of his nephews have studied nuclear maintenance benefitting from the local industrial need for individuals skilled in this field.

So that program has been a tremendous blessing for their personal growth. This college is able to build programs that lead to personal growth and so I realize that...that has been a benefit of essentiality...a local industry and a community college where this local industry says they need employees and the community college goes out and hires an instructor that is skilled to teach nuclear engineering...There are so many programs available here.

Olivia. Olivia greets me in her office suite and begins our interview by apologizing for the disarray of her office stating a floor of the new building being constructed on campus

will be designated for the nursing program. Members of the staff have begun the process of preparing for the move.

At the time of the interview, Olivia had worked at Verrazano for 17 years. Presently the director of the associate degree nursing program, she has worked herself up from being an adjunct faculty member to overseeing the highly competitive and demanding program. A major role of Olivia's position entails compliance oversight ensuring the college conforms to the regulations and standards set forth by the North Carolina Board of Nursing. In addition to this, Olivia has teaching duties and deals with all student-related issues.

Though interviewed for her professional role, Olivia is also a community college graduate. Completing her associate's degree in nursing in 1990 from another community college in the state, she arrived at Seaport to obtain her bachelor's degree at the university and later earned her master's from another neighboring university. With a direct understanding of the challenges faced by students, Olivia feels a strong desire to assist students well beyond their graduation ceremony.

I can speak specifically to associate nursing alumni and their impact in the community means a lot to our program in terms of education. It is very important for me to keep in touch with alumni because I am interested in their success and I want to hear that they are doing well, and that they are passing their exams. And if they are going through issues that I can be of assistance, then I want to be able to provide that. I have had alumni from the early 1990s contact me from another state to get my help. I think that is very important. And I think it is important that we are supported in that way as well and we need to provide what they need to do well.

Working with the Foundation office and specifically Grace who is in charge of alumni programming, Olivia has begun the development of specific programming targeted to alumni. One of the most recent targeted approaches was a breakfast held at the local hospital. The event served as a means of recruiting alumni to become informed of and engaged with the alumni association. Additionally, Olivia and her team have overseen the development of an Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) Facebook group page. In working with others across the campus, Olivia hopes to get alumni involved to assist with programs like mentoring. In a field that is dominated by women, Olivia notes the specific need for male nursing alumni to become involved with the program. Olivia feels male nursing alumni could mentor other men who are currently in the program in ways that would assist in retention of male students.

Perry. Perry is a 54 year old White male. He greets me in the President's conference room where we mutually agreed to meet for the interview. He is engaging and talkative and we settle into an easy conversation about our upbringing. A first generation college student, Perry grew up on a farm in neighboring Duplin County where he says he was driving tractors by age five. Though he credits his farming upbringing for the development of his strong work ethic, he says the time he spent during his formative years in a tobacco field were sufficient enough to let him know farming was not something he wanted to pursue as a career.

Although not formally educated themselves, Perry's parents were advocates of higher education and strongly encouraged him to further his education. Upon graduation from high school, he began his long journey into higher education attending first the local community

college. During what was his junior year at college where he was now studying at a university, he landed a job with a major airline company. Early on in his career with the airline, he was transferred up to Ohio where he met and married his wife. After a few years in Ohio, Perry was presented with the opportunity to transfer back down south with the company. He says it didn't take long to convince his wife to make the move. With his wife tiring of the long winters in Ohio, and his own desire to return closer to home, Perry and his wife returned to North Carolina.

Perry says he knew he wasn't going to get rich, but working for the airline was what he wanted to do. Growing up, he had witnessed his uncle work for a major company and do well for himself and Perry followed suit. The airline became like a family to Perry and he was living and realizing his own personal dream. A dream that is until Perry's work unit was permanently furloughed after being bought out by another airline.

Mom said, 'You know,' she said, 'When Piedmont got bought by US Air, she said,' I thought there was a death in the family' I mean that's how hard it was for me and I probably identified too much with my job... but it was a big deal for me.

Perry had worked for 25 years for one company. Relatively still young, Perry knew he had better make some changes and quickly while he had the opportunity.

I'm like it would probably be a good idea to go back and finish school. So I did that one night a week deal at Mount Olive College, and I'm like that's just not going to be enough, cause I knew back in 2005 our economy was built on speculation and that a train wreck was coming. I'm like a business degree is

just a general degree basically now and I want some more credentials so I want to go to Verrazano Community College and pick up some accounting, and she [Perry's wife] was like, 'Are you crazy? You are historian-minded; you're not accounting-minded.' I'm like I'll take a weakness of mine, work on it some, build that muscle up and so here I came to Verrazano and uh proved in between the horsing around at 18 and the last go around at 45 I had taken another couple of shots at it and never got there; never, never finished. I paced around a degree at six different colleges I think, never graduated. Made good grades, just didn't know how to finish them. I was too hardheaded and ignorant to ask for help until I met Emma out at North Campus and this was right after I had lost my job and I was not a happy man! I was not a happy man and she really became my air traffic controller...I mean there was a ton of people before it was all over that had looked at all those transcripts and, and just um did the most they could for me. And nobody had ever really cared before Verrazano and so I feel like my success here also led to my success at Mount Olive College. I was able to graduate there. I attended here and there simultaneously at two different degree tracks and, and just sucked it up and took my severance, my unemployment, my WIA and was hurry up, jumped in there and 'get 'ir done.' And so I was a double, full-time student for a couple of years there and uh but, but really making it had a lot to do with Verrazano. I mean they were okay at Mount Olive College and I probably would have

gotten through it but I mean Verrazano sealed the deal as far as learning how to get through.

Perry is now afforded on a daily basis the opportunity to return some of the same generosity offered to him when he was a student. After completing his degrees, an opportunity in the Financial Aid office at Verrazano came open. He has worked at the college for over five years now.

Rebecca. Rebecca is a 55 year old White woman who has lived in Seaport for over 30 years. She headed east in 1982 upon graduating from the University of North Carolina – Greensboro with her master’s degree in education. Rebecca is married and has three sons who were 24, 21, and 17 at the time of her interview. She returned to the professional world after being a stay-at-home mother for a period of the boys’ formative years. Rebecca has worked at Verrazano for the last nine years, and is presently the Vice President of Advancement, a new role she assumed as a result of recent organizational changes made by the relatively new president of the institution. In this capacity, Rebecca oversees the fundraising activities of the institution where she also serves as the Executive Director of Verrazano Community College Foundation as well as oversight of the marketing and public relations functions of the college.

Prior to being named to the vice president’s role, Rebecca’s function was solely oversight of the college fundraising activities as the Executive Director of the Foundation. Her previous professional experiences include banking, annual fund director at the University of North Carolina- Seaport, and various other roles. Well known in the community, Rebecca

has received multiple accolades for her leadership and fundraising expertise - both institutionally and in the community.

Encouragement from two community leaders was what brought Rebecca to consider the role with the community college. Prior to working at Verrazano, she had never even stepped foot onto the college's campus. As such, the thrust of her focus over the last several years has been educating the community about Verrazano and the institution's mission and multitude of opportunities. Rebecca says, "People do not need to be surprised by the community college – they need to know about it!" The Foundation holds quarterly events whereby Foundation Board Directors host cultivation events to introduce new community individuals to the college.

Throughout her years with Verrazano, Rebecca has built the Foundation's board to mirror the various major employers, and today, nomination and acceptance to the board is a highly sought after appointment. "In Seaport, it's a much bigger deal to serve on the Foundation Board than it is to serve on the Board of Trustees," says Rebecca. Strategic in her leadership of the organization, Rebecca recently brought in a consultant to assess the organization. As such, she is considering the changes to make in reorganizing and strengthening her department as the institution begins planning for a major capital campaign.

Sophie. A native of Seaport, Sophie was preparing to graduate with an associate degree in applied science in paralegal technology at the time of our interview. This is Sophie's second time being a student at Verrazano. She obtained her associate in arts in general education ten years ago. She says at the time she had no idea what she wanted to do and she had very little involvement as a student.

At that time I did not do anything...at that time I didn't do anything. I was just a student, um...but I was 19 years old and you know...I did okay, I wasn't a bad student or anything like that but, I think at that age you don't always get involved you don't always do things that you should do to bolster your experience. It doesn't seem as important at the time than when you're a little bit older. So...I don't know that I did anything but come to class ten years ago...My first degree was ten years ago. It was college transfer, but I never knew what I wanted to do, or where I wanted to go. And so, I just ended up working and have been in the restaurant business all this time. I managed, waited, bartended, I have done it all. But I realized something was missing. And I have always had a passion for the law. So, I decided to get my paralegal degree. So, that is what I am getting next week.

Extremely active during her second stint at Verrazano, Sophie co-chaired the Student Ambassador Program as well as served as secretary of Verrazano's Student Government Association. In addition to these positions of leadership, she also served on the college's Judicial Board. Recently, Sophie was named Verrazano's Dallas Herring Achievement Award recipient, an honor presented to one student in the N.C. Community College System each year.

Yeah..., and I don't know how I did it. Last year was so... last year was the craziest. The student government was a lot more time consuming than the ambassador program was and um it was worth it. But my, my day planner had arrows pointing like down here to here... [laughs] Oh...ok, it looks like I have twenty minutes right here and then it was like that and then I was taking five classes and working too and I

don't know ...how...how I did it... You don't know how you do it you just do it. You know you wake up every day. You're motivated to know that you are going to make it through. And before you know it that day has turned into a week and you have made it through a week. And then you are like 'wow, the semester is almost over. 'Whew, I made it through that.' Then you see that you made straight A's and ...then you are just like, 'I got this.' [laughing] It's been a wonderful ride. I'm going to be very sad next Friday, but happy at the same time. It will be a happy sad.

Actively engaged as a student ambassador and member of the alumni association, Sophie was part of the group that established the Student Ambassadors Giving Society to honor Verrazano's president who retired in 2012. The funds given through those efforts are added to the Alumni Association Legacy Scholarship. Once fully fund, the scholarship will allow family members or legacy members to apply for and receive scholarship awards.

With her long-term goals set on having a career in Washington, DC, Sophie has an internship lined up upon graduation to begin her paralegal career.

Victor. Victor, age 42 at the time of the interview, is an attractive African American man who was born in upstate New York. Upon his father's retirement, the family relocated to Savannah, Georgia to enjoy the warmer climate. At the time of the move south, Victor was in third grade. Once he graduated from high school, he lived for a time near his parents; however, the close proximity to his parents necessitated a move toward independence that included not only growth and maturity, but a physical relocation as well. "I tried moving across town, but it didn't work because I always moved back home. So I figured that if I was going to grow up, I needed to move far enough away where I could stand on my own two

feet, but close enough so as to return if I wanted to.” Locating a job upon graduation from high school, Victor worked in Georgia until a transfer with his job brought him to Seaport some twenty plus years ago.

Victor was employed in various jobs prior to coming to Seaport with the vast majority being with industries whereby formal education was not necessarily required. Though he loved school as a child and did extremely well completing high school with a 3.0 grade point average by his own admission, he rarely studied outside of the classroom, Victor says he just “fell into working”. You know what they say, If you don’t choose your career, it will choose you! He started out as a courier initially, but was promoted through his ten years there to sales manager. He then spent another six plus years working as a truck driver for a moving company. His last full-time employment was with a company that specialized in developing line equipment where he worked as the tracking manager until the company relocated in 2010. Having recently purchased a home, Victor did not want to be relocated with the company and instead, accepted a severance package.

It was at this time that Victor decided to go to school. While he had taken a couple of classes through the Continuing Education program at Verrazano Community College, he says he never really knew what the institution really did until his enrollment there in curriculum programs. A 2013 graduate, he obtained three degrees during his three years as a student there and was an active participant in various activities. Most notable were his membership in the Phi Theta Kappa Society – the national honor society for academic excellence for community college students, the 3 M or Male Minority Mentoring program, and the Student Ambassadors program. During his role as a student ambassador, he was the first student to

ever serve two consecutive years. Celebrating the retirement of the long-time president of the institution, Victor and his fellow Ambassadors formed an Ambassador Giving Society during his studies at Verrazano Community College.

Findings

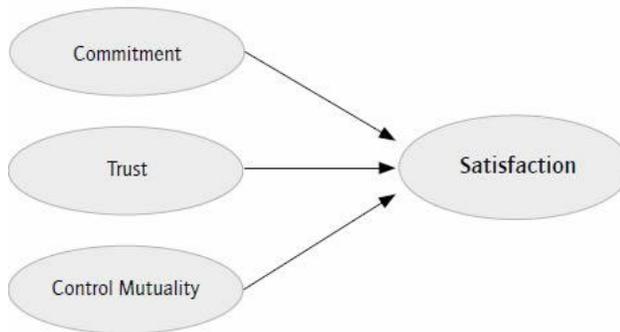
This section presents the significant findings from the experiences and understandings of the alumni and community college professionals based on the research question of how community college alumni and community college professionals each understand the alumni-community college relationship. The intent of the study was not to comparatively assess any similarities or differences between the alumni and the community college professional; however, by virtue of the dynamics of the roles each play within the relationship, the comparisons were oftentimes unavoidable and added important nuances and understandings on the role each serves within the development of the alumni relationship.

The four elements of the relationship management framework as identified by J. Grunig and Huang (2000) and presented in **Figure 3** guided the data analysis. Four general themes with ensuing subthemes resulted from the analysis and are outlined in Table 1. The themes serve to guide the presentation of the key findings and to provide overarching guidance in the discussion of the subsequent subthemes in the sections that follow in this chapter. Connections to the J. Grunig and Huang (2000) theoretical framework and four elements are referenced to the data collected. The first theme presented, characteristics, most closely aligns with J. Grunig and Huang's (2000) relationship management model.

Four distinguishing components of the relationship surfaced through the multiple stages of data analysis. *Characteristics* or dimensions of the relationship, *influences*, *roles*

and *impact* emerged as the four predominant themes of the alumni-institutional relationship. Considerations like communication, timing, and strategic planning were found by the participants to be distinct and noteworthy to the further development of the community college alumni-institutional relationship. These particular elements are included in the relational influences theme.

FIGURE 1. Relationship among trust, commitment, control mutuality and satisfaction.



Source: The authors.

Figure 3 - Relational Influences Theme

Figure 4, which appears on page 147, presents a visual of the four relational elements explored during analysis. The radial cycle serves to portray the collective parts in the outer ring working in concert to influence the development of the central idea - the community college-alumni relationship. An outer circle depicting a theme corresponds to the central idea – community college-alumni relationship - while the central idea in turn affects another outer circle such as *impact*. Of the four major elements discovered during the data analysis, none are viewed as being more important to the relationship than the other. Yet, the entry point of the discussion does more naturally travel clockwise from the top outer circle *characteristics* to *influences*, then to *roles* and lastly *impact*. Each of the elements contributes

to the central idea of the institutional-graduate relationship. The extent to which each of the elements plays into the development of the community college-alumni relationship determines the magnitude of the relationship established.

The model presented in **Figure 4** will serve throughout the chapter as the visual aid to the discussion of themes. Each component of the model will be highlighted and brought forward for the discussion. This serves as a means then of focusing on a specific element while keeping the idea central and the entire model visually accessible to the reader.

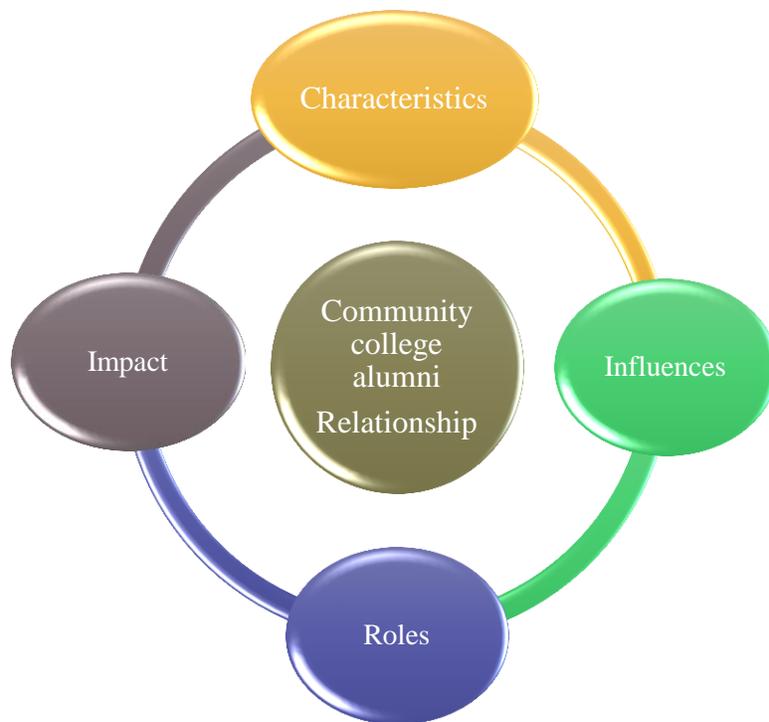


Figure 4 - Relational elements of the community college – alumni relationship

Just as **Figure 4** presents a visual representation of the findings, **Table 4.1** presents a comprehensive outline of each of the four major themes. Each of the themes have developed subthemes which serve to further elucidate the finding while the subsequent subthemes and

sub-subthemes in several of the areas expose in greater detail the participants' impressions as they related to each of the major themes.

Table 1 - Relational Themes

<p>Theme I: Relational Characteristics</p> <p>A. Commitment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Verrazano strong 2. Just a stepping stone 3. Juggling priorities <p>B. Trust</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. College confidence 2. Developing trust 3. Two-way street <p>C. Satisfaction</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exactly what I needed 2. Creating the win-win mentality 3. Always willing to help <p>D. Obligation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Institutionally driven 2. Reciprocal 3. The holistic view 	<p>Theme II: Relational Influences</p> <p>A. Personal attitudes, beliefs, and values</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alumni 2. Professionals <p>B. Student experiences</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning 2. Support 3. Activities <p>C. Connections</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relationships <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Personal connections b. Like family and friends 2. Involvement <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Alumni participation b. A seat at the Verrazano Family table c. Competition for time d. Is altruism dead? 3. Communication <p>D. Future</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategic planning 2. Timing engagement
<p>Theme III: Relational Roles</p> <p>A. Alumni</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Connection to the community 2. Sharing success <p>B. Professionals</p> <p>C. Alumni Association</p>	<p>Theme IV: Relational Impact</p> <p>A. Economic</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alumni employment and workforce 2. Giving back 3. Community college value <p>B. Social</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. College Pride 2. Transformation <p>C. Cultural</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community college versus other higher education 2. Verrazano community 3. Institutional philosophy <p>D. Political</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alumni advocacy 2. Alumni representation 3. Marginalized populations

Relational Characteristics. The first theme, relational characteristics (see Figure 5), details how the Verrazano alumni-institutional relationship is grounded by four distinguishing characteristics. Factors found to be essential to the development and sustainability of the alumni-institutional relationship, *commitment*, *trust*, *satisfaction*, and *obligation* were discovered to be important elements to the relationship for both alumni and professional participants.

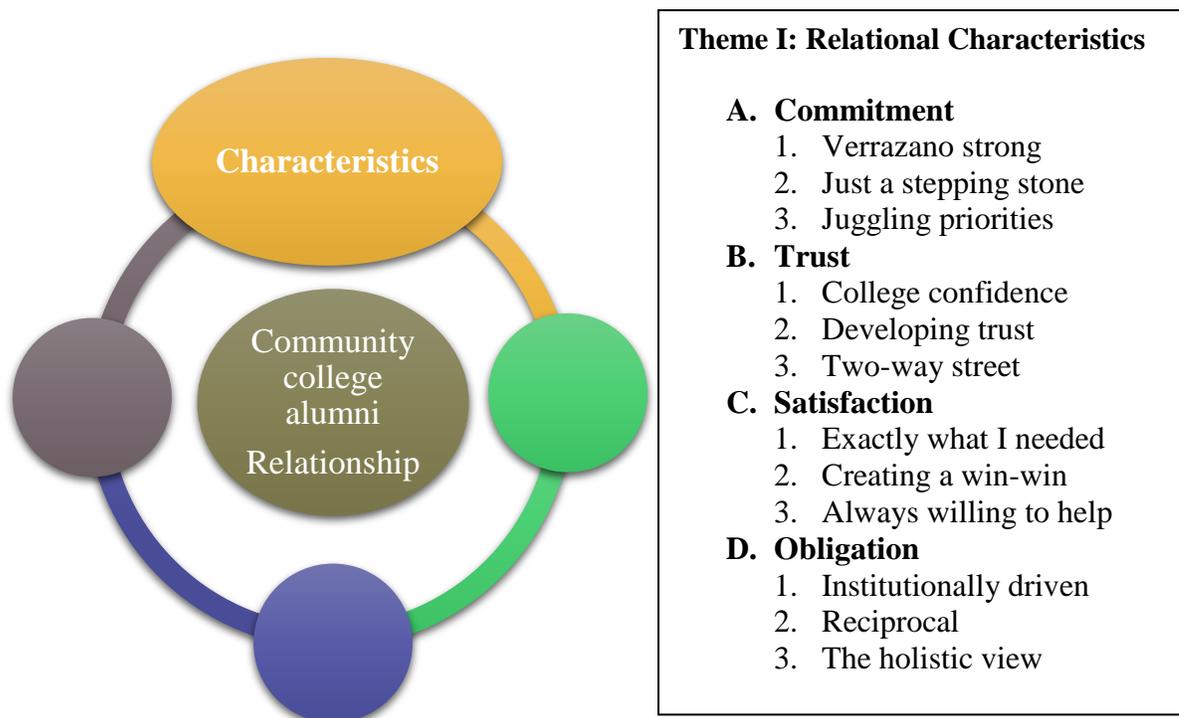


Figure 5 - Community College Alumni Relationship Relational Element I: Relational Characteristics

Commitment is articulated and described as being loyal – a sense of loyalty to each other, the alumni, students, as well as an overall feeling of devotion to the institution. Trust was a feeling developed and supported by experiences. For some alumni, overcoming

challenges and being supported through those obstacles served to build the feeling of confidence in the institution. Experiences again played a significant role in enabling the participants to describe the contentment characteristic. For the alumni, personal accomplishments linked to their time at Verrazano, along with newfound confidences, functioned as catalysts in explaining the level of fulfillment. In contrast, the professionals interviewed relayed feelings of satisfaction when telling stories of assisting students. The obligation dimension revealed opposing and extreme beliefs. Though most participants indicated intense gratitude and explored ways in which to reciprocate, some described the obligation as being a straightforward exchange, with no expectation of obligation beyond what was taught in the classroom and paid for through tuition to the college.

All participants recounted having feelings of being supported throughout their studies or in their professional roles. The participants shared personal stories of how the identified characteristics supported the development of the relationship. All of the alumni expressed feeling satisfied with the institutional relationship and described feelings of indebtedness and personal accounts of transformation. Many felt Verrazano provided exactly what they needed in terms of academic fulfillment and personal development. The professionals interviewed express a genuine perception of care and attentiveness for the students. Many of the professionals revealed their beliefs about personal commitment. Helping students and feeling appreciated by an institution that places a high value on loyalty feeds their personal and professional satisfaction. Each of the characteristics will now be discussed in more detail.

Commitment. All of the participants, both alumni and the professionals, expressed that they feel a deep sense of commitment to the institution. The faculty and staff interviewed

voiced their personal dedication to Verrazano's students and also readily pointed out the multiple ways in which they see their peers working tirelessly to ensure student success. Lee brings a unique perspective as she is both a graduate and employee of the institution.

I would feel very proud, and again not always from a student perspective... but from the employee level as well. You know at our last accreditation... we had no recommendations...and that...that is a real testament of how hard we work here and how much emphasis is put on doing things the right way here... We do nothing half way. I am very proud of this college.

Echoing these same observations, all of the alumni participants shared accounts of how fully supported they felt in their educational endeavors. However, concerns did arise when discussing the relational element of commitment. For several of the alumni, some expressed their frank criticism of students who were viewed as using the college solely as a "stepping stone." And with the allocation of resources and time for alumni relations spread thinly, this level of detachment clearly makes the engagement process even more difficult to achieve on a large scale and in terms of pure numbers involved.

Verrazano strong. All of the participants interviewed exhibited a strong sense of loyalty to the college. Victor was one of Verrazano's staunchest supporters that I interviewed. Faced with an employment transfer, Victor decided to redirect his life by enrolling in a community college. Stating he wasn't ready to make a commitment to a four-year university, he instead opted for what he viewed as a "safe alternative." What he says he found was a "perfect fit" for his educational needs.

I had seen Verrazano Community College; had been living here for about twenty years and I had seen the college. And I have been downtown and I have always been familiar with it. And after making the decision to come back to school, after being out for twenty years, I just didn't really feel comfortable going straight into a four-year university. I didn't really know if I wanted...I wasn't really certain if I wanted to make that commitment for four years. And Verrazano Community College was a safe alternative to a four-year university where I could get some additional education. Because I realized that I was getting too old to use my back to make money. So I needed to use my brain. And I needed....I realized if I was going to use my brain, then I needed to sharpen it up a little bit. And so I decided to come to Verrazano and it seemed like the perfect fit for me.

For Ben, a native of Haiti and a nontraditional student, the dedication toward success and completion was something he shared with the institution. "So when I look at Verrazano that was a ...there was this commitment between us - to make sure...to make certain that I become successful."

The sense of duty from the professionals' viewpoint spans areas of communication, instruction, and services. The professionals interviewed are guided by the institution's philosophy to offer the very best educational and student experiences possible. Jay shares not only his values but those of his faculty. Daily, he witnesses the work they do to educate the students and it is clear the commitment is genuine.

Um I think from an educational point of view, strictly in the delivery of instruction... and I may be biased because that is the side that what I work on, but I think we are

outstanding... particularly the vocational programs. We have faculty here and not just in my department, but across the college on the vocational side. And that is really the only area that I can speak intelligently on....that have worked in industry and have an unbelievable hands-on skill set and are great teachers and deliver that material in an unbelievable way.

As an alumna of the college, Amber knows first-hand the difference commitment can make in a person's life. A scholarship recipient when she was a student, Amber is a dedicated alumni member. She feels she gained a great deal from her experiences there and is committed to the college working hard to ensure the scholarship funding provided by her employer is readily available.

I wanted to start a scholarship because I went there and I know the importance of what a scholarship can do. I know a couple of people in the Foundation and Grace keeps me up to date as well and I will go anywhere that I am needed on Verrazano's behalf. I think a lot of the school and they taught me so much.

Just a stepping stone. While the overall level of commitment was viewed positively by alumni and professionals alike, two areas of concern surfaced during the interviews. One concern expressed was the perceived lack of interest witnessed among certain populations of the alumni. Given the nature of being located in a university town and the numbers of Verrazano alumni transferring, one alumni-employee questioned the extent to which great numbers of alumni will ever be involved and engaged with the alumni association. Lee, an alumni-employee, is representative of both the alumni and professionals group. Lee questions the ability to cultivate and foster student commitment. When asked directly about

commitment, Lee expressed her views as that of witnessing students who come to the community college and use their experiences as a “stepping stone.”

I don't think very much.... I don't know how to say it...but um...ah... A lot of the students do go to school here and then they move on. We are a stepping stone for them going on to a four-year university. I don't know if their commitment is as great as if it's going to be... if you went to a place where you would stay for four years and lived there... they are participating in your extra-curricular activities and all that...Ah...um...I would like to think that they would have...a strong ...going to have commitment to the college but I do not always think that will be the case because they are here for a purpose and then they are moving on.

Lee was not the only alumna participant to make this observation. Others cited this same opinion stating they felt the older and more mature students were the ones most likely to maintain some sort of connection to the institution. Using the same analogy as *passing through* or *stepping stone*, Sophie described her thoughts in this way.

Not many people take advantage of it in the way that I did. Um...but I think you know, you have a lot of your younger students that are in here that are just passing through to transfer, just like I was all those years ago [laughing]. And they don't...it's not that they don't care, but their focus is different. I think...I would say that maybe the more non-traditional students have a little bit more [institutional commitment] than your traditional college transfer students. Because again...they're just passing through, you know? They're coming here for a year...maybe two and then they're on to wherever it is that they want to go. Um, you know your returning

students and your non-traditional students um well they're here to receive an education, and you know get some sort of a degree or diploma or certificate so um I feel like they, they develop a greater connection with the school than um some of the others.

Juggling priorities. Issues with commitment were not voiced solely by the alumni.

Lee and Sophie's concerns are compounded by those of the president and advancement personnel. While the vast majority of the participants expressed gratitude and support for the alumni relations efforts, the president, advancement vice president and director of alumni and annual programs shared the current analysis process they are undergoing with the development and alumni relations programs. The alumni relations undertaking is acknowledged by all as being an ambitious undertaking while managing various other duties. Rebecca, well-respected among her peers and the alumni alike, is the vice president of institutional advancement. She is strongly supportive of Verrazano and views the alumni program as being extremely important to the life and future of the institution. However, with a small staff and limited resources, Rebecca admits there are limitations to what can be accomplished and states the time devoted to the alumni relations building process is sometimes siphoned to other areas of importance. Using a scale as an analogy with ten being greatest, she gauges the institution's attention and commitment to the alumni relations program at a realistic five.

I think on a scale of one to ten I think it is probably about a five. I think it is a five. We are doing it and seeing how it is going, but I would not put our commitment about any higher than five. We know it is important, we want to keep doing it but just like in your office, everybody wears fifteen different hats. At the end of the day we are doing different things, but I think our level of the importance would probably be an eight, but

the level of commitment and what we can reasonably achieve would be a five... just because of the nature of the beast.

When Rebecca assessed the college advancement division as compared to the entire campus, she felt the advancement division was higher in terms of commitment to the alumni. This is most likely due to the fact that Rebecca's area has the direct responsibility for the development of the alumni relations programs. Likewise, Rebecca felt that was reasonable assuming all of the other divisions are as busy as the advancement division she oversees.

Ours [the Foundation's focus on the alumni] is a lot higher. I think as an institution a lot of people at the community college are here to get them [the students] to a goal.

They are not worried about what happens after they get them there, they are working to get them to a goal.

This aligns too with other responses of the professionals interviewed. All expressed abundant support of the alumni relations efforts, but most relegated any discussion of the development of the alumni relations program back to Rebecca and her staff. Most professionals working outside the foundation and advancement offices stated they felt inadequate to answer questions that were outside their area of expertise or oversight, particularly when asked about their knowledge of the alumni association. That stated, multiple professional participants went on to share ways in which they are connecting to alumni through their specific areas of emphasis.

Programs like marine technology, boat building, and associate degree nursing are personally reaching out to graduates. Though they wish they could do more, these are two examples of how they are using technology and social media to capture the attention and

actively engage and inform alumni. Due to accreditation requirements, the associate degree nursing is an instructional area where following the alumni is a top priority for a given period of time.

Initially upon graduation, we communicate immediately during the summer months and frequently with them just to make sure they are not having issues with job interviews and setting up their exams. From there, we do alumni surveys at six months and then again at a year after graduation from the program. We then follow up again six months after that one year mark to try to get in touch with those we have not been able to get in touch with at the first six and one year marks. Um, after that point, the contact is sporadic. We do have an associate's degree nursing alumni Facebook page, so we have gone and found that was started about two years ago and we have gone and searched anyone that was alumni and we reached out to them, offering them to like the page.

Trust. All participants of this study articulated an intense feeling of confidence in Verrazano and repeatedly echoed a strong sense of pride in being associated with the college. Several voiced phrases like “does what it says it will do” to describe the experiences they have had, as either students or employees, that formulated trust in the organization. Equally important to the formation of the trust element within the alumni-institution relationship is the importance individual's personally attribute to trust. Citing early and formative experiences, many individuals feel an internal sense of responsibility in acting truthful with students and their peers.

College confidence. Without exception, all of the participants are strongly committed and supportive of the institution. The alumni are devoted and conveyed a strong trust in the institution to provide the level of education and resources expected by the students. They view the institution as being an organization that does what it says it will do. Amanda expects to be counseled and directed on the appropriate classes to take - something she feels faculty work hard at in assisting students.

I trust the staff and faculty not to fill my head up with stuff that I didn't need, if that makes sense. Not to... they didn't let me take pottery classes when I didn't need, you know. That stuff just wasn't advised and so I felt like they did not mislead me. They did not try to keep me here longer than I needed. They were all about helping me get in and get the education I needed so that I could move on.

Lee speaks about trust from two perspectives; from that of an alumna and as a current employee. She benefited from the education she received and this education allows her to do her job in such a way that makes her feel appreciated and secure in her position.

I feel the trust on the part as a student in that the classes that I needed to get my degree were available to me and I think the instruction that I got was excellent. I trusted them to provide an education to me and feel like I got it...And, I am given the resources to do my job and I don't feel threatened as long as I do my end of the bargain, and don't mess up...So, I trust the college and think it is a good place to work...I trust them as an employee.

Rebecca thinks students and alumni have an unfathomable sense of loyalty to the college. She feels this institutional loyalty would only become threatened should the college not fulfill its obligation to sufficiently educate and train students.

I think it would be a trust issue if they didn't think that degree was worth anything and that they were not prepared for their job. As a whole they trust the college because they were trained and then as an alumni I think you move on one step further, and this is why you have a job... you have these people at four year colleges coming back here to get a degree so that they can get a job. So I really don't um...I think it is more of an issue of, I think if we didn't train them well then it would be an issue but I think they trust the college in general. If they were ill-prepared...then I think that would be an issue.

Developing trust. For alumni, favorable experiences as students served to initiate the long-lasting bond and trust that translates into committed alumni. If students' questions are answered truthfully and if their needs are met reasonably, the trust is naturally formed. Victor feels strongly that Verrazano was responsive to his needs as a student and thereby developed the trust he feels today.

They have always done what they said they were going to do. The staff and the faculty have always been straight forward. If they said they could do something, they did it and if they said they couldn't do it, then they couldn't do it. They didn't pass the buck on anything. They didn't say go see this person, or go see that person. If they said go see this person and if they were not the department I needed to talk to, they called the

department I needed to talk with. I have never left any situation feeling that I didn't get the answer that I needed or wanted.

These types of experiences do not happen by chance, but require faculty and staff who are dedicated to the mission of the institution and who are first and foremost student-minded. Emma is known campus-wide for her helpfulness. Other students constantly refer Emma to their peers.

I am honest...and they know that I am not going to tell them a lie. And they'll tell people they know that they can trust me and that I am honest. It means a lot to people when they know that they can trust somebody and that they know you are going to be honest...But we have so many faculty that work out here that give so much more of their time because they know it's needed and they really, really care and I think when students realize that...if students know that...then it makes them trust the institution.

Perry too relies upon the beliefs and traditions taught to him as a young child. As an alumnus and employee of Verrazano, he feels a deep sense of responsibility for the students. He lost his father at an early age, was a first-generation college student, and then lost his job in the airline industry, Perry has had to adapt along the way. He knows first-hand about unexpected challenges and he empathizes with the students. As with Emma, Perry is sought after and has become someone students search out when needing assistance.

Well they, they [Verrazano] made me. They...they gave me a group of people I care about and that's not as easy as it sounds because you've got to earn respect from me and in big ways and small. A lot of people here have earned my respect and I enjoy being associated with that. Um I really like helping students out because and my two

kind of favorite groups um it, it just pulls up that Raleigh/Washington thing I was talking about a little while ago. We don't ever know where talent is going to come from. If it were genetic we'd know who was going to win the Kentucky derby every year, wouldn't we? We don't. We don't know where our next doctor, caregiver, lawyer is coming from and so we need to provide opportunity and a community college that does a better job of that than anybody else. We'll take people nobody else will take and try to do something with them. We have a lot of bright kids that just never got a shot and I know what that feels like. My father died when I was 16 and I became...I had to grow up and become responsible in a hurry. Um a lot of kids didn't get a shot. I see a lot of kids that don't get a shot and I am bound and determined as I deal with every one of them, they're going to get the information that they need to do the things they need to do. A shot at the opportunities that they ought to get and they're not ever going to walk out of my office saying no one at Verrazano ever told me what I needed to know. The kids are going to know. The other group I really like are the adult students that have lost their jobs and are coming back. I've walked in their shoes. I know how they feel. I know how upset and scared they are and we talk about those things. Um, they don't come in and it's not a little quickie session. They...and, and what I find out is when they find out they can trust you, they keep coming back to you...even it's not in your wheel house.

While all participants spoke very favorably about the institution, for Drew, an incident he recalled while being interviewed triggered thoughts as to how he feels the institution should

work to broaden the reach to underserved and marginalized student populations, such as the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community of which he is deeply engrained.

I would say that there's a pretty, pretty good level of trust there. Um, again, some of this is retrospect so I don't know what my mindset was when I graduated but, um, I think that there are still populations of students that are, that are underserved. Um, and I think that's where the only trust issue would be. Uh, for instance, even you know, now it's kind of bubbling up, um, there was an instance of when I was... I think that I was still an ambassador there, or maybe I was in Phi Theta Kappa there. I think there are a couple of different students but I saw a couple of people from the foundation uh, at, at a class there. And at the time, um, I had a partner who was uh, who was a man. And I introduced him as my partner and so... You know... of course people are like, 'Oh. What? Oh, hi. It's nice to meet you.' You know that they're... Foundation folks so that's what they do but I was just... it was shocking that they were shocked by that, in a way. I guess with the ... I mean the perception of what, what they thought of me or something else but um, I just think at that, the... and I just want to suggest conservatism because I don't think that it's something that goes that far, but just the kind of old south kind of thought. So even if... I'll support you but I'm just... don't put my name on it or anything, kind of mindset, you know... I think that is something... I think there's some room to grow, uh, with respect to under, underserved and marginalized student populations.

One thing is clear in the development of the student-institutional trust factor; it begins in the classroom. Critical to the development of the student-institutional relationship is the

trust fostered between faculty and students. Here, students witness firsthand the expertise of faculty. Jay says the students are astute and are able to quickly discern the ability and sincerity of the faculty.

Well, students can usually tell rather quickly whether you are full of it or not...and more so in these vocational programs. We always try and stress to our vice president of instruction that students will hold no credence in what you say until you actually do it. For example, [faculty 1] or [faculty 2], the boat building instructors, they can talk about something 'til they are blue in the face, but until they pick up a hand tool and actually do it, the students don't believe it. So...when you are in class and you're teaching...and you are doing what you are saying. Until you have the hands-on tangible proof that you can do it, they typically don't believe you. I think that is the first step in building trust. Building students and having confidence that you are not just somebody telling them something to do just because that's your position. But the fact is that you have actually done it...So building a healthy student, teacher, department chair, student relationship, I think, is the first step in building trust.

Two-way street. Issues of trust are not one-sided. The professionals interviewed assess trust as being a responsibility of both the students and the institution. Clark says students have to know their education is valuable and the institution must trust students to utilize the education received to be viable members of the workforce.

Well, they have to trust that...well there is a two-way trust level going on.

Ah...Number one they have to trust that their education is valuable after they leave

Verrazano...they have to trust that there is value, that they are going to get that job, that

we're going to keep our accreditation so that the reputation stays at a very strong level. Uh...ah...They want to make sure that when they go for a new job or a promotion and when somebody looks at their resume and it says they graduated from Verrazano... that is going to hold water...Umm ah...when our health science students go off for their first, second, third job and they take their resume that has Verrazano Community College listed on it...that carries weight with it. Because we have some of the best health sciences programs in all of North Carolina. So when...when an employer reads that they graduated from Verrazano and had a 3.5 GPA [grade point average]... regardless of what the rest of that resume says... that employer is going to be excited. They have to trust that we are going to keep our high standards. And we have to trust that they are going to be the best employees that they can as to ...ah...as to keep both sides of our reputation...both sides of our reputation intact.

Olivia is of the opinion Verrazano's alumni do indeed trust the institution. Given her role as director of the associate degree nursing program, she stays in close contact with the nursing alumni. Olivia's personal evaluation of trust for the alumni is linked to their successful performance out in the community. She feels the alumni respect and trust the institution not only while they are enrolled, but as alumni too.

I think the depth of my ability and providing what they need to be successful alumni fosters trust in me. And their honesty and integrity and going out and into the community and working and being a valuable employee, then that gives me trust in them. In thinking about how over time the students we have had graduate and their successes, I believe that trust is there. The true definition...an actual definition of that

trust I think I would say is a mutual respect and assurance that each side will be honest in expectations and delivery of products.

Satisfaction. The alumni participants all shared feelings of deep appreciation for the time they spent as Verrazano students. Telling various stories that showcased the institution's attentiveness to their students, the alumni all communicated feeling encouraged and supported through their studies.

Exactly what I needed. Self-identified as being weak in math, Drew talked about how his needs were met to help him achieve and succeed in an area where he had previously struggled.

Again, I think academically, very attentive. Even, like math was my weak subject and they have a math lab that was fully staffed at all times and you could go over there and get as much help as you possibly could need. Really, I would say, yeah, I mean, across everything at the time that I knew about ... I mean that I knew was possible. I had...my needs were met very, very well.

Matthew says he too felt supported throughout his time as Verrazano and states he enjoys reflecting back on this time at the college. Not having planned to further his education and not necessarily an "A student," he spent his last two years in high school in a program that was geared toward going straight into the workforce as opposed to one furthering his education. Nonetheless, once Matthew arrived to Verrazano he excelled landing on the Dean's List.

Oh, it was exactly the thing I needed. So ok, if you look at my transcripts from high school, I was already geared in my junior and senior year to basically go to work and

into the workforce because I was in a program called DECA. We called it DE. I actually worked at [named company] and then next door at [named company 2] from basically um...noon until the evening in high school. So I had a full time job both my junior and senior year. And it was all about learning marketing and distribution. But if you looked at my grades outside of the...the required courses, I tried to take Algebra II and ended up failing it. But I didn't need it to graduate so my teacher told me...my teacher told me after the end of the semester, "You know, why don't you stick it out Matthew, because you know, you might...you might grasp it...?" But anyway, to answer your question, um...if you look at the courses I took here I was a Dean's List student which showed that I had the aptitude for what I was doing. And I can remember some classes like business finance where I had a 100 average. So the curriculum was exactly what I needed, for someone who really did not know what they were doing. And...um...I do remember...like the typing class... I had started it when I was in college and I had never typed before... so I was obviously a "bunch of nubs" trying to do it. [laughing] I was already behind...Well, they had electric typewriters [at first community college he attended] and then I came here and they had manual. So, I was even a couple of steps behind...I can remember we were all just basically on edge when we had a typing exam [laughing].... because it was all about 60wpm and to spell properly...and so I did that, but I was very slow. But...to ah... answer your question they gave me exactly what I needed and I really enjoy thinking about my times being here.

The attentiveness and support extends beyond the academic classrooms where both alumni and the professionals told stories of how Verrazano's students are bolstered and encouraged throughout their studies. For Victor, it was important to know he could honestly share issues in a helpful and supportive environment.

They were very attentive. Any time I had a problem, I could go to somebody and talk whether it was personal issues, academic issues, um...career guidance, um...motivation. You know, there was always somebody to talk to. They have always been there and they have always had an open door. I never have been made to feel under-minded or slighted in any way. You know? They made time for me in their busy schedule to sit down and hear me cry, complain, or whatever I needed to share.

Creating the win-win mentality. Significant to the satisfaction dimension is the notion of developing opportunities for the institution, students, and alumni to benefit by their association with each other. As an alumnus and employee of the institution, Perry enjoys being associated with a college that values identifying ways to operate more effectively and more efficiently.

You know, how can we do this effectively, more cost effectively, more everything? Because that, that just creates such a *win-win* kind of virtual cycle. You know, if we can do something more efficiently and effectively, we can save money on the budget that gives Dr. Fitzgerald some lead-way to do some other things that he may not otherwise be able to do. The students are happier because we're turning them around faster. Yeah, so I like being a part of that.

As someone who has thrived in the business world, Matthew knows that satisfying your customers is critical to the success of any organization. In the context of Verrazano's alumni relations program, Matthew realizes the value too in positioning the alumni association to offer benefits to members, particularly while the alumni relations is rebuilding and undergoing evaluation of its programming.

And again realizing that we are in a tremendous building stage for the alumni program...I think it's only a four year old alumni association...it's got its challenges. When I met Grace originally I told her that because of my living in Winston-Salem for 10 years, I got involved with the Deacon Club [at Wake Forest University]. Now, as a person that did not go there, but saw the real benefit from being involved in that...Now, we can't compare the two, but we can try and strive and do things and get people connected. Because that's the biggest thing...As a business person, that is one thing I love...just getting people connected...and trying to build those critical relationships that can benefit both parties...and uh the old adage is that when business is created...people tend to do business with friends. No one wants to do business with somebody that they don't know and that they do not like. And so if you can set up possibilities for people to meet and possibilities to do business...then it is a win-win.

Obligation. When the interviews turned to the topic of obligation, the responses were mixed. The idea of obligation is sometimes viewed differently among the alumni as compared to the professional participants. The responses, offered in greater detail later in this section, ranged from the participants who think alumni should have no obligation at all, to the

institutional representatives who feel a strong sense of commitment and obligation to alumni and students.

Institutionally driven. One of the strongest proponents for being obligated to alumni, but with no expectations for anything in return came from the president of the college Dr. Fitzgerald. He feels adamant that the college should have benefits and services in place in order to attract more alumni participation.

I don't think they really have an obligation. It has got to be a two-way street, if we provide something to them, we provide services, if we provide activities that we provide help in finding jobs, then I think there's a relationship. There would be an obligation, but right now we do not do enough for them to even ask them to do anything for us. I am an alumnus of a college and all they ask for is money. And that for some reason is 40 years ago when I graduated. They think that I should be giving them money because I graduated from the college and I do not feel that is necessarily true. I give my money to this college and another college that I started; and I don't feel really obligated because I am not getting services. If there was something that they gave me, I would feel differently.

Amber, an alumna member, concurs and wishes there were programs to help alumni further their education while keeping them informed of other activities going on at the college.

The institution should come up with programs that further the education students and alumni are able to receive; these programs should look into new avenues and ways to help educate. Their other obligation is to keep alumni informed of what is going on at the institution.

Jay, director of the marine technology and boat building programs, sees his obligation to alumni as being accessible and approachable. He routinely offers advice to alumni and provides them with invaluable connections to employment.

As a department, I define it as being available, being accessible whenever a graduate needs assistance in industry. So you know... the most interaction I have [with the alumni] is right after graduation with the students, helping them land that first job. Then there is that smaller subset of folks that will reach out as they looking for advice in changing an industry or just finding another job. I...ah...I had a student just the other day that reached out that had worked with [named company] for three years and they just hate the travel and they have reached out that needed assistance in a new job because they want to be at home more with his fiancé and wants something a little more family-based, so you try to help them and steer them to another aspect of the industry that they studied to help them get a new job... So that's how I see my interaction – as a partner with the students...So to continue to grow, continue to be well-respected, and to continue to be on the cutting edge of marine science. Those are the things that I expected. So.....If I was a graduate from Verrazano from the marine tech program, or any program, I would expect the same exact thing, to not be in the paper for all the wrong reasons.

Reciprocal. Though there are participants who feel alumni should have no obligation back to the institution, individuals like Clark, an alumnus and employee, feels the relationship should be reciprocal.

Well I think umm I think the alumni need to be good stewards to the college...and they need to not just acknowledge their...their beginnings, but they should be involved. They should come to functions...They should continue to support the school maybe not financially...maybe financially, but to also support um what they have made it in their professional careers...come back as a mentor for students. Or serve on an advisory panel, or um whatever their professional career will allow them to do. Because everybody that is a graduate has something to give back.

The holistic view. Bringing the concept of obligation together from the perspective of being both a community college graduate and the vice president of student affairs, Madeline understands the role of obligation to be a characteristic that is holistically developed. Joined by others who shared similar thoughts, Madeline interprets the concept as something that expands beyond the traditional alumni benefits of tangible affinities or special privileges.

I think this may bethis may be your....your whole thing. I don't think...I don't think that a graduate has an obligation to the university or to the college. I think they have come, they have spent their time, and they have paid you to teach them. Their feeling about the university or the college can't be an obligation...I mean it has to be something that they *feel*.... You cannot and should not make anyone feel obligated.

The characteristics revealed through the data analysis establish the elements the participants described as being critical to the development of the alumni-community college relationship. The next phase within the relational continuum details the various aspects of the *relational influences* theme.

Relational Influences. Multiple factors influence the development of the alumni and institutional relationship. As outlined and shown in Figure 6, the most primitive influences initiate from the personal philosophies of the participants. The perspectives shared by the alumni and professionals are drawn from their attitudes and beliefs as well as personal values. Throughout the interviews, the alumni participants reflected on the various individuals who shaped their experiences while they were students.



Figure 6 - Community College Alumni Relationship
Relational Element II: Relational Influences

II. Relational Influences

- A. Personal attitudes, beliefs, and values**
 - 1. Alumni
 - 2. Professionals
- B. Student experiences**
 - 1. Learning
 - 2. Support
 - 3. Activities
- C. Connections**
 - 1. Relationships
 - a. Personal connections
 - b. Like family and friends
 - 2. Involvement
 - a. Alumni participation
 - b. A seat at the Verrazano Family table
 - c. Competition for time
 - d. Is altruism dead?
 - 3. Communication
- D. Future**
 - 1. Strategic planning
 - 2. Timing engagement

Beyond their academic experiences, all alumni shared the significance of being involved in other activities and the support they received outside the classroom. Both were viewed as being extremely important to the development of the alumni-institutional relationship. Without fail, all participants stressed the importance of personal connections to the development of the institutional relationship. They all viewed this as being the one key component to the relationship building process that is pivotal to the development of the relationship as well as critical to creating any sustainable alumni relations programming. This section closes by tying the present development to the future as participants imagine and share ideas as to how they envision the future development of the alumni relationship. There are four subthemes that emerged from the data analysis pertaining to the relational influences theme to include: 1) personal attitudes, beliefs, and values, 2) student experiences, 3) connections, and 4) future.

Personal attitudes, beliefs, and values. The personal philosophies of all of the participants undergird the development and management of the relationship. The personal philosophies are explained in the ways participants make meaning and how these values have been formed. How they have come to know and appreciate particular principles serve to guide their actions both personally and professionally. For the professionals, their personal beliefs translate into behaviors that strongly influence the formation of the relationship with alumni. Subsequently, the ways in which alumni were treated as students serve to strongly shape their own behaviors as well as to inform attitudes toward further relational development with the institution.

Alumni. The vast majority of the alumni participants interviewed came to Verrazano at crucial times in their lives. For many of those interviewed, their time at the college was spent as adult learners and as non-traditional students. For some, their most recent time at Verrazano was a re-appearance to college after failing previous attempts at obtaining a degree. Several of the participants interviewed also acknowledged being first generation college students. With their foundational beliefs already shaped and well-established, previously held assumptions were challenged and confronted. Their experiences revealed not only new understandings of others, but resulted in newfound realizations of who they are as individuals. For Victor, encouragement from his faculty helped him to overcome his initial feelings of inadequacy and caused him to believe in himself.

My first semester was very trying. I felt like I didn't fit in. I am 42 and my students in class were anywhere from 18 to 22 and I just was...had a hard time with that. But I began to adjust to it and I talked to a lot of different people about it. And a lot of my professors encouraged me to speak out in class...and to be the role model for these younger students. That really helped...that really helped pave the way for me to do well in that situation.

The level of attentiveness from faculty and staff provides a collegiate atmosphere that fosters growth and self-discovery. Although an adult, married and working at the time she attended, Amber spoke of the personal growth she experienced while a student at Verrazano.

I have grown and you learn so much while you are here. The professors are able to share personal experiences with you. It helps mold you and it was a great start for me and I am very fortunate.

Ben not only benefited from his faculty associations, but as a student ambassador, he was provided the opportunity to interact with the president of the institution as well. These interactions made an impression on Ben giving him individuals to look up to and to model their behaviors.

It's about a determination, consistence. Work hard, study hard, discipline. I remember when we were around people like Dr. [former president]...I remember that he came and spent some time with the Ambassadors. He's no longer here. It was beneficial at that time to me and he came and spent some time with us. And I remember one day, we went to a dinner and he was the president of the school and he was the one driving the bus for us. And that really impressed me. And I remember too the first day of school when they would call all of the ambassadors to come and be introduced. He included everybody from the janitors all the way to the teachers. That really showed me the character of him at that time... how he included everybody. So overall, the leadership...the way they conducted themselves...the way Verrazano is...the teachers. It rubbed off on me and it showed me I could be a good leader in the city too...

Whereas Ben serves as an example of how others inspired his own behaviors, some alumni rely upon deeply held spiritual guidance to illustrate their thoughts. Drawing upon his Christian faith, Matthew used his beliefs as a means of illustrating the importance he feels in staying connected to Verrazano. In hopes to encourage others, he suggested alumni take the opportunity to get reconnected and involved with the institution. He explained how he values the connections he has made and how he feels he receives a blessing from these

associations. Matthew thinks others would enjoy the same, if they would connect back to the institution.

One of the things that I would want to share with anyone that sees these notes or the results of this interview is...that I just want to encourage you wherever you went to college after school...because most people will plan to go to reunions or homecomings at their high schools...If there is a reunion at your college or if there is a homecoming, I would encourage you to just go. You will be blessed even if you don't think you will. And just realize that God has a plan for all of us and that...that there may be a silver lining blessing that you don't even know about. And when you get in touch with the place you that spent two or four years and just be willing to help and serve. It has been an extreme benefit for me for the last two and a half to three years since I have been involved with the alumni...I have met a lot of people and my encouragement is for people to get involved to contact ...obviously I am not certain who the person is now to contact, Grace's assistant, I believe. And ask them how can I help and get involved? You just get involved and you will be blessed.

Professionals. The professionals interviewed also draw from personal beliefs and values to guide their actions and interactions with peers and students. For some, leaving a high profile career in professional sports to work in education might be perceived as devastating. Not for Madeline. Citing the community college as the absolute "best place" for her, she uses her past experiences and a strong sense of passion and dedication to guide Verrazano's student division. In describing her personal views, Madeline also shares that she

wants other like-minded individuals working alongside her and describes the conscious approach she takes when hiring staff to work with students.

I think I am a person that has a passion for helping no matter if it is at the community college or at the kennel...or someone's children...I just have a passion for helping. And so...this is where I landed [pause]....and this is probably the best place I could have landed...I think how we foster it and how we carry it out is in the people that we hire that are more like us. He [former president] hired me because of me and my attitude. Now...my responsibility and my personality and how I deal with situations and my leadership style dictate that I hire pretty much the same type of people. I want the people in student services to have the same passion I have for helping students. And if you don't have it, and I say this over and right across the board...If you don't have it...we don't need you in student services. And if you have it when you start...you have to have it...because after the day after day after day...because you know... these are positions that deal with stressful situations day in and day out, day in and day out....dealing with students in crisis. Our students need us....Our students are so needy and require extra time. And if you have it and you are losing it, we need to move you somewhere. Not out of the college, but somewhere where you don't have that stress all the time. And um...some people in the college have it; we have to keep the fires burning and sometimes that is the challenge - keep the fires burning to keep the attitudes really positive. When I hire people...I want to hire people with a positive attitude is the first thing....I can teach anyone...I can teach anyone how to do a job, but I can't teach positive attitude. You know? I can't teach a good strong work ethic, but I

can teach them how to do it. So...those are the kind of people....And so I think that is what fosters “it” throughout the college. It has to come from the top; if I set an example for people that I am a positive, I want to be a positive role model for my staff and the students that come into me on how to deal with certain situations. You know? The glass is not half empty, but half full and how to deal with a faculty member when they are having issues in the classroom. And hopefully those kinds of situations that are very positive again for students makes them then ...makes them want to come back and they learn that it is a positive experience for them....and they want to create those same positive experiences...and it is a domino effect I think. Hopefully some of the students that I have helped along the way will want to come back as alumni and want to be a part, I know we have a young man working with us right now that had no intentions of ever working in student services and he started part-time. His mom is working in the President’s office. And he now wants to go into student services.

Similarly, Emma draws upon the teachings she received as a child; and her strong Christian faith serves to guide her as she works to advise and register Verrazano’s students.

I think it’s just something within me....it was something I was raised with. I told you I was a Christian but even when I wasn’t, I was still that person...I think it was the way I was raised...I was raised to give 100 percent, even if I was cleaning floors....whatever I did. I was raised to give 100 percent. My mom and dad are still living and my dad gets upset with me sometimes because I put so much into my work. I work so much and he says you need to take a lunch.... You need to take some time off [laughing].

You know and I have worked here for 13 years...and I have never, ever been late.

And that's how committed I am...I love it here.

Student experiences. For the alumni participants, the interviews served as a time to reflect upon their experiences and their time spent as students. Three major areas of the student experiences element surfaced during analysis of the data to include learning, support, and activities. These three areas of the relational influences theme serve as major factors instrumental to the development of the alumni-institutional relationship.

Learning. A vast majority of the alumni participants were non-traditional students when they first began pursuit of their degrees at Verrazano. Out in the working world for a number of years, they valued the opportunity to obtain a degree. All alumni, both traditional and non-traditional, conveyed sincere gratitude for the education they received. Not wanting to relocate with his employer and taking a severance package, Victor set out on an educational journey that led him to obtain multiple degrees, thereby enhancing his experiences at Verrazano.

As for my first semester here at Verrazano Community College... I got bitten by the academic education bug and fell in love with the school and the process. And I decided that if I can do this, I can do more. Since the applied science degree did not really transfer...once I completed that...I decided to take extra courses that would transfer, so that I could continue on with my education. So I went back here for another year and got two more degrees, and...one in business...one was an associate of arts in business and the other, an associate of arts in communication.

Also a non-traditional student at the time of her pursuit of her degree, Amanda recalls her learning experiences as an exciting time. Challenged by her faculty, she took classes she had previously thought herself unable to achieve and once an employee at Verrazano, she took as many classes as she was able to fit into her schedule.

Oh, it was exhausting but exciting because I learned a lot, I learned a lot, a lot. It was fun, it was definitely fun and so it wasn't a chore you know even... I am not a math person, not at all. But...when I went for my bachelor's, I had not taken my statistics or my pre-calculus or any of that and so I took it here at Verrazano. The first time I was a student, but I was not an employee, but when I became an employee and a student, I took whatever I could online because it was convenient. But when I took math, I needed to be with somebody trying to do all I could to get it to soak in my head. I remember having a problem and I stopped in to see my instructor and I found a math instructor that worked for me, and I kept her all through my math courses. And she said, 'Oh you work here? And I said I do, but I never wanted any kind of special treatment. I didn't want that. I just wanted to be any other student and I never felt that. I wasn't treated any special and the instructor was just awesome. I probably needed more help than some of the younger students, but the care that she gave me made me want to take some of those harder classes here because I knew I would be able to do them with help.

Many of the non-traditional alumni participants juggled working full-time jobs and their academic pursuits simultaneously. With little time to spare, the learning experience and commitment of faculty made lasting impressions that were readily recalled during the

interviews. In terms of describing this, Amber was quick to point out the incredible attentiveness afforded students.

I loved it. I went at night and it was accommodating to my schedule because I had the Monday through Friday nine to five work schedule. The college provided a variety of courses on both campuses, but primarily my classes were on the North Campus... There was one class and I even went to get help from a student tutor and they were overwhelmingly helpful and I ended up going back to get help even though I was doing well in my other classes and it was no additional cost; it was just because I was a student there... My teachers were a good influence they were helpful and I just really enjoyed working with them. You could see a passion in them. I always saw a passion in them over and beyond what they taught.

For Carter, a traditional student at the time he attended Verrazano, the learning experiences he had propelled him on a trajectory of learning that took him all the way to law school. Self-identified as being less than a stellar student during high school and arriving at Verrazano with a dreadful grade point average, Carter found his second chance. Through new ways of acquiring knowledge that better suited his personality and learning styles, Carter discovered he wasn't such a bad student after all.

The transfer program [two year program enabling students to transfer credits to major universities] was amazing and I attribute everything I have now to that. Because if they did not have that program set up... and I had heard they did away with it... but that gave a kid like me the opportunity... for those who get behind the ball on the importance of college and they don't do well and mess up, and end up going down a

different path to give them a second chance. Because people learn at different levels and people want things at different times in their lives. For me it was like a way to test the waters and see that I can do this. And are you going to do this here or do this at [named university]? And I went there with a lot of money in my pocket.

For Drew, achieving immediate success from the very first semester set him on a course of newfound personal self-confidence and academic excellence.

I would say my most memorable experience at Verrazano was when I got my very first grade for my very first semester and I got a 4.0. And I knew that I've really tried and that it had clicked and that I felt successful. This was the very first time I had ever felt academically successful. And I felt hopeful that that was...you know, that this was what I was going to be able to do from that point forward, and that really....it really solidified the fact that I had made a good choice...coming here to Verrazano, you know, coming to a community college. And um... it gave me hope that I could actually have a real career right off from the start with the community college.

Oh...I...let me think, um, I just...I just really enjoyed my experience there because in the little...well, I guess I shouldn't say little but, uh...in the amount of, of taking some sort of initiative to want to be involved. I mean, I was really able to rock it and go to you know the upper level of ...the upper echelon of students that are incredibly involved. Um, for instance I was in Phi Theta Kappa, I was the President of the Ambassadors and, working directly with [former president of the college]. They only have two graduation marshals every year...every graduation and you have to be specifically picked to do that.

Support. The classroom learning experiences are only one component of the students' experiences. With limited exposure to a community college or any institution of higher learning prior to their enrollment at Verrazano, alumni found devoted members of the faculty and staff willing to navigate them through unfamiliar processes. Marginalized by his immigrant status and unaware of the financial assistance available, Ben found help when he most needed it. This attentiveness he received has in turn led him to form a strong devotion to the institution.

I was a way behind in school because of a lack of money and financial issues. And uh I did not understand the whole financial process so they advised me to see a financial advisor. And I went to talk to her at the North Campus and uh she spent a whole hour working with me, showing me the whole...every aspect of the programs they had. And uh so when you see all this kind of help, this kind of system, this kind of care all around you...you have to...I don't have a worry about that...I believe...I believe in their vision and um I'm glad to see the um the students investing in Verrazano because they are making an impact with that kind of information they are getting. And education is the key of that information and they do a great job about it and I have nothing contrary to say about Verrazano... I wish them the best. I hope they can help other people the way that they helped me.

Drew touts the benefits of the community college and speaks specifically about the tremendous financial support he had while a student. His support at Verrazano consisted of receiving multiple scholarships. Because of the support Drew received as a student, he recognizes the value of Verrazano's college foundation.

So I would just like to say something ... this is something I just thought about ...there is a significant benefit of having gone to Verrazano...well, two things actually. As I right now think about it. The difference...like at Verrazano, I got so many scholarships and so many grants. And some of that is just being where I was at the time financially, but at Verrazano concerning scholarships specifically... I got ... I think four or five scholarships ... I got a *brand new* scholarship while I was there. And I mean ... I haven't even gotten one at [named university], not one. And that is a real testament to Rebecca and her team... and what the foundation does...

For Perry, Verrazano was not his first exposure to postsecondary education. Having started at multiple colleges, but yet never completing a degree, he says he finally found a place that cared about him as well as cared about educating him. Now an employee at Verrazano, Perry has taken an active leadership role in the employee giving campaign and he actively participates in alumni activities as his schedule allows.

Oh very, they were the first I mean, I will say it on tape they were the first school that gave a damn about Perry. When I sat down with Emma one of the things she slid across the table was a scholarship application. That was back in the pen and paper days, and I looked at her and I was like this is never going to happen. She was like just fill it out for me. Well you can't tell Emma no either...right? And so I'm like okay. I said I'll fill it out and I probably forgot about it, because I just knew it was not going to happen. Not long after that Katrina [Hurricane Katrina that occurred in 2005] happened and gas went up and our budget went plunk. And I didn't think I was going to be able to finish and so I was not happy because I wanted to finish this time.

You know, finish what I started. I wanted to finish and low and behold in the mail, I received a letter. ‘Congratulations you have been awarded a \$500.00 scholarship.’

[named person] signed it.

Activities. Along with their personal learning and the individual attention they received, participating in supplementary activities was another point of discussion for alumni when reflecting on their days as students. The vast majority of the alumni interviewed for this study were heavily involved in extracurricular activities as Verrazano students. Ambassadors, athletes, academic and enrichments clubs, and student government association are just a few of the ways these individuals were engaged as students. Students like Victor took advantage of the many programs afforded students at Verrazano.

I attended ah...the sporting events. Of course I was too old to actually participate, though I wanted to but... I attended sporting events that they had on campus - basketball games and soccer games. After my first year here, I applied to be a Student Ambassador with the Foundation here. And I began working with them for my last year in the Applied Science program after my last year and I decided to come back. I asked them if I could continue to be an Ambassador. For the first time they have ever had someone come back for a second year as a Student Ambassador and they agreed to it. And so I have been a Student Ambassador for two years here at Verrazano Community College. I have been inducted into Phi Beta Kappa which is a national honor society for community colleges. I am a part of the 3M program which is the...Male Minority Mentoring program

For Sophie, she feels these experiences enhanced her academic success and she hopes these experiences will aid her as she builds a professional career.

Like I have said, I think that my experience here is um... it tops the chart. Because a lot of that I owe to myself for going out and getting it but a lot of it I owe to them for being so welcoming and supportive too. Um, so how would I rate it? I mean I would just... over the moon [laughs]. Um, and I am going to be over the moon next Friday too when it's all done... [laughs] but um you know, every single one of those experiences brought something different. It helped me out...um it helped me academically; um it helped me personally, um and professionally. I think you know getting involved in your school, be it here or at the university- wherever you are, it is the best thing you can do to create a well-rounded person. To.... create...what I am trying to say? It's not really balanced, but really to prepare yourself not only academically...you know... going to school is not always just about a grade point average and I learned that.

Connections. Personal connections are the cornerstone of the alumni-community college relationship. Personal relationships are formed through experiences that are shared with the alumni and professionals. The degree to which alumni are involved beyond graduation serves to either extend or terminate the relational exchange, and is largely dependent upon the personal relationships formed during their time as students.

Relationships. Overwhelmingly personal relationships are by far the richest influencers of the alumni-institutional relationship formation. Were these personal associations underdeveloped and not allowed to mature past the student-institution stage, the

alumni-institutional relationship would likely be nonexistent. When asked about their experiences and the reasons they wanted to stay connected to the college, all alumni associated their experiences to particular individuals who had supported them during their educational journey. Citing the support they felt they received, the alumni stated they wanted to help others as they had been helped. Likewise, the professionals see their roles in helping students as “their calling.”

Personal connections. The personal connections of the participants act as conduits translating engaged students into committed alumni. Instructors, college leadership, and peers serve to humanize the alumni-institution connection. Linking students to instructors, instructors to alumni, and alumni to the institution, the relationship extends beyond graduation. With the institution now in its 56th year, Verrazano’s alumni are now positioned within their careers to be great influencers and even to hire graduates. As Jay points out, Verrazano’s alumni are opening doors and connecting other alumni to employment, and in turn, employers to the alumni and the institution, and finally the alumni back to the college.

It’s a system that almost feeds itself in some industries. So a student graduated in the ‘90s and goes to work for [named company]. They have been doing it for 15 years...well so now they are project managers and if something comes open, then they send a job to us and we post it. So we are constantly going into new industries, new employers who haven’t heard about us. There is a lot of work on the front side; resume workshops, you know, things that aren’t taught in class. These are things that we sort of do outside of class. We will run workshops on resumes and you would be amazed at how bad the resumes are. Um... you know, if they are not given any direction on how

to produce them...to do those. We do interview workshops where we put them in front of people that they have never met – our vice president of instruction and [name] who is a dean....they will interview the students and give them and us feedback.

For Emma, who identifies as being naturally drawn to helping others, working with students to bolster their confidence and getting them through difficult times is a part of the student-employee relationship she values most.

I don't....well, I have actually had some come back. I don't want this to sound like I am bragging...I mean you're asking me these questions.... and I don't like to do that, but I will see people that come in um...and they don't even have the self-confidence to even look me in the eye and my heart goes out people like that. You know, I remember something you provided that this might be something that might bring tears and this might be it...[laughing]. But I see this and my heart goes out to these people...I am the kind of person that sees that and I reach out to help them. I am kind of the representative in the customer service kind of way to help them. And I have had them come back and say, 'Miss Emma, if it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have graduated.' They tell me that they would not have graduated without me. They come in to take the placement tests....I had one girl was crying and she was walking away. And I went and got her and sat down and talked with her. And she said, 'I just can't do it!' and I said, 'But oh yes you can!' And I talked to her and encouraged her and when she graduated she said, 'If it weren't for you...' and you know...I was doing what for me comes naturally. It shouldn't be...well, you know I feel like if you don't have it in your heart, if you don't have that compassion, then a customer service workshop can't teach

you that.. And I have found that these customer service workshops are not at all what they seem to always be or are supposed to be. If you do not have compassion, it is not something that can be taught. I had this young man....and he came in....in high school, he was probably considered a nerd, very unpopular... then come in and I worked with him. And when he got ready to graduate, he brought me a card. And he came in recently and he has since graduated from [local university] and he is now teaching.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (White Paper, 2006), the nation's community colleges educate and train 80 percent of all first responders and 60 percent of all health-care professionals. During his interview, Perry discusses this and multiple other ways Verrazano alumni directly impact the quality of their community.

Look, like what grandma said - don't ever forget where you come from. We have fully staffed the medical profession here in Seaport, with the nurses, stenographers, radiographers, EMTs [emergency medical technicians], cops. When you're in a wreck, think, think about this...when you're in a wreck, the cops and fire departments show up, trained here. The guys that are going to fix your car, trained here. The folks at the hospital that are going to tend to you, trained here. Um there's a reason I think they put the word "community" in community college and that, that doesn't...I don't think ever really ends....really.

Drew examines the impact too as he uses the analogy of "tentacles" as a means of describing the ways alumni are infused into the community. He jokingly illustrates how he supposes his Verrazano sticker will help him should he be stopped for driving too fast.

You know how lots of people have that police sticker there on the back of their car? And I'm like, I have my Verrazano sticker on the back of my car because I think that most likely that police officer that may stop me has probably received training at Verrazano. And he is proud of the fact that he has gone to the community college...so yeah...there are just these incredible tentacles all over where we impact.

Aside from the broader context of the relational connections he has within the community, Dr. Fitzgerald considers the relational perspective on a more personal level as he shares his own experiences as a community college student and the ways he maintains close relationships with his alma mater faculty.

I think what connects me is that they connect to me constantly. [named college] Community College for example, I hear from the professors, now I graduated from there in 1968. That is a long time ago. I still get a letter from [named retired faculty] who was in the business department and one of my math instructors. They follow my career and they keep in touch with me. When I took this job here at Verrazano, I was interviewed and was in the lead story in an alumni publication as well as being nominated for alumni of the year for the University of College Systems. So it is that kind of thing. So even though I have two scholarships - one there and one in West Virginia at a college I started, it is that constant contact. Knowing that I am going to open up that email from [named college] and it is going to be interesting information. Something about the school and those that went there that keeps the connection. You know I can go back to 1968 and find out who died and who got married and who has grandchildren and those kinds of things....It is interesting that we are talking about

what is important. What really is important? What is important is the personal contact. It really, often times, is not so much about the school... maybe people feel differently than I do. My memories of [named college] are absolutely connected to the people that I met there – the instructors. There are a few folks that I remember and have been life-long friends with some of the students. The whole thing is about personal contact. It is not about the building...

Like family and friends. Just as Dr. Fitzgerald describes, all of the alumni and professionals interviewed have formed close-knit relationships through their association with Verrazano. Most participants likened the connections to that of familial relationships or of close friendships. Victor declares his strong love for the institution and indeed views the relationships he has made as being comparable to a family. He openly discusses a challenging time and speaks to the support he felt he received during this particular instance.

It has been wonderful, it has been absolutely wonderful. I love Verrazano Community College; they can't get rid of me [laughing]. I keep coming back and finding stuff to do. Anything that I can do to help out and be a part of it... it is like a big family. I think they would be right up there, I would put the relationships I have with the staff and faculty of Verrazano Community College are right up there with the relationships that I have with my family members and close friends that I have had for years and years and years. There are people on campus that I know that like I said I can walk into their office at any time of the day ...and unless they are completely swamped they will take some time to sit down and talk with me about whatever it is that I need to talk about. And you know...they are there and they are sincere about it. Um...ah...I had a

situation...toward... I think it was last semester maybe a little earlier than last semester where I became a little disheartened about graduating and what am I going to do. Am I going to get into another school and everything? And...is this just a facade...is...is it...Am I as good as everybody says I am? 'Cause you get people who patronize you and are always telling me how great you are...and part of me says... 'Are they just saying this because they get paid to say this?' ...And I walked into the head of the 3M [Male Minority Mentoring] program...Travis' office...and I just lost it...I just lost it.. And he was there and he said I am going to make some phone calls to get things on track for you to do what you need to do and he was right there for me. I don't think there is anyone outside the college that I could have gone to and explained and they would have understood what I was going through. But Travis, he completely understood... You know...they are my family...they are.

Equally as passionate about her experiences, Sophie says she has felt tremendous encouragement through her time at Verrazano. Speaking about the degree to which she felt supported, Sophie too uses the familial correlation to describe her experiences.

I feel like all of these people that I have met along the way they are my family, they are my Verrazano family and um so while it's not you know the traditional family dynamic, I feel like these people um they're here to see me succeed, they're here to see me do well and they'll do everything that's in their power they can do along the way to help me get to where I want to be. Um, so I see I do, I care about all of these people just as much as I care about my own people... my...my own family. I think it can be kind of a similar; you have your professional family and have your '*family family*.'

A few of the professionals interviewed identified their roles as being that of a “mother” to their students. Emma believes mothering is part of her calling and she takes great care to assist students. Without fail, Emma’s name surfaced among the alumni and professionals as someone who goes to great lengths to support the students. Having students succeed brings her great joy and all she desires in return is to witness their success firsthand.

I...I promote what I give in a relationship...and I want honesty, I want um...well... I am a mother ...I mother my husband, I mother my son, I mother my grandson, I mothered my dog until he passed away...I mother these students and I really don’t expect anything in return, to be honest, except for to see them come to school and for them to do well.

Once Drew became an ambassador, he likened his experience with the staff in the Foundation as that of being one of their children. For Drew, this degree of caring and encouragement helped him to stay focused on his studies.

So, Phi Theta Kappa most especially, well, both of them are special to me I mean Rebecca and Grace say, and everyone in the office, you know that they...we’re like their children when you become an ambassador, you’re family and so, you know they’re making sure of ‘how are your grades, what’s going on?’ And you know that what’s ... they’re always checking on me, making sure if they’re okay and really care about to ... you know academically [they] want you to achieve your goals. So, it’ll help you stay focused for sure.

For Rebecca, she sees students developing lasting relationships, particularly for the students in programs such as the associate degree nursing. These students are bound to each other by

virtue of enduring long clinical shifts together at area healthcare facilities - all while being academically challenged with their studies. As opposed to other community college students who enter, leave, and re-enroll, once these students receive a coveted spot in these programs, they work tirelessly to maintain their enrollment status and grades.

I think we have different things in common. For instance, the nursing program... they go through blood, sweat, and tears together. And in that way they are the same thing as a family. It is the same thing for people that endure things together... What people have in common is what people gravitate towards... we can't pick and choose family, but people pick and choose their majors...

The fostering of the familial connection is not solely held for alumni. The professionals expressed not only a deep connection to the students, but all feel strongly supported by their peers. For Lee, the feeling of family extends to her peers where she says they all pull together in times of need.

Very much so, I think we support each other. And when we know a student is dealing with something catastrophic in their lives... we try to support them and I know as far as faculty and staff, we *are like* a family and we all pull for one another and work together when something is going on.

Involvement. Just as involvement in activities outside the classroom appears to elevate the overall student experience, participating in activities as alumni reconnects the graduates to the college. The alumni who were interviewed stressed their desires to partner with the college's leadership in efforts to determine how best to maintain connection to alumni. Because they already realize the value of the alumni-institution connection and are benefitting

from this relationship, they express their desire to see the program grow and say they want to be a part of building and envisioning ways to get others more involved.

Alumni participation. Initially re-engaging alumni through the college's 50th anniversary celebration, Grace, Verrazano's director of annual programs, has set about to build programs that would serve the current students while engaging alumni. The alumni relations office has hosted various special events to encourage graduates to return to campus such as a concert series down on the river. Additionally, efforts have been successful in getting alumni to give back monetarily with the alumni creating a special Verrazano alumni scholarship fund. Though the program has by all accounts been positively received, the alumni interviewed say their greatest barrier to being more involved is time. Busy with additional family, work, advanced studies, and responsibilities, several of the alumni admit their involvement is limited, while others, like Matthew make time to reconnect.

Matthew was currently serving as the alumni association president at the time of our interview. He says he gives back to the institution financially. Matthew has also served as a volunteer at various college and alumni functions, most notably serving as a homecoming speaker. Drawn initially back to the institution through the athletics program, Matthew enjoys the camaraderie of being with other alumni as well as the faculty, staff, and students of Verrazano.

We did...ah...last year we also did one of the Friday night concert series and we sold tickets. And my daughter was able to come and my girlfriend did too. And I tell you what...it was busy for a long time... But...yeah that...so um let me think, let me see what else comes to mind. I guess...yes mainly the homecoming events and just being a

part of that. And then the last two years, I have been a speaker at half time at homecoming where I recognized the winner of the homecoming banner and I was just acknowledging and recognizing the alumni.

A seat at the Verrazano family table. For many of the alumni interviewed, having an opportunity to be able to share their views in terms of future alumni program development would be welcomed. Though they realize the college has many pressing initiatives, several of the alumni stated they desired to be involved in ways to provide input in order to help grow the alumni program, to engage past and future graduates, and to assist the college. While all alumni speak highly of the former and current administration, Drew stated he and other alumni sometimes felt they were being placated by the former administration when issues were brought to their attention. When Drew was discussing marginalized student populations, I inquired as to why he had not discussed his observations with college leaders. In doing so, he had this to say.

I would say that probably no. But that's the state of the day... you know, because I haven't tried you know, recently. So I know when [former president] was there, our contact was...there were so many layers between us and any of the decision makers that anything you said was so filtered that it was like...We're happy. That's all they wanted to know. [laughs] We're connected, we're happy...that's really all they wanted to know, you know? My perception was that they [decision makers/leaders] play to the stigma and really don't care and think community college alumni really do not matter...

As vice president of student services, Madeline sees the college's role as being welcoming. She views the alumni as having a "place at the table" and her personal desire is to determine more ways for graduates to be connected back to the institution.

I think the obligation is to be open and to be welcoming and to be engaging for them, for alumni to continue to have a place at the table. They are part of the family...they will always be a part of the family; there is always room...for more and more...for them to come back to see us.

Competition for time. The greatest obstacle expressed by many of the alumni is the treasured resource of time. Juggling families, work, community, and civic commitments, and for some, advanced studies, there is little time left to attend alumni activities. Amber, a member of the alumni association, serves as a prime example of someone whose time is limited. A relatively new mother with a demanding career and living an hour away from Seaport, she expressed her desires to be more involved, but her days and evenings are filled with other responsibilities.

Not as much as I probably should be. I am part of the alumni association, but I just don't really get involved. And in fact, I live an hour away. When I come to Seaport during the week for work, I really don't want to come back afterwards. Plus, I have my daughter.

Ben struggled to stay involved with the alumni association while working shift work at a local industry. Now working day shift, he is able to devote more time to the alumni association.

When I graduated, I tried to participate. I worked night shift and because of my schedule, it was a little hard for me to go to work at night and then travel in the

morning. It was a little hard. Whenever they host things, have some things that I can get to, I go. I just wish I could get involved more, but I do thank the lady named Grace for always letting me know about what's going on...

Similarly, at the time of our interview, Sophie was juggling completing her degree, serving in various capacities on campus, maintaining a 4.0 grade point average, and working in the restaurant industry full-time. Though she has volunteered for some of the activities sponsored by the alumni association, she stated she struggles to find time to participate.

I helped with the concert series downtown... I went and helped to raise money for scholarships. And I came back and helped with the Gift of Education luncheon this year....that was not necessarily an alumni activity. But, we had a record...a record setting year for money raised. That was amazing. And...um, that is really about all I have done with the alumni association thus far. But, I just haven't had the time to...I have been so busy with the other things on campus. I am a part of the alumni association...I stay connected with them through Grace, but unfortunately have not been able to do a whole lot with them. The Student Government Association took up so much of my time plus I was a full-time student, plus I was working. So, I have done a few activities with them and now that things have calmed down a little bit for the summer...I plan to stay connected.

Is altruism dead? While none can argue understanding the challenges of today's complexities in managing time as well as the busyness of people's lives, Rebecca wonders about the current philanthropic state of our country. A life-long devoted volunteer herself, she sees the problem encompassing many organizations.

This is just what is happening. People have gotten so busy in the last ten years just trying to get ahead of themselves that the altruistic state of our country has fallen off. And I don't think it is just Verrazano Community College alumni. I see it in a lot of volunteer organizations, churches, and other types of organizations. We used to have to beat the volunteers away to do things and I think people have gotten so busy...working and trying to make it for themselves. The altruistic things in life have just taken a back seat.

Communication. Communication emerges as a crucial element to the development of the alumni-institutional relationship. The alumni office must intentionally and creatively use resources to connect to the alumni and greater campus community given resources of money and time are limited. When Grace accepted her initial position with the Foundation, she quickly realized communication would be essential. Additional information would need to be shared with alumni in order to make the program successful. With a background and education in communication and journalism, she utilized her skills to begin a newsletter.

And so I applied for this job...well, the job I applied for at the time was special events. And so when I entered this role, one of the skill sets I had was, um, because of my background in writing and graphic arts...was producing publications. So I started a newsletter here. We didn't have one before. I tried to really work with our web page. So for me, donor relations actually became like public relations.

Along with the newsletter, Grace routinely sends out email notifications to the alumni group she has developed. This mode of communication has served to reconnect Carter to the institution where he wants to become involved and volunteer his time.

I get emails and notifications, but I just got reconnected with the college after ten years. I have been out of the area for a while now. I have [named local university] wanting money and I don't have any money yet, but I am more than willing to give some of my time.

The advent of social media in recent years has produced tools such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These applications have become widely used serving an indispensable role in the overall marketing of programs like alumni relations. For alumni like Drew, though he maintains close ties to several of the college's alumni and professionals, social media serves as his main source of published information for staying informed about the college.

I would say social media was probably...would probably be the biggest thing for me. Just to follow what's going on at the college. I have a classmate who is in the master's program here [local university] with me who is a professional back there [at Verrazano]. So I'm involved in some things and they ask me for...sometimes...how I think about something pertaining to the alumni...what do I think about the things that they are doing. Clark is one of them...he's the recruiter there. He's a friend of mine from when I was there. I knew him through Grace. So I would probably say the vast majority of things are through social media and through my personal contacts there.

Realizing no one method will suffice, Sophie suggests a multi-channel marketing approach whereby various electronic, hard copy, and face-to-face exchanges are occurring as a means of recruiting new alumni to reconnect. Still, she finds the newsletter invaluable to her and sees value in getting the publication out to other graduates.

I think emails, newsletters, hosting different...um different little events, meet and greets, if you will. You know not everybody is going to be able to come to everything. You do...you continue to um put the options out there and people will come eventually when they can. I think that half the battle is just keeping in touch with people. Continuing to let them know that you are out there and um that you are still there and I think that's you know the newsletter. I think Grace does a great job with it. I think that...I think the newsletter is very beneficial because people see other people that they know...And everyone reads their email.

Future. Dr. Fitzgerald considered himself still new to the campus community and as such had spent his first several months learning the campus. At the time of our interview, he was making preparations to turn his attention to the advancement area of the college. He recently named Rebecca to a new role as vice president of institutional advancement. At the time of the interviews, Dr. Fitzgerald was working with her team to determine next steps in terms of developing the division. As president of the college, he realizes his role is monumental in the progression of the alumni relations program.

I think the college has to have a vision of how they would like to work with the alumni right now though I don't think we have that. It has not been one of the things that had my full attention. I am not sure if we sat down and talked about what that vision might be...how do we want to relate to our alumni and how do we want them to relate to us, what are the expectations for strong alumni programs and what are the benefits to being an alumni? We have not really wrestled with that...For me, it would be to provide some leadership and again I have not had that on the agenda, but now I have got to do

that. You come into a school this large and you look around and see what has to be done...this and this and this and the alumni. And it was not one of the things on my list, but is going to have to be on the agenda soon. I can provide the leadership to make that happen. If you do not put it out there and set the tone and the pace for the development of alumni relations, it will happen, but I think it will take longer. As president it is my job to assess those things that will make a difference and I think cultivating alumni relations will make a difference to the community. There is a phenomenal, a phenomenal opportunity for alumni. You walk down the street and talk to the people of a college town...the community loves the college, they think it is fantastic. The programs we have, and the people we have, the people we are putting to work, they just love it. So we have some opportunities...

There are hundreds of Verrazano alumni receiving the newsletter. However, the numbers of individuals actually participating in alumni events and returning to campus are, in the minds of Rebecca, minimal. For her, one of the immediate goals of her division is to have alumni engaged throughout campus.

I think we should have them coming back on our advisory boards. I think we should have alumni on the board of trustees and our foundation board (which they will be)...To have alumni from each program on every advisory board, that is a good start; we have fifty programs so that is fifty alumni and that is more than we have engaged right now and that would be a start.

Networking. From her perspective as the vice president of student services, Madeline envisions engaging first year graduates as a means of getting students enrolled with the alumni

association. Once they join, Madeline feels the value of providing alumni and students opportunities to network with each other will serve to link them back to the college and to each other.

My first thought would be, is that if we had students that are members of alumni that are in their first year of having graduated... That they are the ones that are able to help these students to become members and to become active members. I know Drew has helped Grace a lot. I think probably....one of the big advantages...you know...might be the networking... the networking part of the alumni....that is the first thing that comes to mind from the Alumni Association stand point. Because....We all know that that is not what you know, but who you know. So I would think networking would be a very strong element. Networking, the camaraderie you know, networking with friends...networking with professionals....Networking creates opportunities...I think that is it. The key is networking.

Timing the engagement. All of the alumni who were interviewed expressed a strong desire to work with the institution to strengthen the alumni programming. All of these graduates think the program would be more successful should the college work to get alumni engaged much sooner, even while they are students. Ben says, “The problem with the alumni I feel like is connectivity. How to get them connected quickly before they leave and to stay connected to them after they leave.” During the interviews, several alumni shared their ideas of how the college might go about increasing the presence of the alumni program. Sophie suggests using existing student groups as a means to get students involved before they leave.

I would hope to see them as well as some of the other major student groups on campus get very active at the onset of the school year in the fall. When we're going to have orientation for new students... And I feel like instead of, in, in the catalog there is all this information about the different things you can be a part of, I want people to see at the very beginning here's what they... what they can look forward to – as alumni. Some things they can start from the beginning you know, the alumni association and getting involved in that. I would like to see them develop a way to be involved with the students from the very beginning. And I don't exactly know you know the best way to go about doing that...But, so that they know about the alumni association from the beginning, not towards the end of their time here. Because you know even when they do transfer to [local university] or wherever it is they decide to go, they're still going to be alumni of Verrazano.

Alongside the existing programs already established with student groups, Matthew would like to see an annual open house held on the college campus. He expressed his appreciation of the time he had come to a campus open house and what it meant to him to be able to interact with former instructors.

I think on an annual basis, the college should be opened up...and everybody that went here can come out and see...to allow the alumni to see what improvements have happened here at the college. To maybe see and to have and build fellowship between all the instructors to include those that have retired. And welcome students past and current. I came to an alumni thing one time and I think it was basically a tour and it was neat to see one of my retired instructors. I think he went on to another institution,

but it was great to see one of my former teachers...And so...one of the things I learned from my girlfriend...she teachers seven year olds all day, she is a second grade teacher, so she has got somewhere in the neighborhood of probably 250 you know, kids that she can see and some of them are as old as 26 years old now. But when they see her... you can tell that she was a very, very important person in their life and so all these former teachers that we all had...we look up to them...so having a way that you can get connected to them again...with them and see them. To get connected with them as you did back in the classroom...that is my suggestion.

Whatever means the college might use to involve students and alumni; Victor says it all begins with igniting a passion within each program that reaches out to the students so that they become and stay engaged.

So a lot of students that come to school don't finish. And because of that they lose that drive and they either drift away, think they can't do it, or there's no use in doing it...or somebody's is edging them to do it and then that person stops edging them...and they slip through the cracks. They just fall through the cracks. And I think that if the college and the alumni association grabs these people that have done it and made it, and are on with their lives, and bring them back and say, 'Tell us your story...what, what happened to you while you were there'...what you did here and how you made it afterwards and things like that. I think that should be a good goal and would give other people hope too...I believe and I think that it is harder with students that are not non-traditional...that are coming out of high school...they don't have that level of maturity...that are...they do not have that real world experience and they are just going

to class to go to class and to get that education and walk down that aisle and get their diploma at the end. At the end of two years, they go on to get a job or go to a four year institution. And that is the drawback to community college is that we don't have at community colleges...we only have that two years where as at the four-year institutions they have...have those four years, by the time they finish there, they have a bit more maturity and they can see beyond the paper that they are going to hang on the wall....to the markings on the walls and they start to develop those relationships. I think the staff and faculty here have a harder job because they have to do it in such a short period of time and they need to....and a lot of them do, that is how I got stuck here [laughs]. Is that they do reach out and they do let you know that it is important to have those relationships and to build those relationships and to be grounded somewhere. And I think there are more Victors out there...um...people out there that are just as passionate about their studies, about the programs that go on here at Verrazano Community College....I have seen them. The key is to getting them to continue that passion...um because sometimes passion dies out. You know...that it does not live as long as it should. And it needs to be rejuvenated along the way and that is where the alumni association comes in...getting them involved earlier on, um....getting involved with the student government, getting involved with the different clubs and organizations on campus. Having it [alumni association] broken down into departments and majors and programs that they have here because that's what is going to reach out and grab somebody. If someone from the marine tech or boat building program were to talk to say... a member of the alumni of the nursing program... they are not going to feel that

passionate as they would if they were to talk with a member of the alumni of the boat building program. So, I think that program specific alumni attractions will need to go into effect because that is what will continue that passion for that program and help that person stay involved. A lot of times when you talk with someone that is in a different program you are going to think well...I guess boat building must not have alumni because all I see are nurses and dental hygienists or business majors...and so all of the programs need to be represented in the alumni and all of them have to be involved.

Collectively, the alumni and professionals who were interviewed value the work that has already occurred in building the alumni relations program. Amanda regards the effort as a team approach where the dedication of the alumni, students, faculty, and staff should all come together to intensify the work of the alumni relations program.

What you believe in you will dedicate...what you believe in...you will dedicate your time and your effort, and your money. So, I think that we need to start at the very beginning and say, that this is your class...That this is your class of 2013 and make that connection. And carry it along and they are going to feel a part of it, and want to be a part of it, and not just going to classes and then go home. You are part of a team, a class, and you can always come back.

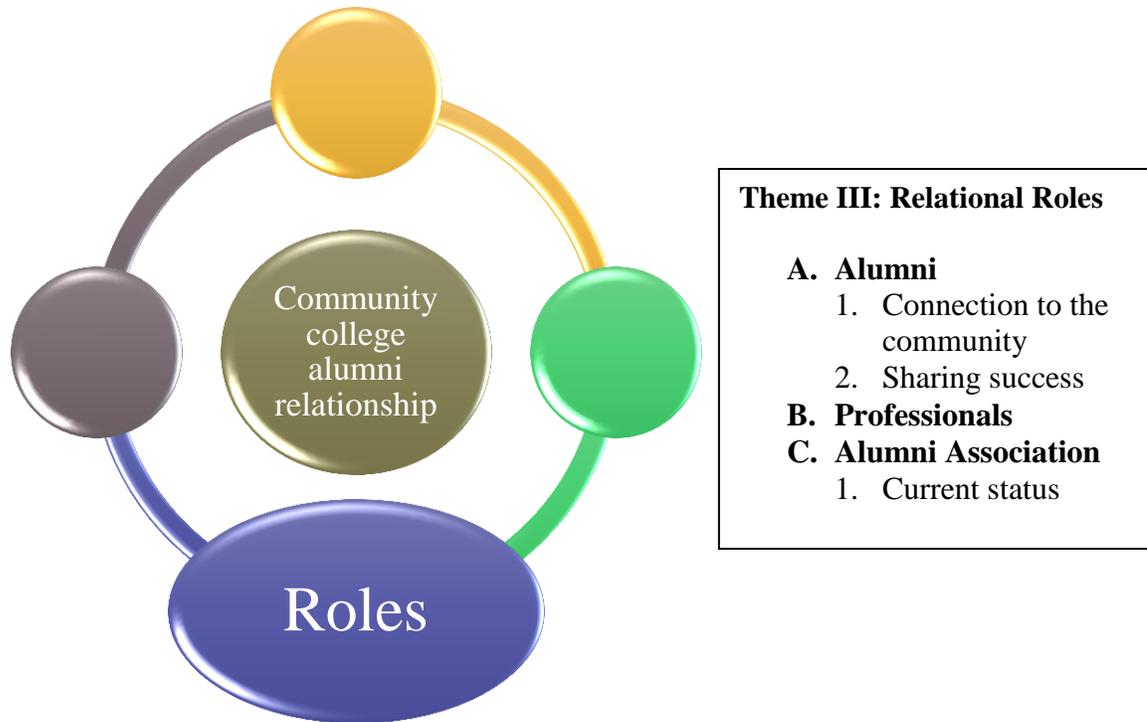


Figure 7 - Community College Alumni Relationship Relational Element III: Alumni Relationship Relational Roles

Relational Roles. The roles of alumni, professionals, and the institution intersect creating a continuum of exchanges that serve to strengthen the individuals, the relationship, and to reinforce the mission of the institution (see Figure 7). The faculty and staff of Verrazano support the students from entry to departure helping students to shape and achieve their educational goals. Institutionally, the organization’s systems and values guide the development and sustainment of the alumni-institutional relationship. The community college alumni live and work in their respective communities. The alumni participants interviewed for this study value their education and are interested in contributing to

determining ways to bolster the alumni-institution connection and consequently, positively impact their communities.

Alumni. Alumni of Verrazano number into the thousands. Employed in all sorts of businesses, industries, governmental, and public organizations, alumni symbolize to the community the role the institution plays in preparing graduates for employment or advanced education.

Connection to the community. Readily agreeable to sharing thoughts about the college, alumni such as Amber who works in the financial industry says she takes advantages of opportunities to discuss the college when asked about her educational background.

I have nothing but good things to say about Verrazano. If anyone asks about where I went to college and what I did, all I have to say is positive and I spread the word about our community college.

Using an analogy of an accident to describe the roles Verrazano alumni play in the scenario, Perry illustrates the multiple ways in which the alumni take the education learned to impact the community.

We have fully staffed the medical profession and doctors here in Seaport, with the nurses, stenography, radiographers, EMTs, cops. When you're in a wreck, think - think about this...When you're in a wreck, the cops and fire departments show up, trained here. The guys that are going to fix your car, trained here. The folks at the hospital that are going to tend to you, trained here. Um there's a reason I think they put the word "community" in community college and that, that doesn't...I don't think ever really ends....really.

Sharing success. With a 50 year history, Verrazano has graduated thousands of students, many of whom have gone on to build successful careers. The alumni and professionals value the personal success stories of graduates. Showcasing alumni and their accomplishments is perceived to be helpful to current students. Victor, an alumnus and contract employee at Verrazano, imagines an alumni day where graduates could come back to speak one-on-one with students.

A lot of people in the community have gone to Verrazano have opened their own businesses and started their careers. That is something that current students need to hear that kind of thing. So have alumni day where alumni come back and have a function where they speak to the students, you know...set up ah...booths in the cafeteria or somewhere on campus where they can ask them questions like...‘What struggles did you face when you left? And that type of thing.

The college’s recruiter Clark understands the value too in bringing alumni back to campus. An actual person to share his or her successes makes a more meaningful impact to future students.

Well, the alumni are people that we can pull experiences from. The alumni...they can share their success stories with everyone. We can utilize them as a resource. Of course, the Foundation is going to ask them for donations. They are going to ask them for support. But in my professional role here at the college, I think they are best used and would be more successful to bring new students in. If we’ve got a student who... and exactly, I can give you an example. There is a student that graduated from our one year auto body program...making six figures a year...and having that person talk about his experiences here and his ability to make a great life for himself

and his family. Well, that speaks volumes. I can talk until I am blue in the face, but when someone who has actually done it... is actually... talking to somebody or reading a letter that they wrote, it uh, it speaks volumes.

The roles of alumni are unique given the fact the institutional relationship first begins for these individuals as students. Shaped within the dynamic of the institutional-individual relationship, the roles for the alumni progress differently and are as distinctive as the individuals themselves. Once a struggling high school student, Carter found himself and academic direction at Verrazano. Now a successful attorney who returned to Seaport to practice, Carter wants to give back to the college and has been developing plans to work with the paralegal program.

I really think I could give back. I work with three paralegals every day and I know what they hate about the job and what they like about it. And so I know the realistic side of a paralegal in practice...and not even that, but I feel like people need to...you have a 4.0 but how do you put all that useless stuff that you have never used into practice in the courthouse. I think the school needs more practical applications...I have been talking to them about being a host and taking some of the paralegal interns from here, and me designing a program over the summer for a couple of months. I don't know whether it will scare them away or they might like it. It would be nice down the road if the opportunity arose that I could get involved in the community. I love the kids; I do think I have a lot of perspective and out of the box thinking from what every other Joe is going to tell you. I mean honestly it would be something that I would, I would like to teach and I would like to speak to kids. Even though I did not do

everything perfectly, but I think that I have an angle to try with these kids that they would be able to relate to.

With a roster of graduates spanning well over 50 years, alumni are serving in roles that connect current students to the external workforce. Assisting their companies by recruiting and hiring students, alumni routinely contact Jay to visit campus to recruit spring graduates.

...We have been at it this for 50 years so it has a reputation. Many of the students who graduated in the '90s are now in positions of hiring at the companies where they work. They call up, looking for new employees. It's a system that almost feeds itself in some industries. So a student graduated in the '90s and goes to work for [named company]. They have been doing it for 15 years...well so now they are project managers and if something comes open, then they send a job to us and we post it.

All of the participants discussed how they envision alumni being involved to the extent that they positively influence current and future students. Mentoring was a topic that was discussed considerably. Mentoring is perceived to be a pivotal way to engage alumni that would be beneficial to alumni, students, and the institution. An area where mentors are needed is the associate degree nursing program. With the vast majority of the students being female, Olivia, the program director, struggles to retain male students. She thinks the alumni are strongly enough connected to the institution that they would willingly assist.

I have looked at retention and the percentage, not the number, but the percentage for male drop outs from this program is higher. I thought that if a male that is doing well now and did well in the program, he...it would benefit having some kind of mentoring relationship. I know they would say 'sure' because I feel like there is that mutual you

help me out I will help you out kind of relationship. Not necessarily as intimate or as close as family or spouse or sibling relationship, but definitely mutual relationship.

Professionals. The employees of Verrazano make a significant impact on the students. As discussed earlier, Verrazano is known for its dedication to provide impeccable customer service. For Amanda, working at the college never occurred to her until she experienced firsthand the attention and care extended to the students. Serving as a student ambassador, Amanda was able to experience up close and personal the degree to which students are supported.

I definitely would not be working here not because this was never on my radar. I never thought that I wanted to work in education. I never considered working in education. I would definitely not be working here because it was the employees that work here that drew me wanting to work here, it was the employees that were smiling when I asked a question and went out of there way and were so helpful; that is what made me realize I need a change. And I thought, why not Verrazano?

This same level of attentiveness provided to current students is offered to the alumni of Verrazano. Occurring more frequently immediately following graduation, professional participants like Jay make themselves available to assist alumni and to serve as connectors and partners to the professional world.

As a department, I define it as being available, being acceptable whenever a graduate needs assistance in industry. So you know... the most interaction I have [with the alumni] is right after graduation with the students, helping them land that first job.

Then there is that is a smaller subset of folks (alumni) that will reach out as they are

looking for advice in changing an industry or just finding another job. I...ah...I had a student just the other day that reached out that had worked for [named company] for three years and they just hate the travel and they have reached out that needed assistance in a new job because they want to be at home more with his fiancé and wants something a little more family based. So you try to help them and steer them to another aspect of the industry that they studied to help them get a new job... So that's how I see my interaction – as a partner with the students.

Alumni association. The alumni association provides former students with an organized means of staying connected to the college. Chartered in 2008, Verrazano's Alumni Association was launched in celebration of the college's 50th Anniversary. During the official kick-off celebration, over 200 alumni and guests attended. A volunteer alumni advisory board oversees the activities of the association and there are presently over 1,400 members. According to the college's website and printed documents:

The mission of the Verrazano Community College Alumni Association is to form partnerships and strengthen relationships between the community, the College, and its alumni. Initiatives will be based on the Associations' core values of giving back through involvement, fellowship, and service. The Association will be a positive, goal-oriented steward for VCC, its mission, and goals.

Verrazano's Alumni Association serves to connect graduates back to the institution. Though most of the participants I interviewed stayed connected to the college immediately upon graduation, Matthew was drawn back to the organization due to his love of sports. He, along

with other key members, have used the alumni association as a vehicle to raise scholarship funding, and as a means of connecting graduates back to the institution.

Well...I think I mentioned it earlier...my love of sports and I love to participate, but um because Verrazano has a men's basketball team. That is how I got involved to essentially even come back out here. And so in doing that, I met Grace and not too long afterwards...she asked me if I would join the alumni board, which I did....After two years of being alumni president, I am not sure if I am still considered that or not since we are talking and changing things right now...we are considering doing things a little differently...so...but it was quite a privilege. And one of the things we did set as a goal when I came in two years was to fully fund our scholarship which we do now have the money in it. I can't take sole credit for that.... The other goal I had for the alumni association was to build our database so that anytime I meet anyone and go anywhere, I will ask people, 'Did you go to Verrazano Community College?' And I encourage them to go to our website and let us know who you are and where you are so we can keep in touch with you. If we have somebody basically that wants to give a \$1000 to someone who went to nursing in 1984, then we know where to send it!

[laughing]

Current status. As Matthew mentioned, at the time interviews were conducted for this study, the foundation had recently completed an internal assessment with an outside consultant. The alumni relations program was a part of the evaluation. With ongoing connections being formed through homecoming, athletic events, summer concerts, social media, and email communication routinely sent, there exists a strong desire to formalize next

steps for the program. Presently, the Alumni Association does not charge any fees for membership and the initial introduction to the Alumni Association for graduates occurs during their graduation rehearsal ceremony. When I inquired further about the dues, Grace, director of annual giving programs and alumni relations, offered that the issue of whether to charge memberships had caused considerable discussion among the alumni council members.

No, no, we don't. And that's kind of been a philosophical, you know, tug of war Um, sometimes I think ... I read research that said if you charge using a nominal fee like \$5, then there's more investment into it and the point to stay active. But to me...our philosophies are to make it friendly...A lot of them [Verrazano's alumni] transfer to other universities. They might have an affinity with that university, so it depends...I'd rather spend money in an annual appeal for a scholarship donation than to charge them for the stuff.

Whether alumni are charged a fee or not, all participants are positive and value the work of the Alumni Association. Without exception, the professionals interviewed say they respect the work of the Rebecca, Grace, and the Alumni Association. With an approach toward building awareness and participation through program areas, Grace recently worked with Olivia, the director of the ADN (Associate Degree Nursing) program to host a health care specific alumni event at the local hospital. Challenging given the nature of the hospital setting and shift work, still the college was able to make connections with a substantial number of individuals.

We were trying to just find out how they were doing at the time and maybe start up an alumni ADH section of the college. And that was the whole point and it was really

hard because it was a floating kind of thing. I do know that the Foundation did take up alumni association applications that day and I know there were at least 30 or 40 that came through. But of course I don't know how many applications made it to the alumni association. Of course it is free so I can imagine that she [Grace] got quite a few... We had already put up the Facebook messages and the flyers in the hospital. And the hospital has several floors and we also walked through the hospital and announced the breakfast for those that either had forgotten or had not known of the event taking place, so we got a lot that way.

For Amanda, she candidly discusses her thoughts and questions whether the alumni association will be able to grow past its current existence. "I don't think our alumni association is that strong yet. I don't think it is that strong yet and I don't know if it will ever be. I am not quite sure, but it is definitely not there now." On the other hand, Victor envisions the future as being bright for the alumni association and he sees the potential for impact as being that of networking.

In a perfect world I would think, in my vision of what the alumni association and the institution - especially in a two year institution - is that the alumni association and the institution would form a networking type partnership where students at the school can mingle with the alumni that have made it through. Use them as mentors.

Relational Impact. The effects of the alumni and institutional relationship exposed four key areas impacted by the association. The relational impact aspect (as shown in Figure 8) emphasizes the connections to both the internal and external community demonstrating the effects Verrazano's alumni and professionals have to each other and to the outside. The

impact is also expressed by personal changes taking place internally for the alumni. All of the alumni say they are completely different people today than they were at the time of their enrollment at the community college.

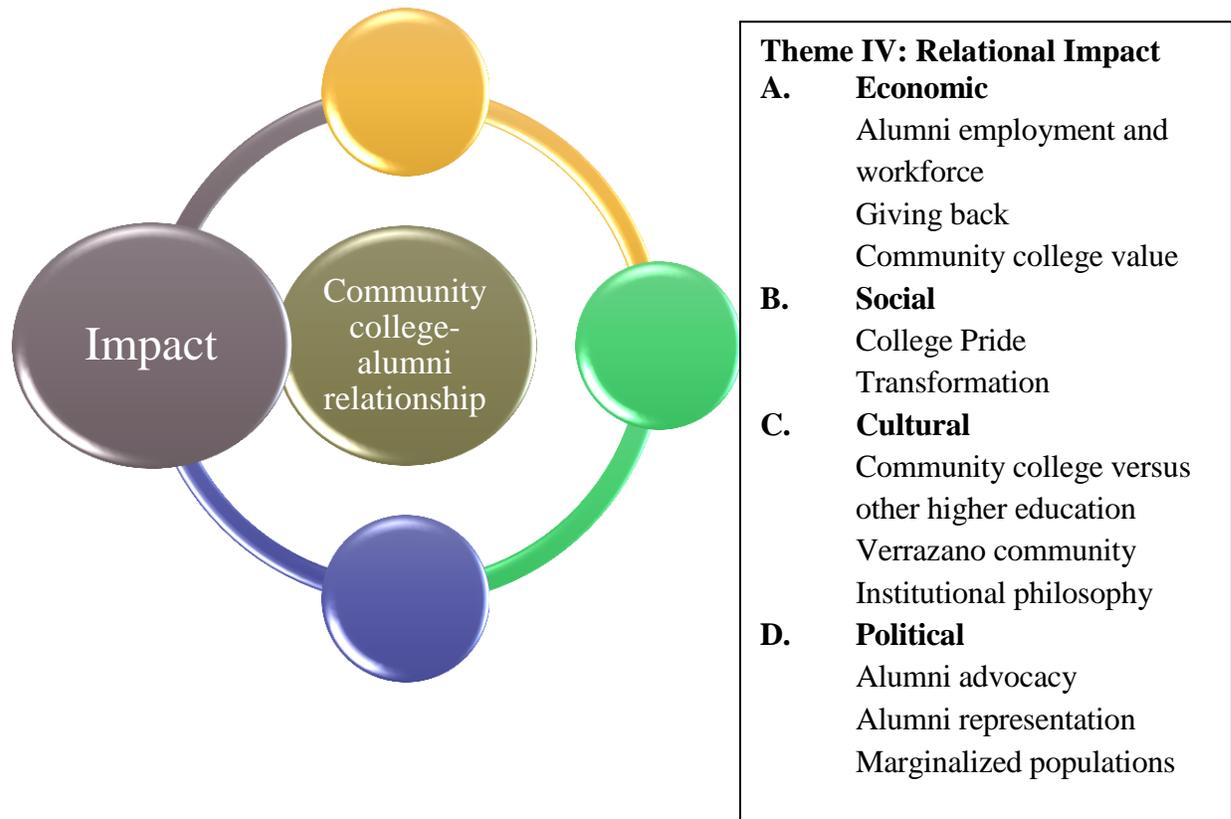


Figure 8 - Community College Alumni Relationship Relational Element IV: Relational Impact

Economic. An integral benefit of community colleges is the ability of the institutions to directly and favorably impact the economy of the communities in which they serve. In seeking a community college education, many students are enticed by this and seek the education and skills that translate into viable employment. As with their peers nationwide, Verrazano Community College plays a significant role in the local economy enabling the

community to attract and maintain top employers by meeting the demands for a well-educated and skilled workforce.

Alumni employment and workforce. The community college professionals interviewed were keenly aware of the impact Verrazano's alumni are having on the local economy and in some instances, even the world. According to Jay, students in the marine technology program at Verrazano are extremely attractive to potential employers across the nation. This is due in part to the extensive training and preparation students undergo to successfully complete the program. Of particular importance is the sea-going component of the program.

Every single employer that comes on campus says they hire our graduates because of their training. We are the only program in the country that sends our students to sea for as many days as we do. So, let's go back to [named company]. When they come and recruit here, we are the only two-year institution that they recruit from. They recruit engineers from Texas A&M and other engineering schools, but the reason being is that when they tell our students that they are going to be spending five weeks at sea, our students go, 'ok.' And when you tell those other students that they are going to be spending five weeks at sea...they go, 'Oh, that doesn't sound too awful!' But to send someone to sea, you have to spend...I want to say it's around \$3,000-\$4,000 for federally-mandated training before you can put someone out to sea for sea survival school. And that is what those that graduate from Texas A&M do. Where they go in one of these pools in a mock upside down helicopter and get dunked, and they have to safely unbuckle themselves and things like that and ...all that training

costs money. Then you have our students...and when you spend all that money on our students and they go live out on a boat, so they know what they are doing, and what it is like so when it comes to these jobs, they are ready. Whereas those from Texas A&M you are spending that money for the training and by the second week out at sea, [the students say] ‘This is awful. I don’t want to live out here for three more weeks.’ They don’t want to be out there...So the rate of attrition is much higher for someone that has not had that kind of training and experienced what it’s like. They think it is captain’s dinners and shuffleboard on the deck. So having that sea-going component is really, really important.

Several of the programs offered at Verrazano, such as the nursing and allied healthcare programs, as well as cosmetology, require graduates to pass state certification exams prior to practicing in their respective fields. For the year 2012-2013, Verrazano graduates all successfully passed the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN). Olivia, program director of the associate degree nursing program, says these successful graduates are sought after by employers both locally and regionally.

Just yesterday we were interviewing for an open faculty position and there was a nurse that works out at the hospital. And she said that those graduates that got employed at the hospital...was what made her want to be an educator... Verrazano students [are] above the other students in that case. As far as the feedback from employers they come here to get our graduates, they know our graduates are good and they know that our relationships are good. East Carolina Medical Center comes to recruit our graduates

and we have some of our students move two and a half hours away to work there and that [has] worked out very well.

For several of the alumni, their community college experiences have led them to personally discover an interest in higher education. Drew believes his community college education provided a unique qualification for him as he pursued his university position. Presently he is enrolled in a newly developed higher education program while working at the neighboring university.

So, I have to say now, and looking for a job, and working at a university, having that community college credential, it's huge! They are looking for somebody who is different; someone who has had different experiences. So, so yeah, I'm, I'm so happy that I finished my associate's degree.

While the greatest economic impact Verrazano alumni make extends beyond the doors of the institution, there are those graduates who desire to stay at Verrazano working at the institution. Of the twelve alumni interviewed for this research, four are presently employed at Verrazano and one is aggressively seeking employment at the college. The alumni employees interviewed value their experiences as students and feel being a former student of the institution provides an interesting perspective. The general sense gained from the alumni employees is that having graduates employed by the institution results in an engaged workforce. These alumni know first-hand the challenges and opportunities the college can provide to students. Amanda feels that successfully educated, trained alumni are the result of the institution's core mission. Therefore, she thinks alumni should be considered for open positions as long as the alumni candidates possess the appropriate qualifications.

Some alumni think that they should be put in the right job regardless of where they got their education from. Now if it is a good fit then I think if they are a good fit and they are qualified, then by all means I definitely think that they should be looked at because to not look at them is like saying that we did not put out good quality educated people. But, now if they are not [a good] fit then by all means don't hire them. I do think that if we are educating people in certain fields, we should definitely give them a look.

Because if we don't hire our alumni, how can we expect other people to? Because that is what we are putting out; that is what we are educating.

Verrazano alumni fully expected excellent educational experiences, well-rounded and supportive student services, and yes, even possible employment opportunities from the institution. Because Verrazano delivered, and according to all the alumni far exceeded their personal expectations, alumni willingly see their responsibility as giving back to the institution.

Giving back. Direct questions regarding financial giving were purposefully avoided during the interviews as a means to extend participants' thoughts beyond the traditional practice of alumni solicitation. Instead, participants were asked to share their thoughts regarding the degree to which they felt obligation should play a role in the alumni-institutional relationship. Alumni and professionals all identified activities such as mentoring, recruiting, or volunteering as being indicative of significant support to the institution. These were often mentioned as areas where the alumni felt they could make meaningful contributions. Clark, an alumnus of Verrazano and presently the student recruiter for the institution, feels all alumni have something to give and he expresses various ways in which he immediately recognizes alumni to be involved.

Well I think the alumni need to be good stewards to the college...and they need to not just acknowledge their beginnings, but they should be involved. They should come to functions. They should continue to support the school maybe not financially...maybe financially. But to also support by showing how they have made it in their professional careers. Come back as a mentor for students. Or [serve] on an advisory panel or um... whatever their professional career will allow them to do. Because everybody that is a graduate has something to give back.

While most professionals interviewed shied away from discussing any expectations of financial giving, several alumni openly discussed their present giving, or the intent to give once financially established. Amber, a 34 year old alumna, has used her professional role with a local financial institution to tap into crucially needed scholarship funding through her employer's annual corporate giving program.

Part of my role here at [named company] is that I handle the scholarship budget. We do have some things that we are very loyal to but I do get a little bit of my own to play with and I was able to create a \$1,000 scholarship for a second -year business student and that has been going on for three years now. Every year we fight for it and every year it has been approved. I did that because I know what it is like and it was my way of giving back. Plus, I am business relations and it gets a little bit out there about [named company].

Most of the alumni interviewed feel strongly that graduates should give back – both monetarily and of their time. Amanda sees this as an opportunity to help future generation of students.

I think they should contribute their time and funds, if you have it. Funds because I was an ambassador and I do know that was a scholarship that I earned and that I worked very hard for, but I enjoyed every moment of it. And without those funds, it would have been a little bit harder for me. A lot of people graduating from Verrazano are getting grants and scholarships so I think they should pave the way for other students because this is a good place.

Victor and others of the alumni interviewed are noted as being some of the first alumni to give back to the institution. As members of the Student Ambassador program, these members initiated the Ambassador Giving Society as a means of establishing the Alumni Scholarship Fund, a scholarship affording alumni members to qualify for the scholarship.

I think they should give back to the institution. A lot of the, a lot of the alumni... a good percentage of them probably had some type of help while they were here from the institution in the form of scholarships, um other types of financial aid... And they...they should be willing to give that back. I know while I was here as a student ambassador, we started the Ambassador Giving Society, which is a small way for ambassadors to give back for the Ambassadors to give back to the college each year because as an ambassador we receive a scholarship to pay for our school. So you know that is something you know to that... in my mind should be something that we turn around and pass it on to somebody else. And...so I...I talked to my fellow ambassadors and it was actually when...ah...[former president] was retiring last year...and so we decided to do it in honor of his retirement. We decided to start the Student Ambassador Giving Society where student ambassadors...present student

ambassadors could give money at the end of the year to the society and the money would go....would actually goes to the Alumni ah..um... the Alumni Scholarship Fund, which allows alumni family to come to Verrazano Community College. So alumni...if your brother, sister, parent, uh child of an alumni, you can apply for this scholarship to come to Verrazano Community College.

Some of the alumni recognize the benefits they received and feel it is their personal obligation to give back as opposed to always taking. Like Victor, Sophie received scholarships while attending Verrazano as a student ambassador. She feels compelled to give back to the institution serving as a founding member of the Ambassador Giving Society.

I personally feel that everybody should give a little bit back. I think that um, well me personally I just used several scholarships along the way here and you know I give back whenever I can and I think that it is important for um...you not to take, take, take, you have to give it...it builds the school. Um.. give to the foundation and then um we started, the year that I was ambassador we started an Ambassador Giving Society that was the inaugural year and in Dr. [former president name] because he's the one that started the Ambassador program. We did that um the True Blue campaign, which we have been working on for 2013. The foundation kind of decides how to fund some of those scholarships with the money that we give but um... the bottom line is it goes to a student who needs it.

Community college alumni such as Amanda, Victor, and Sophie dispel the historical notions that community college alumni are unable or unwilling to give. Likewise, Drew appears to be an anomaly as he gives to both his community college and his present university.

I give to both for different reasons. I give to Verrazano really institutionally because I feel like the overall mission of the college speaks to me. But, for [his current college], I specifically give to the LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender] office – to their trust fund. So that they'll connect it to that piece of...you know equity of the university specifically.

Though favorable and largely supportive, the alumni who were interviewed represent only a small portion of untapped alumni resources. Given the relative infancy of the program, Dr. Fitzgerald believes the alumni impact could be significant and envisions a tremendous impact for the college once the numbers of these actively engaged participants increase.

[The alumni can have] substantial impact on the college if we could bring them together in some fashion where we could design programs as a service for them, and for us. The alumni at any institution can be a very powerful group of supporters but here because there are so few of them, we are just learning how to work with them. That would be a tremendous support for the college.

Though large numbers of alumni may not be presently engaged, those alumni who were interviewed value the education they received at Verrazano. Equally, the professionals interviewed pride themselves and their peers on the support they lend to their students.

Community college value. All of the participants feel strongly that Verrazano is an institution that is committed to student success. Additionally, all of the alumni participants value the education they received at the community college. Lee, a long-time employee of the college, did not have a degree at the time she was initially employed by the institution. Realizing she would need to further her education in order to advance, she elected to take

classes for two years at night where she learned everything from shorthand to blueprint reading.

I feel like I got a quality education. I was in the secretarial field and you know I mean...so I had to learn the short hand...I had to learn the typing. We had homework every single night. Then...you know...I was in the technical and engineering so I had to take blueprint reading... so I could read blue prints for building houses... you know Things through my life.... So yeah...I feel like I got a well-rounded uh....a well-rounded education.

For many alumni, the value of the community college education entails not only the quality of education obtained, but the monetary value as well. Extremely cost effective compared to four-year institutions, community colleges are becoming the first choice for students, particularly for those who receive no student aid. Because Amber did not qualify for any student financial aid, the cost played a significant role in her decision to attend Verrazano. “Well, the cost was a big factor. We don’t get scholarships or grants so we had to pay for it ourselves and it was a big factor in me going back to school.”

Similarly, Matthew’s parents financially assisted him in attending college; however, with his mother a stay-at-home mom and two sisters to also educate, the community college was the choice made by the family. With Matthew’s parents paying for his books and tuition, he was able to get a valuable education for relatively little investment.

Now, I can remember that my parents talked about it when I went away to school that they would take care of my...and pay for my tuition and books, but everything else, I had to take care of and that’s one of the reasons that I came to Seaport. And...Looking

back and I know it was the mid-70s, um but it was nothing. I mean the tuition...the tuition was really...was very low at the time from what I can remember...Again, I realized it was a struggle for my parents because they did not have a whole lot and because I have two sisters, a younger and older and um... and my mom was a typical stay at home mom while we were all being raised.

For Perry, though the educational cost is of great significance, he says any attention afforded to him for his education is focused on his community college accounting degree rather than his bachelor degree. “Truly I get more...I get more attention with my accounting degree than I do with my four-year business degree and I found it to be a more practical value to me. Um, I’m using it a lot in the job I have.”

Amanda also maximized her time as a student at the community college. Taking advantage of the multiple educational opportunities afforded, Amanda graduated with a degree, diploma, and certificate.

When I graduated from Verrazano, I got the most education for my buck or everyone else’s buck that ever gave me a dollar. The first time I walked out, I had an associate’s degree in business administration, a diploma in accounting, and a certificate in customer service. So I did not take electives and I got a certificate in Microsoft Office in the Microsoft Suite. I did all I could and I applied myself...I sat at a computer forever, but it was well worth it.

Carter who is an attorney with multiple degrees considers his debt load and those of other students. He sees other students overextending themselves while in college. Once

graduated, these students find themselves with little to no resources to repay the student loans accumulated during school.

I would be another 50 grand in debt if I hadn't done the first two years there.

Community College offers so much value because you can pay cash out of your pocket and get a lot of education. I got two years of education and that is why Verrazano especially will do well because you get the four-year experience with the value which is something that [other community college in the state] can't match and that no other community college can match. It just happens to be where they are located. It is a great school and it has a lot of great programs. They will let a kid with no credit borrow \$50,000 and what are you going to get with this, and then they get out and they can't pay and their credit gets beat to hell and now they can't contribute. They can't contribute to the market, they can't buy cars, they can't buy houses, they can't make money and they can't buy anything so why not go to community college for two years? So that is the game and that is how you come out ahead of the next guy. I learned the hard way, trust me, I have plenty of student loan debt.

Social. The alumni and professionals alike noted with pride the many ways in which the college assists students to gain a quality education. The alumni play a powerful role in spreading the word about the institution and they note the transformational experiences they have undergone while studying at Verrazano. The professionals interviewed expressed their pride in not only the accomplishments of the students, but also in the ways in which the internal community works together to support each other and the students.

College pride. Alumni and employees have a great sense of pride for the college and all feel the college is highly regarded in the community. Amber says she tells people all the time about her experiences.

I have nothing but good things to say about Verrazano. If anyone asks about where I went to college and what I did. All I have to say is positive and I spread the word about our community college.

Lee, an alumna, presently works at the college in the Foundation office. She proudly shares the college's excellent marks received during the last accreditation process conducted by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

I feel very proud. Again, I mean not always from a student perspective, but from the employee level as well. You know at our last accreditation, we had no recommendation. And that is a real testament of how hard we work here and how much emphasis is put on doing things the right way here. We do nothing half-way.

I...I am very proud of this college!

Likewise, Perry is both an alumnus and an employee of the institution. He feels a deep sense of commitment to the institution. Perry believes the college should provide various ways for the alumni to connect back to the institution.

I think community is what we're talking about here; just 'cause you graduate you're not done, you know. I don't think that we should be done with the college. I don't think the college should be done with us. I take such pride in being able to identify with Verrazano. I see the institution both as an employee but also as an alumnus too. I want

to see the school do well and I think it's perfectly reasonable for the college to find some avenues for us [alumni] to lend a hand.

Beyond their own personal pride, the alumni serve as human cues in times when the college needs for the community to act. Amanda takes a great sense of pride in being connected to Verrazano. She recounts her reaction upon running into her former boss after the successful passage of a bond referendum.

If I am being honest, and if I am being honest with my own self, it gives me joy to be associated with the college. Because I have... there is not a time that, at least when I have someone calling or stopping or my mother calling and saying so and so's grandchild wants to come to Verrazano. Or my son wants to go to Verrazano, can you tell me who to contact, or what can I do? Because I am a helper, I get a lot of joy in being able to help people and have that knowledge that I can share with the community...I was talking to my former boss in the health sciences field that I love so dearly. When that bond came through she said, 'I voted for that bond for you.' And I said thank you very kindly. So I was so excited to go back and tell her about the surgical techniques and how they were cutting edge and that they were awesome. I was so proud to tell her that you should see where your money is going. And I told her that you are going to want to go on a tour when they open it up because you did a good thing.

For employees like Emma, they take their jobs very seriously and self-identify as being an integral part of the institution. She takes a great deal of pride in her work as a student services technician. Emma's name came up repeatedly throughout the course of the data

gathering phase. In fact, though she was not scheduled to be interviewed by me, I added her to the participants' list as she was constantly being named as a personal resource for many.

I like everything about it and I want every person in the world that comes through those doors to be helped because when they go out speaking about Verrazano, they are talking about me. They are talking about my job. That is my job. That's who I work for. I always wanted to have pride in everyone I work for.

As one would hope, the person serving as the student recruiter and who is a graduate of the college feels strongly about the institution. Clark excitedly shares why he feels he has the best job on campus.

I really enjoy it. I always tell people I have the greatest job. My job is to brag about the college! And the college makes it easy to do that with all the amazing programs and amenities. The student services that we offer, the clubs and organizations, its...uh... I mean it...they make my job easy.

While Clark thinks the college makes his job easy and he associates his pride from his professional role, most of the other alumni interviewed reveal profound changes they have experienced through their studies at Verrazano. Marginalized by their own self-defeating thoughts or circumstances beyond their own control, these alumni experienced changes in how they felt about themselves once they realized the potential of what they can accomplish. Drew is a strong advocate and is convinced future students are going to benefit from their experiences at Verrazano.

So I mean it was just a wonderful experience being at Verrazano – just fantastic. I'm proud to have it on my resume, that I attended there and I could just go on and on about

it. And you know, I can advocate for it and everyone that goes there... I just, I know and I feel confident that they're going to have a good experience.

Transformation. Madeline, vice president of students and also a community college graduate, notes many of Verrazano's students are socially bound when they first arrive onto the college's campus. Therefore, she views these students as being more appreciative of their education due to the limited experiences they have had previously in their lives.

Community college is so critical to every community. It is just critical. There are so many students that number one, simply don't want to go to school and then they take a class and all of a sudden realize it is important. Many of our students are...oh how do I say this? ...they are not house bound...they are community bound. They haven't ever left and seen...I didn't. And some are like me. See, I got married and had a child and I didn't go to college I worked in a very, very responsible job and I didn't...back then you didn't have to go to college...you just had to prove yourself I didn't need a degree to get a foot in the door. So I was lucky and I was in the right place at the right time. I have been very, very, very fortunate... but today, it is not like that today. You need that piece of paper to get your foot in the door. And to be an adult, you don't have that opportunity to go off to university many times....because most of the time you have already started your family or it is too expensive, so I think community college graduates are probably a little more appreciative of what has happened at the community college and how the community college has helped them change their lives.

Lee exemplifies just such alumni. She joined the community college early in her professional career, coming to the college with only a high school education. Realizing fairly

quickly that unless she wanted to stay in one position, she would need to gain additional education, Lee enrolled to get her degree. Though she hasn't taken any classes lately, she is a life-long learner who enrolls in classes when she feels she needs to refresh particular knowledge and skills.

Well, I started out as an admission's secretary and I got my degree while I was an admission's secretary so it definitely helped me move up to the next.... up in my career. Without my degree, I would not have been able to have stepped up to administrative assistant without it. And so....I would have been stuck.

The alumni interviewed have all been affected by their experiences at the community college. Several recounted the significant impact their time at Verrazano has made upon their lives describing the ways in which they feel personally transformed. Victor feels the transformation goes beyond the educational knowledge gained and declares he is a different person than he was prior to arriving to Verrazano.

Uh, I believe I have received a new way of life. I am not the same person I was three years ago. Verrazano Community College has changed my life. It has made me a different person. It has given me a lot more self-confidence. It has given me the ability to talk to people, to meet people that I don't know. I have had to handle situations as a student ambassador, working with the foundation and doing events and benefits to raise money for the foundation...for the community college. I have had to meet different people in the community that I wouldn't normally mingle with and it's has given me the confidence to just go up to somebody and talk to them and just socialize. It's given me um...more self confidence in knowing that I can accomplish

something. You know...uh...I ah... I think the biggest thing that the college in general is not the education that a person gets from the college, but it in knowing that they have started and completed something that took some work. You know and ah...I have done that and I have done that successfully.

For Sophie, this is her second time being enrolled at Verrazano. Ten years earlier she received an associate of arts degree following the transfer track. Initially frightened to return to school, Sophie has thrived this second time around. With the support of faculty and other college staff, she feels dramatically changed by the experience.

It has been amazing. It has probably been the best two years of my life. I have grown so much; as a student, as a person. I feel like I turned the corner into...into being a professional...I was scared to come back to school after you know being away from school for ten years. It is kind of nerve wracking, you know? But then that very first day, I was right where I needed to be and everything just started to fall into place. And all the people I met along the way, they were just so supportive. So, I feel like they just played a big part of me...of me finding out who I was, I'm a different person than I was two years ago.

Carter echoes Sophie's sentiments saying he discovered a newfound freedom in his life. He describes his experiences at the community college as being the best times of his life setting him on a trajectory of learning that took him from Verrazano all the way to law school. Carter feels he would not have successfully transitioned to a university straight out of high school.

Best time of my life. Verrazano and college in general allowed me the freedom for the first time in my life. The classes were good, the instructors were good and I enjoyed

my time there...Absolutely, I wouldn't have been getting into a four-year school out of high school if it was not for Verrazano. Honestly, there are many factors, but when I look back on my life that was probably the most fun time that I have ever had in my life. I enjoyed going to class, I enjoyed my social life there, I enjoyed the people there. Another thing that is so cool about Verrazano is it gives you that realistic college experience before going to a four-year college. There is a younger demographic here. If you go to [another North Carolina community college], there is probably a lot of people that are older and they are not going to go have a beer with you at lunch. You get all that same experience. I would never have been able to start that journey. I might have ended up working for my dad's company, who knows. Now the market for cabinets is going downhill fast and so I am watching him struggle now and you know. I loved it. I met my whole circle of friends from Seaport. My whole circle of friends that either went here or [named university]. I loved Seaport. I loved every minute of it.

For Ben, a native of Haiti, the college provided a lifeline for him and his family. First obtaining his General Education Diploma (GED), Ben went on to enroll and was selected to participate in the Student Ambassador program.

Well I um, I don't think I would be where I am today with only my GED. If it were not for Verrazano and all of the positive support...to prepare me for that ...for that moment And right after I was able to discover the place... I was still willing to learn and at night I come back to Verrazano to get some more classes to better myself, here at Verrazano. Verrazano was the bridge of my future for me. Verrazano Community College touched

me in a way that is very special to me...uh...I believe it's truthful, knowledge is power.

It empowered me to become a better person.

Equally as transformed, Victor says he is a completely different person than he was just a few years ago when he was working hard as a laborer for a moving and transport company. During the interview, Victor projected a quiet and complimentary sense of confidence.

Uh, I believe I have received a new way of life, I am not the same person I was three years ago. Verrazano Community College has changed my life! It has made me a different person. It has given me a lot more self-confidence. It has given me the ability to talk to people, to meet people that I don't know. I have had to handle situations as a student ambassador, working with the foundation, doing events and benefits to raise money for the foundation...for the community college. I have had to meet different people in the community that I wouldn't normally mingle with and it's has given me the confidence to just go up to somebody and talk to them and just socialize. It's given me um...more self confidence in knowing that I can accomplish something. You know...uh...I ah... I think the biggest thing that the college in general is not the education that a person gets from the college, but it is in knowing that they have started and completed something that took some work. You know and ah...I have done that and I have done that successfully.

Cultural. The student transformation is supported through the values placed on student success and achievements. Verrazano's institutional culture is grounded in an intense value placed upon customer service. Without fail, all of the participants spoke about this. For the alumni participants, this level of service translates into recalling positive experiences

and feeling supported through their time at Verrazano. For the professionals, they feel supported in their roles and hold firmly to beliefs they share that are grounded in childhood teachings. Having developed through their formative years, this knowledge is both explicit and tacit. This institutional culture is perceived to be the correct way to feel, think, and act. The values are shared and the group collectively acts to provide the very best student experience possible. The issue though for most community colleges begins with the transition from student to alumni.

Community colleges versus other types of institutions. The alumni relations programs of private colleges and four-year universities are far more established and sophisticated than the vast majority of community college alumni relation programs. With significantly more time to develop the relationship, vastly residential, deeply rooted traditions, and well-established athletic programs, the alumni are cultivated and courted from the moment they step foot onto these campuses. Now in his second community college presidency, a community college graduate, and with more than 40 years of experience in community colleges, Dr. Fitzgerald is well-versed on the challenges encountered in developing alumni relations programs.

I think for most educational institutions and not community colleges in particular, but for most universities, alumni are very important financially speaking. The alumni are great contributors. They build buildings, hire faculty, support them, do research and on and on and on. Community colleges are sort of new to alumni associations for the most part. I think that if you look at a four-year college that has been around for a while and if you worked the alumni some that paints a larger picture. At the University of

Alabama they sell out their stadium with 100,000 of people a football game, you know what I mean? On the contrary, at the community colleges we struggle to get 15 people in the stands for the most part. I think it has to do with the idea of cultivating the alumni. Four-year institutions have had time to cultivate those relationships such as University of Alabama. Community colleges do not do those same kinds of things so there is not a lot of enrichment. So um, if I look at Verrazano, because we are an older institution, but young when it comes to the alumni associations, we just don't have that support base. It takes a while to get there. We have a lot of people out there that graduated from the college, a lot of people in the community. We just have not found a way to get them in, yet. So all of the things I would like to see happen, support for the college financially, support for the athletics, support for dance/ music program I would like to see them do that, but right now we are not getting them here.

Though Dr. Fitzgerald's observations are well-grounded; the successes of Verrazano's alumni association are impressive and have developed over a relatively short period of time. Grace, director of the annual programs and alumni relations, spoke of how the college kicked off the alumni relations program during a college anniversary event welcoming 200 alumni at the very first event.

And it was part of a big college open house we were doing for the community.

Anyway, so it just worked out very nicely [to kick-off the alumni relations program].

And so, we had the open house and there were around 200 alumni that came out just that day. And then, so when that happened we were like, 'You know what, we may

have something!' ...Um, and then a couple of months later, we had... actually, that...there was a similar event. And then a couple of months later we had alumni at the university celebration. And then a month after that, there were several kickoff events and then we started out to, um, it was February 2005...we started out with the alumni council it and we began organizing and developing our bylaws and then we just started rolling with it. So, I guess in that first year, we really did a lot. We did a lot in the short amount of time.

Carter views the dichotomy of community college versus higher education in a more comprehensive approach saying community colleges have long been discredited. He describes the value of the community college and the need for hands-on skills knowledge required of today's workforce.

Community colleges and universities around here...who is better off? There is a stigma attached to community colleges that needs to be erased; There needs to be tradesmen and those are dying arts and those jobs are being outsourced to people that you know that are coming over from other countries that are happy to have those opportunities and you make good damn money. I went to law school and the guy that is a welder is probably sitting on par with the guy that is five years out of law school, think about it... and he is not struggling to pay back \$150,000 in student loan debt. The trades, and my dad is a craftsman... he owns a cabinet company, so I have worked with my hands, I was never a white collared broker, never. and these kids now would rather get an art degree. I just want to shake the shit out of them and say what are you going to do? You don't need go to school to do art... just go paint shit. You don't go to

school to be a rock star, you just do it. They get \$60,000 worth of debt to get an art degree and when they are out, like my sister, ‘I have to pay that back, I just want to go Cancun.’ I think before you go to college, sometime in high school you need an economic literacy [class]. These kids do not know how to balance a check book, finance a car, or what a credit score is and by the time they get out of college, they have some credit card that they have run up and they are going to spend the next ten years digging their way out of that. Why doesn’t every student take a course on financial literacy so that you understand what debt is when you take on these loans, so that you can learn to balance a budget and understand a credit score? I don’t know if Verrazano has that program, but they need to.

Verrazano community. Seaport is home not only to Verrazano, but also a major public university. Many of Verrazano’s students transfer to the university and both institutions provide support programs that align with each other. The perspective of most is that the college students are treated no differently whether they attend the community college or university. For Carter, this is a unique community in that it differs from what he knows about other towns and communities with similar institutions.

Nobody ever...in Raleigh and I grew up right outside of Raleigh and I have friends that went to college there and went to State. They did not hang out with people that went to Wake Tech because they were kind of the townies, kind of like that. There was that stigma that you were not good enough to get into State, but here at [named university] and Verrazano...it’s like one school, honestly. At any party there was

probably a 50-50 mixture of students...and nobody cared. I never once felt ostracized or embarrassed that I went Verrazano. It was awesome that I went to Verrazano. Clark, both an alumnus and employee of Verrazano and a current student at the university, further expounds on the collaboration of the community college and university. He wonders too if the success of the two could be replicated throughout the state where the North Carolina Community College System and the Universities of North Carolina could join to augment the transition for students while keeping alumni connected to their community college alma mater.

So I know that at [named university], they have created a [community college mascot club] to [university mascot club] that allows for some social interactions. It keeps them connected to their roots here at the two-year school and ...where they got started at... So I think that is one way that we can keep alums... um engaged and excited is...to not let them forget where they come from and to interact with other alum from our institution as they are at their four-year school. And of course It is easier because these two schools are right here in town, but the same type of club could be created at all types of four-year institutions all over North Carolina because our students go all over the place. Ah...um...So yeah , taking...taking a page out of the playbook of the universities would be my first thought, interacting with university foundations and find out what works for them...ah...but starting clubs that students can get involved with at the four-year schools to keep them engaged um with the ah...with the community college.

Institutional philosophy. A hallmark of Verrazano is the way in which customer service is embraced and practiced. Without fail, alumni and professionals spoke of the incredible commitment to service Verrazano fosters and the ways in which students are encouraged and assisted through their learning. At the time of the interviews, Dr. Fitzgerald has been president of Verrazano for over a year. This is his eighth institution. Dr. Fitzgerald talks about the ways in which he has observed the faculty and staff working with the students stating it is by far the best he has ever witnessed.

On a scale of one to ten, I would say a ten. They do a fantastic job. Having been to a lot of colleges all over the place, and I gave you a listing of those, this is by far the best as terms of customer service. It is just wonderful. If you look at the success rates of our students in terms of preparation, licensure exams and things like that, they have done very, very well. I think we have a ways when it comes to retention in terms of the traditional when looking at graduation. One of the problems we have is that [named university] is right down the street and students tend to take off.

While students may leave for the university, no one would say it is because of mistreatment. Without fail, all of the participants described ways in which they or their peers take extra steps to support the students of Verrazano. As an alumna employee, Amanda sees daily the ways in which students are supported.

If you pick the right person, if you have a problem and you pick the right person on your side in this place they will tear down walls to make it happen for you and that is important, they will make it happen for you.

The institutional culture would be meaningless without the individuals who foster and support the philosophy. Amber illustrated how all students are treated as being special and shared that no one student receives preferential treatment. For Amber and several of the alumni participants, one employee, Emma, is a shining example of the institutional culture at work.

Regardless of who you are, your skin color, or whether you are rich or poor, when you walk through that door you are treated the same - they will help. The people here are overly helpful and you always feel welcome. It is a wonderful feeling. Emma is one of those people. She is so resourceful and had all kinds of useful knowledge that I needed and she was willing to give; she always went above and beyond her job title.

Political. Political impact is defined as being “the effect that government policy and its administrative practices can have on something.” Community college alumni are able to play a significant role in advocating and supporting major initiatives of the institution. Given the economic challenges faced in recent years across the nation and in the state of North Carolina, leaders of the General Assembly are continually searching for ways to significantly reduce spending. With no immunity offered to higher education, be it to the state’s 17 universities or the 58 community colleges, areas of program support have come under attack facing probable reductions or worse, withdrawal of total funding.

Alumni advocacy. Garnering the support of alumni, Verrazano has on numerous occasions protected funding awarded by the state for essential functions of the college’s programs. Specifically, Jay has encountered this scenario repeatedly as Verrazano’s allocation for the highly touted sea-going component of the marine technology program has

been threatened in recent years. Each time, Jay and his team have successfully engaged and informed alumni to the degree that alumni have successfully defended the expense to the extent that funding has been reinstated to the program.

Our graduates have really stepped up in letting them know in Raleigh how important our funding is... I don't have percentages; some students will send us copies of the letters that they write. Parents of students who leave us will write letters, not on behalf of their children, but in addition to their children. But, I have never sat down and counted out the letters that have been written. I will tell you this though every time I call up to Raleigh which it seems like I am running a political campaign out of this office... having done it for the third time...in February 2015, I have my calendar cleared out to do this all over again, But once I find out that we have been targeted, then I work to find out who I need to get in contact with in Raleigh, whoever there is that has targeted us, that is where we want to focus our initial onslaught. We will get our efforts started here and then I will wait a week or two and give them a call. And then they will have heard a lot about our program. I don't have number, but they know when they start getting letters and phone calls...I will make trips to Raleigh and go into our local members of the subcommittee for education and I'll go in and introduce myself and all I have to do is to get Marine Technology out of my mouth, and they know who we are. Nine times out of ten, they will say..."Yeah, we have heard about you." And they get lots of feedback about our program. They always ask why can't you run this program without going out to sea? And we say, if we could run our program without these boats but you can still teach marine technology but without

the ship, and you try to explain to them that that is the program...then they start to get it. When you're at least able to get into the door and at least talk to them, then you can explain it...Their support is critical in getting us that funding; we are talking \$700,000. Without that money, I cannot run the ship or pay that crew.

Just as Jay engages alumni to advocate for the necessary funding to sustain the sea-going component of the marine technology program, Clark works with the Foundation to raise scholarship funding for Verrazano students.

Well uh currently, ah...umm... with my work with the foundation and with the student ambassadors in our work we use both general and ambassador alumni to uh spread ah...spread information. When we have our Gift of Education lunch... biggest event of the year...I just love it! It is so much fun and it raises a lot of not only awareness, but also a lot of money for student opportunities. Ah... we use those alumni to get information out.

While the support is strong from various segments of the Verrazano alumni population, Drew feels compelled to advocate for the community college system as a whole. He personally advocates for and supports Verrazano and he also sees the value of engaging alumni at a much broader level.

I feel committed to Verrazano, uh, again because, you know, it is an alma matter and it's umm, you know I feel a personal connection of people that are there, you know, in real-time right now. Umm. But I feel like Verrazano has so much to offer and I think that somebody ... you know looking at ... I guess systemically community colleges, umm, I feel like I need to advocate for, Verrazano and community college in general.

Looking toward the future, Dr. Fitzgerald envisions alumni advocating in various ways to assist the institution. “Well, financially, politically, they certainly could help us with a program in terms of validation and getting feedback about the way we look in the community. There are a number of ways they could help.”

Alumni representation. The participants envision a time when the alumni of Verrazano will be even more greatly involved. Though not in place at the time of the interviews, according to Rebecca, there is a component of the strategic planning which involves securing alumni to serve on the various governing boards. The college has plans to seek alumni participation on boards such as the foundation and trustees, as well as program advisory boards.

No, we do not but that is in our strategic plan. That is in our strategic plan and we talked about that yesterday. Our board only meets quarterly and then we have our council meets monthly which is all the committee chairs and we review and we did a complete plan a year ago and they bring it up at every meeting, at every committee meeting. I think we would have them coming back on our advisory boards. I think we would have alumni on the board of trustees and our foundation board (which they will be); they would be involved with not the daily operations, but the planning part of the college...To have alumni from each program on every advisory board, that is a good start; we have 50 programs so that is 50 alumni and that is more than we have engaged right now and that would be a start.

Including the alumni voice on key and strategic boards would be a helpful addition to the campus, and the function of the alumni.

Marginalized populations. While the positive political impacts far outweigh the negative, Drew did express his concern related to the representation of special populations and wonders to the extent these groups might be better served in order to serve the institution. As an example, he thinks that making certain that veteran alumni, those living with disabilities, those living alternative lifestyles, or anything considered outside the traditional student profile are included in the conversation. Building resources for these types of services can secure alumni involvement and allow their voices to be heard.

Yeah. And I would say that uh, at the time, veterans were kind of getting better but now it's fantastic. You know they have a veteran's center that is phenomenal and they have a space specifically for student veterans and they're going into the brand new buildings [laughs] so I would say to that is, that has remedied itself, um. I think that there is um, uh, there's still...there's a little bit of hurting and it happens for...um and, I think in racial diversity there from a student organization level, that there is nothing that looks better from, from an organizational level at all. I think there's a person, but there's nothing, you know, there's no like center of multi-cultural affairs or anything just like that....Umm, and again, I think, you know, again...there is very little that I could say about Verrazano like... I'd like to say that is here that is not absolutely stellar but that is one area that I feel like to be, improve upon and honestly I'm looking for a job that I want to work in LGBT at the university. Umm, and honestly not having that experience in the community college and ...really having that three year gap where I have no, no contact with, with ... you know other LGBT advocacy officers and on professional, and at university setting or college setting for that matter. I'm put at a

disadvantage against other candidates that you have seamless four years of having in contact with the LGBT community.

Chapter Summary

This chapter was presented in two parts with the first consisting of the institutional profile of the North Carolina community college that was used as the data collection site. The college profile was followed by individual profiles of the 18 participants, representative of both alumni and professionals who are actively engaged in the overall development of the community college-alumni relationship. The first section ended with collective profiles broken down into the two main participant groups: alumni and professionals. Within the alumni group, a subgroup profile of all alumni-employees was developed.

The second part presented the data resulting from the interviews of the eighteen community college alumni and professional participants as well as from electronic and hard copy sources reviewed. According to Grunig (2002), “In research on relationships, one would look for patterns or insights defined by the indicators of relationships we have identified” (p. 6). The data was organized around four general themes and numerous subthemes that emerged through analysis of the data using framework coding generated from J. Grunig and Huang’s Relationship Management Theory model, the conceptual framework for this study. The four themes that shaped the presentation of data include: relational characteristics, relational influences, relational roles, and relational impact. Participant quotes were incorporated in the presentation of findings to support and provide illustration of themes. Subsequently, an analysis and discussion of findings as discovered from the data analysis is presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to examine and better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study explored how graduates and key leaders of the community college defined and perceived the relationship building process, their perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. In the course of the data analysis, four significant findings were found to be relevant to this study being derived from the four major themes presented in the previous chapter. The coding phases resulted in four interconnecting relational themes.

The first theme relates to the *relational characteristics* found to be meaningful to the community college-alumni relationship. Four subthemes were found to be significant: 1) *commitment*, 2) *trust*, 3) *satisfaction*, and 4) *obligation*. The second theme relates to the *influences* that were identified by the participants as being meaningful to the relationship formation. The four subthemes related to this theme are: 1) *personal attitudes, beliefs, and values*; 2) *student experiences*, 3) *connections*, and 4) *future*. The third theme addresses the *relational roles* of the 1) *alumni*, 2) *college professionals*, and 3) *alumni association*. The fourth and final theme revealed the *relational impact* of the community college-alumni relationship. Through this theme four major subthemes developed: 1) *economic*, 2) *social*, 3) *cultural*, and 4) *political*. The data supporting these themes and subthemes was presented in detail in chapter four.

The organization of this chapter consists of analysis and discussion of the findings as they pertain to this study. This discussion is described and presented as four major findings that were arrived at through a recursive process of reflection on the previous chapter's themes. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), the goal of this phase of the study is "to figure out the deeper meaning of what you have found... You scrutinize what you have found in the hope of discovering what it means or, more precisely, what meaning you can make of it" (p. 127). In addition to analyzing the findings within and across participants and themes of this study, the discussion includes literature that was found to be relevant. The relationship management theory and alumni relations literature were revisited in an effort to determine how the understanding of the relational themes presented in chapter four are positioned within existing empirical and theoretical research, and to what extent this study expands the conversation about community college alumni relations. In addition to drawing from literature pertaining to alumni relations and relationship management theory, a brief introduction of Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory is presented in this chapter during a particular discussion of the transformational nature of the community college experience – something discovered as being particularly attributable to the establishment of the community college-alumni relationship.

According to Mojtahed, Miguel, Jorge and Alex (2014):

In order to access and achieve an understanding about human perceptions, one of the main requirements of the constructivist approach is the establishment of a reciprocal

and communicational ground between the research project participants and researchers in the co-construction of meaning. (p. 87)

A constructivist perspective combined with the researcher's professional role played a role in ensuring that the emergent ideas were rigorously challenged and analyzed. The raw data and findings were consulted repeatedly to ensure validity, to search for significant meanings, and to connect this study to theory and practice. Additionally, specific examples were showcased to illustrate the findings and as a means of arriving at a point of "analytic generalization" of this particular data (Yin, 2014). This chapter brings the study to a point of further clarity and sets forth a dialogue to interpret *the ties that bind* alumni to community colleges.

Discussion of Findings

At their inception, community colleges relied solely upon state and local funding to meet the needs of the institutions. With little strategic thought and planning assigned to the advancement functions so distinctly a part of the overall culture of four-year colleges and universities, community colleges have faced stiff competition and have struggled to keep pace in terms of the dollars raised and the number of constituents giving (Akin, 2005). Specifically, and until recently, alumni relations have all but been ignored in terms of prioritization for constituent relationship building among two-year institutions. "Community colleges for a long time have operated under the misguided assumption that they should not waste time or resources prospecting and cultivating their alumni in hopes of generating philanthropic support" (Skari & Ullman, 2012, p. 20). The landscape is changing though as community colleges across the nation are increasingly interested in understanding the

significance of developing new relationships and specifically cultivating new connections to individuals who might have a propensity to support the community college. Based on recent research focused on community college alumni giving, alumni relations programs and the significance of what these relationships mean for the individual institutions as well as this entire sector of higher education holds tremendous promise (Boyd, et. al., 2009; Skari, 2011; Starace, 2012).

Finding #1: The community college-alumni relationship develops through interpersonal relationships between individuals or a group of individuals. The research data establishes the various understandings of what this relationship means and how it is conceptualized by the beliefs, experiences, and ideas of the individual participants. While community colleges are often looked at as an entire entity, in and of themselves, the relationship is developed and nurtured between individuals or groups of individuals. This is an important point to remember when developing institutional strategies and intentionally shaping institutional culture. According to Thomlinson (2000), “A *relationship* has been defined as a set of expectations two parties have for each other’s behavior based on their interaction patterns” (p. 178). Investigating the community college-alumni relationship in depth revealed just how complex this type of organization-public relationship can be. While formed and described through a compilation of individual events and experiences, the community college-alumni relationship is holistic, meaning no one single relational element was identified in this study as being the *one* component that makes or breaks the relationship. In fact, this study indicates that multiple aspects of the relational phenomenon converge to shape how the participants understand and make meaning of their community college-alumni

relationship. For instance, all of the alumni recounted stories of experiences as students that influenced the development of those relational characteristics and perspectives. Ultimately, these experiences served to influence or in some cases inhibit the inception of the community college-alumni relationship. Although this study found that no one relational element is more important than another, there is one component that provides the foundation of building the institutional-student relationship – the importance of positive individual interactions.

Interpersonal relationships. Essential to appreciating the community college-alumni relationship phenomenon is recognizing the value of interpersonal relationships. The findings of this study support the theoretical proposition that community college alumni relations are very much grounded by what is already known about the relational view underscoring the “emotional and psychological aspects of interpersonal relationships and behavioral aspects of inter-organizational relationships” (Huang, 2001, p. 65). This notion that these *relationships* are central to the institutional-graduate relationship aligns with what is known through research and constitutes what has given “rise to a major shift in the core focus of the discipline” (Ledingham, 2003, p.). An example of this relational behavior was explored by Wright and Bocarnea when in 2007 the authors piloted a study that “focused on external alumni donor attitudes and behaviors toward giving as a product of donor-organization relational connectedness” (p. 220). The authors found the donor organizational public relationship (OPR) significantly predicted university alumni donors’ behaviors and positive attitudes toward giving. In 2001 Ledingham identified “four pivotal developments which spurred emergence of the relational perspective as a framework for public relations study, teaching and practice” with the “recognition of the central role of relationships in public

relations” being number one (Ledingham, 2003, p. 286). All of the study participants spoke of the importance of personal relationships and the role these types of relationships play in their overall development of feelings toward the institution. Grace, who manages the alumni relations function said, “It’s all about relationship building. It’s all about relationships. And we need to work and build to get this back to our focus.” Similarly Dr. Fitzgerald, a community college graduate and at the time of the interviews president of the college, claims,

My memories [of his community college studies] are absolutely connected to the people I met there. You know...the instructors. There are several folks that I remember who are now my lifelong friends. The whole thing is about relationships and personal contact. It’s not about the buildings, the programs.

Drew, an alumnus and former president of Verrazano’s Alumni Association, spoke specifically about the importance of personal relationships and how these associations served as a major link to the college for him. Previously a poor student, Drew was encouraged to challenge himself to achieve a degree he otherwise thought unattainable. In talking about the future and how he might stay connected once he obtains his masters at a neighboring university, Drew stated, “If there was someone I knew at Verrazano then I would feel much more inclined to want to participate.”

These interpersonal relationships become a critical link to connecting the alumni to the institution and significant to the development of the community college-alumni relationship. Furthermore, the relationships are noteworthy in that they directly impact the individual, having been documented to not only determine who will be more likely to be involved as alumni, but are also meaningful as to the level of success these individuals

achieve as students and graduates. Skari (2014) noted in her groundbreaking 2011 study of community college alumni donors that “alumni who are able to connect with their institution through relationships or activities, achieve higher academic performance levels, persist, and graduate” (p.26). This information is compelling considering that “community college graduation rates have not significantly increased over the past decade” (Wyner, 2014, p. 4). However, the Completion by Design (CBD), a transformational initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and that was discussed more thoroughly in the review of the literature in chapter two, seeks to mitigate the enrollment to completion gap being witnessed at community colleges throughout the nation. Presently being piloted by select colleges in North Carolina, Georgia, and Ohio, CBD “focuses on comprehensive institutional transformation at scale... Their collective efforts are aimed at making systemic changes in policies, programs, and practices that strengthen pathways to completion for most students” (Completion By Design website, June 2015). The CBD framework engages students from *connection to entry to progress to completion*. A consideration then to this overall design could be that strengthening and building *alumni to students* connections as part of the CBD overall framework would not only engage students, but would begin a holistic connection to alumni that would serve to connect the graduates back to the college as guest speakers, mentors, tutors, and donors. Several of the alumni participants noted particular times in their student experiences where encouragement from college personnel meant overcoming obstacles to keep moving along with their academic progression. One participant was running short of adequate funding for a semester at a time when gas prices were high and his travel costs were soaring. At the persistence of one key college employee, he applied for and

received scholarship funding that was sufficient to allow him to complete his studies. The student to alumni-institutional relationship positively affects student attrition and retention – significant issues faced by today’s community colleges (Cohen, et. al., 2014; McEwan, 2011). Cultivating an awareness of the experiences and challenges students endure and intentionally shaping those experiences impacts the future alumni-community college relationship. Faculty and staff then who are connected to these individuals greatly influence the students’ academic and social experience.

Key influencers. The alumni connection first begins at the time participants were students. All of the alumni in this study described various instances of where the relationship was influenced by notable individuals while students. The most likely influencers on campus are the instructors who interact consistently and at a level of depth most other college professionals are not able to accomplish. The influence of faculty on the development of the community college-alumni relationship was clearly evident from the data collected. When reflecting upon their experiences as students, the participants noted key individuals who served as mentors and supporters throughout their educational journey. During her interview Amber talked about a particular instance where a faculty member had noticed what she was doing in order to assist a student.

In one of my classes, I was sitting up front, there was another student up front that had a hearing aid and had difficulty seeing. So what I ended up doing was sitting beside him and typed up all the notes. I would print them out for him in larger font at the end of every class so he did not have to listen and write at the same time and he and my faculty member actually nominated me for an award for doing this for him

and I thought that was really sweet. It was awesome that she [the faculty member] noticed that. Two weeks later I received a letter and the certificate that she had nominated me for the award for helping [the student]. It just made me feel grateful that she acknowledged this.

The classroom was identified in this study as the first major point of connection for the students and where their impressions of the institution and subsequent connections were most likely to be developed. Beyond completion, persistence, and retention, several authors have determined faculty relationships to be meaningful to the degree to which students are engaged and involved with the institution post-graduation or post-transfer, as well as the decisions they make concerning careers (Lertputtarak & Supitchayangkool, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Kasworm's study of community college adult learners points to the importance of the faculty and student relationship. Kasworm (2005) writes, "They also noted their positional identity and agency through tacit positive relationships and interpersonal interactions with most faculty members" (p. 16).

The positive effect of faculty and alumni relationships has been observed with the most recent studies suggesting alumni that developed relationships with faculty and staff and who enjoyed positive student experiences were also more likely to give back to their institutions (Clotfelter, 2001; Monks, 2003; Sun et al., 2007). According to Sun, Hoffman and Grady (2008), "Satisfaction was greater for those alumni who had developed relationships with university faculty and staff during their educational experiences. If alumni were satisfied with their previous student experiences, they were more inclined to give" (p.

27). Satisfaction aside, the alumni and professionals interviewed have well-defined views about the types of interpersonal relationships formed.

Relational types. Participants described various degrees or types of the relationship as critical parts of the process with the most prevalent types discussed defined as *transactional* and *relational*. For Madeline, vice president of Student Affairs, she viewed the institutional–student relationship as more of an exchange. From her context as a college administrator where she maintained a broader view of the organization, if the exchanges were positive in that students received quality education and had suitable student support services in place, the college had fulfilled its role in the relationship. Because of her administrative responsibilities, Madeline likely did not have time to develop intimate relationships with individual students, but was instead devoted to making certain all students received the appropriate attention and resources needed to be successful. This transactional view was not reserved solely for the administrators interviewed. Carter, an alumnus of Verrazano, saw his initial relationship with the institution as that of being purely transactional. On the contrary, Jay, who oversees the marine technology programs and who spends two weeks annually at sea with students, developed close relational ties to individual students. He described the emotional connection he formed with many of his students saying, “It doesn’t seem like work at all.” According to Mann (2007):

Customers have relationships with an organization ranging from transactional to highly relational; customers who have a positive relationship feel connected to the organization, whereas transactional customers view their relationship as an exchange of services and have no emotional investment in the organization.

Overall, Jay demonstrates a high level of emotional investment in the wellbeing of the students. However, he did acknowledge being more emotionally connected to some students more than others citing how he felt some students were “like family.” Because of the personal nature of how the institutional-graduate relationship first develops between individuals, the replication of intimacy between individuals is difficult to duplicate. Gittel and Douglass (2012) claim, “these reciprocal relationships tend to be personal rather than role based, limiting their scalability, replicability, and sustainability over time” (p. 709). The challenge is how to manage these same relationships institutionally and in such a way that the interpersonal connectedness moves seamlessly from that of a personal one-on-one interaction to the broader college relational context.

Finding #2: The community college-alumni relationship is socially constructed through meaningful individual and interpersonal interactions built upon trust and commitment. The second major finding was overwhelmingly supported by the data reflecting the relational elements that were found to be important to the alumni and professional participants of this study. Though all of the findings of this research are interrelated, this particular one most closely aligns with the relationship management framework used to guide this study. It is the basis for the development of the community college-alumni relationship and from which all other conclusions emerged. A major discovery drawn from this study suggests the community college-alumni relationship is consistent with what public relations theorists, specifically Hon and Grunig (1999), have found in previous works that sought to explicate the important and measurable relational elements of organization-public relationships.

Trust and commitment play a significant role in the development of the community college-alumni relationship. Where relational confidence is established through interpersonal demonstrations of trust and commitment, the relationship begins to materialize. For example, Verrazano's employees recounted multiple instances of how they make tremendous efforts to engage students in ways that validate the students and their existence, giving meaning to the relationship. For Perry, it means taking extra time with students informing them of financial aid and scholarship opportunities.

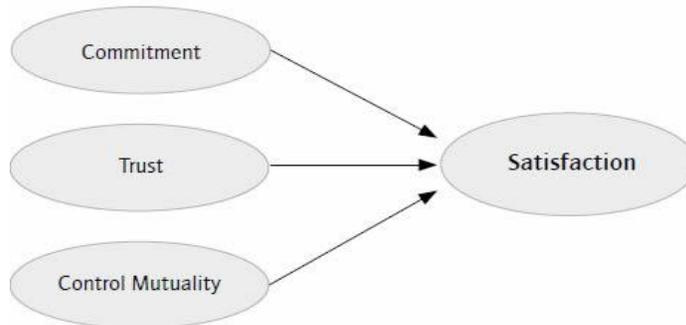
I see a lot of kids that don't get a shot and I am bound and determined as I deal with every one of them, they're going to get the information that they need to do the things they need to do. A shot at the opportunities that they ought to get and they're not ever going to walk out of my office saying no one at Verrazno ever told me what I needed to know. The kids are going to know. The other group I really like are the adult students that have lost their jobs and are coming back. I've walked in their shoes. I know how they feel. I know how upset and scared they are and we talk about those things.

Throughout the social construction of the community college-alumni relationship, personal values and beliefs are major stimuli in the development of the relational bonds. These bonds are formed, according to all of the participants, through official instances such as sorting through the financial aid process, to more casual and relaxed interactions where students might find themselves socializing with faculty during a concert or athletic event. These exchanges, when genuine and positive, arouse first a sense of confidence in the students. This confidence is then translated into a sense of obligation. The alumni

interviewed for this study express strong desires to give back to the institution that has given them so much. Likewise, the professional participants genuinely want to see students do well. Along with an obligation to each other, there exists an appreciation for the institution. These feelings transcend from personal fulfillment within the relationship to a broader desire to collectively join the efforts of the college to build on the existing alumni program and to positively impact the institution. A primary example of this level of relational commitment between the alumni and institution was most clearly evident in the marine technology program. The faculty of marine technology have positively retained significant programmatic funding allocated by the North Carolina General Assembly and North Carolina Community College System by successfully engaging alumni, many of whom live outside of the state and service area, to the point that they will write letters and make calls to elected officials. These alumni know their voices matter and they take the time to be heard in order to preserve the funding critical to this program.

Relational characteristics. An important component of this study was to determine what, if any, association existed between the community college-alumni relationship and the organization-public relationship as conceptualized by Grunig and Huang in 2000 and as reintroduced by their model of relationship outcomes in Figure 3.

FIGURE 1. Relationship among trust, commitment, control mutuality and satisfaction.



Source: The authors.

Figure 9 - Key Components of the Relationship

According to Botha and Van de Waldt (2011), Grunig and Huang’s model is “useful in explaining why organizations engage in relationships with specific publics” (p. 6). The authors go on to claim:

The model explains that with all organizational relationships, certain factors (like the context of the relationship, the type of relationship, or the amount of parties involved) influence the outcome of these relationships, called situational antecedents. Authors are still in disagreement about which factors should be considered (and measured as) situational antecedents. Grunig & Huang's (2000) provide suggestions of possible situational antecedents that affect the outcome of organizational relationships. After relationship partners enter into the relationship or alliance, both partners follow certain communication strategies to ensure the success of the relationship. These strategies can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical and we call them maintenance strategies. Thereafter, we should assess the outcome of the relationship by measuring the outcomes of the organizational relationship: trust, commitment, control mutuality, satisfaction and goal attainment. (p.7)

While Grunig and Huang's model has been validated by previous research in other contexts such as, fundraising, communications, and business to business contexts (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Hon & Brunner, 2002; Jo, et al., 2004; Stroh, 2005; Waters, 2008), the findings of this study vary slightly from the Grunig and Huang model in determining which relational elements are most important to the development and sustainment of the community college-alumni relationship.

In Grunig and Huang's (2000) model, the relational characteristics of commitment, trust, and control mutuality lead to satisfaction in the organization-public relationship. Similarly, the relational connectedness between the community college and its alumni public and the subsequent satisfaction of the relationship were found to be largely derived from the relational characteristics of trust and commitment. However, the two models deviate with the control mutuality of Grunig and Huang's model being supplanted instead with a much stronger presence of obligation in the community college-alumni relationship. Though each was presented as a finding in chapter four in the relational characteristics section, what follows next is a deeper examination of how each of these elements relate to the phenomenon at hand – better understanding the community college-alumni relationship. Additional probing assesses what is already known about the relational behaviors of alumni, specifically those who are community college graduates, with what was learned through this study. Because the four relational dimensions are more often referenced as a collective group of relationships outcomes, the comparison to various studies will be grouped into a final section of this particular finding.

The individual characteristics were presented and grounded by the literature in chapter two. However, to further advance the community college context within the discussion of organization-publics relationships, prior to the discussion of each relational characteristic will be the definitions that Hall (2002) developed from Hon and Grunig (1999) and Huang's (1997) works. Hall addressed the measurement of relationships in the context of the community college resource development relationship describing the four elements measured to test the strength as each relates to the community college-public relationship. Prior to this discussion, is Figure 10 which I created to provide a visual presentation of what was learned about the community college-alumni relationship. This model serves to address specifically which relational characteristics were found to be important to the development of the community college-alumni relationship and how each are intertwined in the development of the overall community college-alumni relationship.



Figure 10 - Relational Elements Lead to Satisfaction

Trust. According to Hall (2002), *trust* is, “A willingness of the college and the publics to be open and honest with each other. Trust builds on the integrity, dependability, and competence of each side” (p. 55). The data strongly supported the relational element of trust as being attributable to the formation and sustainment of the community college-alumni relationship. All participants, both alumni and professionals, expressed their understanding of the trust component as being a critical element of the relationship. For Dr. Fitzgerald, the president of the college at the time of the interviews, views building trust as a major component of his role saying,

I think every college president has a role to play, but I think the basis of my management belief is based on trust. You have to be open and honest. You have to be able to communicate the information about the college...what is going on, what is coming up, what the challenges are, and that is what builds trust.

One participant defined trust as “mutual respect and assurance that each side will be honest in their expectations and delivery.” Trust means being able to “depend on the openness and honesty of all parties in a relationship” (Waters & Bortree, 2012, p. 126). Influenced by various factors, all participants articulated trust as being connected to personal and individual values, fostered through two-way communication, and developed through shared experiences with one another. For one of the participants, trust was explained most simply as “knowing that I can count on individuals to do what they say they are going to do.” Past research points to building trust as a critical element in the development of the relationship and the degree to which alumni will in turn advocate for and provide support to the institution (Barrett, 1989; Herbin et al., 2006).

For the alumni, trust was most often shaped through individual experiences and was given meaning through specific instances. An example of this was when one graduate described trust as “the college not keeping me longer than necessary.” As explained by this participant, the college forever earned her trust when as a student she was appropriately advised on what classes to take to successfully obtain the degree she wanted to earn, thereby assisting her to successfully complete the degree in a timely fashion. Another participant most closely associated trust with the assistance and help he received in completing the complicated process to apply for federal financial aid. An immigrant who was suddenly sidelined by health issues, the student received assistance that was a lifeline for him and his family. Because of this one instance, he developed what he described as being lifelong trust and respect for the institution.

In comparison to the alumni, the significance of trust was viewed more broadly for the professionals. While all pointed to trust as being grounded by their own personal beliefs and values, most associated the formation of trust with students as being a responsibility and expectation of their professional roles. This philosophy had earned several of the professionals being interviewed a reputation of always being able to be counted on – no matter the circumstance. In particular were two individuals who were participants of this study, but whose names were also mentioned repeatedly by multiple alumni participants. Notorious on campus as individuals to be trusted, and known as “go to” individuals who take pains to support students, their names are passed to incoming students from year to year. One of these individuals succinctly summed it up this way. “I promote what I give in a relationship – honesty. I want honesty. And that is what I give to these students.” The

president of the college felt strongly about this too as he linked openness and honesty as being one of his utmost duties as the leader of the institution.

Verrazano's faculty members who were interviewed believe that trust must first begin with competence. The faculty must be able to convey their knowledge in the classroom by showing that they know the content, are able to convey the content, and share it in such a way as to pass their knowledge onto students. By providing exceptional educational experiences for students, the students' trust is earned by faculty. The program director of the marine technology and boat building programs considers the first step in "building trust with alumni" to be "building trust with students from the very first moment they step into the classroom."

Commitment. Once levels of trust are established within the organization-public relationship, other relational characteristics begin to develop to include commitment. Commitment is often associated with relational satisfaction and is indicative of long-term investment in the relationship (Jahansoozi, 20007). According to Hall (2002), commitment is:

The degree to which the college and the publics each believe that the relationship is worth the investment of time, energy, and money that it requires. Sometimes commitment means continuing to do something, like make a gift. Other times, the commitment is an emotional or attitudinal commitment to the other's wellbeing or to a shared goal or mission. (p. 55)

The observations of the relational characteristic *commitment* varied widely among the alumni and professionals who participated in this study. The commonalities for both were the direct

correlations made regarding institutional loyalty in describing their commitment. Both alumni and the professionals professed their allegiance to the mission of the institution as well as their devotion to the institution and to each other. While both participant groups expressed their own strong sense of dedication to the institution, there were some participant representatives from each group who spoke of frustrations pertaining to students who were viewed as merely using the institution as a “stepping stone.” These opinions were most often expressed as disappointments in relation to discussion of the current state of participation of alumni with the alumni association and alumni relations program. Specifically, their direct comments were most often directed to the population of younger students. These observations were predominantly communicated by one participant who was technically a student getting ready to graduate and alumni who were more recent graduates.

For most of the professional participants, of which some were also alumni, they agreed commitment was fundamentally defined as being something *within* – a way of being and doing that is an inherent part of who they are and is essentially what motivates their actions toward students. One professional participant described her commitment to the students and college as being “just something within me. It’s something I was raised to do. I always have to give 100 percent.”

Some of the professionals interviewed offered a description of commitment by providing a candid and sincere assessment of the current state of the college’s commitment to the alumni programming. The president, who was relatively new to the institution at the time of the interview, expressed his observations as such that he felt the alumni relations program was not to the point of being able to offer any real incentives to alumni to get great numbers

to participate. While he mentioned a few events that the alumni group had hosted and he had attended, he also stated his attention had been on other institutional priorities initially, but that he intended to devote time to the alumni. As a first step, Dr. Fitzgerald had recently organized an institutional advancement division to encompass the alumni, fundraising, grants, and public relations functions. Rebecca, the newly appointed vice president of advancement, described the institutional commitment in terms of desire for the program at a ten on a scale of one to ten. However, she also readily admitted in reality the function was more likely at a five. While the alumni relations effort is viewed as being important and communicated as being very high on the list of priorities, what can realistically occur to advance the program is limited in terms of having sufficient time, resources, and staff to adequately work on building the program. For the professionals who were already successful in extending the relationship beyond graduation, they represented programs such as nursing and marine technology that function like cohorts with intense faculty and student interaction. The close faculty-student interaction in these types of programs serves to initiate the connection early on in the development of the community college-alumni relationship, a notable point examined more fully later in the study's discussions.

Whereas some of the staff presented a realistic valuation of the alumni relations program through discussion of the commitment aspect and what can realistically be achieved, the alumni used the conversation pertaining to this relational characteristic to envision possibilities of ways to be more personally engaged, and to provide opportunities for others to participate, both formally and informally. While Carter expressed his strong distain for organized programs and formal events, such as gala events, he had a clearly defined idea of

how he might use his knowledge as an attorney to assist the college's paralegal program, even to the extent of desiring to collaboratively design and develop a summer internship program with the college. Victor suggested breaking the alumni association into mini programmatic associations that could provide relatable opportunities to get alumni back to the institution while assisting in the development of the larger college-wide alumni association. For Clark, the college's recruiter, the ideas began to flow during our interview together as to how he could broaden his engagement with alumni in order to assist in recruiting and retention efforts.

Obligation. Obligation was found to be much more strongly expressed by both participant groups as opposed to the control mutuality described by Grunig and Huang (2000). Hall (2002) defines obligation as "the ability of the college and the publics to influence each other" (p. 55). Though each group, alumni and professionals, possesses the ability to strongly influence each other, there is a certain implication through the concept of control mutuality that was not linked to this study. The absence of the relational characteristic of control mutuality was replaced instead with obligation. This could very well be attributable to three suspected factors: student mentality, benefits of education, and timing of community college alumni relations development. First, the perceived dynamics or ability to control the relationship is hampered by what is labeled here as *student mentality*. Alumni, particularly those who are recent graduates, might still consider themselves as students and have yet to break mentally out of the student mode of thinking. Because of the student mentality, alumni feel limited in their abilities to affect institutional change.

Due to the direct and tangible benefits associated with obtaining an education, alumni felt and communicated a powerful sense of obligation to the college that had provided so much to them. Therefore, the obligation characteristic far outweighed any sense for or need to exert control. Alumni did not perceive themselves as having any control within the power dynamics of the institution, nor did they suggest desiring power within the relationship. This phenomenon is likely related to the community college context where long-established alumni associations are rarities. Unlike the long-established, independently chartered and governed alumni associations of many public and private universities, the community college alumni associations, specifically Verrazano's, have only been active for a few years. Due to the early stages of the revitalization of Verrazano's alumni programs, the activities of the association are largely guided by the alumni relations staff and are highly social in nature, being used appropriately to cultivate new relationships with individual alumni. This being done not by design, but out of necessity while the program is being revitalized. By contrast, the vice president of advancement voiced her strong desire to see more volunteer alumni involvement so as to alleviate the vast majority of the duties falling on one staff member whose duties extended beyond alumni relations.

Satisfaction. Defined by Hall (2002), satisfaction is “the degree to which the college and the publics have positive expectations about each other. Those expectations are usually based on specific actions taken to reinforce them” (p. 55). Satisfaction with the institutional-alumni relationship has been shown to significantly impact actions, specifically alumni giving and involvement (McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Monks, 2003). Clodfelter (2003) wrote, “Satisfaction with one’s undergraduate experience is a mark of approval that would be

expected to induce feelings of gratitude or a desire to enhance the institution's chances of future good influences" (p. 114).

Overall, both groups of participants expressed feelings of satisfaction with the institution and with each other. For many of the alumni participants, satisfaction with the institution was discovered through their own academic accomplishments. Perry was one of several examples. Though he had attended various colleges only to abandon his studies prior to completion, he said he found exactly what he needed at Verrazano. After being laid off from his long-time employment as a result of a corporate buy-out, he realized he must get skills to find new employment. Finishing not only his degree at Verrazano, but a bachelor's at a local university, Perry acquired some much-needed confidence that translated into his sense of approval for the college. For Perry and others, this newfound satisfaction based on their own personal actions as well as the way others treated them served as catalysts in solidifying the community college-alumni relationship.

Linking to other studies. Some of the same relational aspects found to be important to the community college-alumni relationship have also been found to be universally important to other settings, even those outside the United States. Personal interactions and positive experiences relevant to the building of the community college-alumni relationships are also found to be important factors in the willingness of alumni to contribute and give back to other higher educational institutions. For example, Wright and Bocarnea (2007) conducted a pilot study to examine alumni attitudes and behaviors as they related to contributing an unrestricted gift to their alma mater. According to Wright and Bocarnea (2007), a nonprofit organization's relational connectedness with its donors is largely derived

out of the levels of relational commitment, trust, control mutuality, and relational satisfaction that donors have toward the institution. The researchers advocate for “intentionally and continually monitoring the variables that are contained within the donor OPR [organization-public relationship] construct with the intent of adapting internal actions to meet the relationally based needs, demands, and desires of their critical external stakeholder donors” (p. 231). According to Pumerantz (2004):

The experience that students have is critical to the development of their future intentions for ‘giving back’ to their alma mater. Positive experiences increase the probability of giving as an alumnus, and negative experiences would have a negative impact on giving. (p. 104)

Thousands of miles from North Carolina, Aritonang (2014) recently studied 226 undergraduate business management Indonesian students to learn that the results “suggest that satisfaction, trust and social identification are both positive and significant predictors of loyalty, and trust mediates the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty” (p. 77).

Aritonang’s (2014) study triangulates the relational dimensions of trust, satisfaction, and loyalty noting “satisfaction is a positive and significant predictor of trust and trust is a positive and significant predictor of loyalty” (p. 88). Aritonang’s study suggests institutions should work to build satisfying relationships with the student public so that students will trust the institutions extending the relationship beyond. Sargeant and Shang (2010) claim, “The more two-way interactions are engendered, the higher will be the level of loyalty achieved” (p. 328).

A recent study conducted by Dr. Lisa Skari sought to determine factors most likely to predict giving by community college alumni. A key finding of this study was the role student experiences played in the likelihood of alumni contributing. Statistically significant to the findings was the fact students who expressed satisfaction related to their experiences as students were much more likely to be donors to their alma mater (Skari, 2011; Skari, 2014). Skari's 2011 research aligns with studies conducted in the four-year context. Multiple studies have confirmed that the more satisfied alumni are with their alma mater, the greater the likelihood they will contribute back to the institution (Clotfelter, 2001; Hunter et al., 1999; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009; Sun et al., 2007; Wastyn, 2009). For Monks' (2003) study, the most significant predictor of alumni giving was the alumni's satisfaction with their undergraduate experience. With the literature suggesting alumni motivation to be decidedly influenced by the extent to which alumni are satisfied with their experiences as students, the next step in unpacking the relationship is to learn more about what influences the community college-alumni relationship.

Finding #3: Personal transformations as students give meaning to the community college-alumni relationship that results in a more profound affinity for the institution. Evidence throughout the data suggested that all of the participants who were alumni of Verrazano or other two-year institutions communicated in their interviews as having gone through a personally significant transformation while a community college student. This personal transformation was expressed holistically as resulting in newfound awareness and ways of knowing. Of the 19 participants interviewed for this study, 15 were community college alumni with 12 of those being graduates of the research site institution.

Participants' transformations ranged from overcoming long-held feelings of scholastic inadequacy to one participant who felt he had literally been saved from incarceration by attending community college. Evidence of these transformations came out of the discussions regarding past educational experiences to include high school and those experiences the participants had undergone during their community college studies. When disclosing their personal educational journeys and sharing their community college experiences, all alumni described being profoundly changed in some way and having experienced some level of personal transformation as a community college student.

Transformation and learning. Based on the interpretations of several of the participants, their community college educations served as the stage for dismantling long-held assumptions and internalized insecurities. Hoggan (2014) asserts, "Adult learning can, and often does, include profound experiences that change deep, habitual ways of thinking and being" (p. 134). These life changing events resulted in altering how these individuals perceive themselves and how they comprehend education. The alumni said they felt empowered by their success as students. According to Williams and Seary (2011), "Transformative learning essentially occurs when an individual's taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, feelings, and judgments are unsettled, critically assessed and revised" (p. 125).

Connection to transformative learning theory. The experiences of the participants of this study were found to be similar to Jack Mezirow's 1975 study when through his groundbreaking research "he first applied the label of transformation in his study of U.S. women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace after an extended time out"

(Kitchenham, 2008, p. 104). Of the 83 participants in Mezirow's qualitative study, 16 were middle-aged women community college students in their first semester of college (Merzirow, 1975). More recently Chu et al.'s 2010 study on adult learners and online learning found evidence for transformative learning reflecting how certain learning environments "may accommodate adult learners' transformation" (p. 213). A comprehensive overview of transformation learning as described by Chu et al. (2010) is below:

Mezirow developed a transformation theory for adult learners to explain how to reassemble and organize their experiences and transfer them into a focus for negotiating their goals, values, assumptions, perceptions and meanings of life. The three knowledge interests: technical, practical and emancipatory, in Mezirow's transformative learning theory, were modified as three types of learning: technical, dialectical and emancipatory. Technical learning emphasizes that human beings learn to control and manipulate their environment and the knowledge needed for that purpose; the focus is on obtaining technical knowledge, the appropriateness of chosen strategies, task orientation and problem solving. Dialectical learning, otherwise referred to as communicative learning, stresses the knowledge required to understand the social environment and the obtaining of practical knowledge. This kind of knowledge is obtained from interactions and sharing experiences with others, and through rational dialectics to reach a consensus. Technical learning and positivist evidence are an important basis of dialectical learning. Emancipatory learning refers to the discovery of oneself, developing rationale, and stressing the critical knowledge of past experiences and the surrounding social context. By reflective thinking and

reflective discourse, people challenge and re-evaluate their assumptions and then transfer them into actions. Technical learning is positivist, and the latter two interests are constructivist. (p. 206)

Mezirow (1975) developed ten phases that have been widely adopted as occurring during the transformative learning process. The phases are first initiated by the learner experiencing a disorienting dilemma. Self-examination and critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions are the next two phases. The fourth phase is a realization by the learner that the discontent being felt and the process of transformation is shared and experienced by others as well. Further into the process, the student explores new roles, new relationships, and new actions. The last two phases include building competence and self-confidence in new roles and lastly going back into the world with this new knowledge and new way of knowing. The experiences of the community college alumni participants who interviewed for this study align with those of Mezirow's students from 40 years ago.

One of the most extreme stories of transformation of this study came from Carter, an attorney, when during our interview he stated he would likely have been incarcerated had he not found himself during his time at Verrazano.

I could have just as well ended up in jail instead of standing here successful. I mean honestly, I was pretty wild back in the day. I think a lot of kids don't believe in themselves and I would never have thought in my life I would be sitting here today as a lawyer. That is something that never crossed my mind.

The personal transformation Carter underwent as a student at Verrazano served him well as he continued his pursuit of advanced degrees leading to his obtainment of a law degree.

Others participants shared similar experiences. As a high school student Drew struggled and had never really done well academically. After serving in the military, he arrived at Verrazano where he excelled in his courses and earned A's for the first time in his life. Through these positive and profound experiences, Drew became free of his self-defeating doubts. At the time of the interview, he was working as a graduate assistant at the local university where he was pursuing his master's in higher education. Drew's future intentions are to further his education by pursuing a doctorate once he successfully completes his masters studies - something he says he would have never ever considered prior to his time at Verrazano. These long-held internalized assumptions and past failures were disrupted through achieving success as students resulting in new ways of knowing and new realities. For Perry, a participant who had gone to multiple schools without ever successfully completing a degree described his experiences saying, "I'll just say this on tape, VCC was the first school that ever gave a damn about me!"

This confirmation of transformative learning within the community college setting is further evidenced by Peters' 2010 study of ten Iowan Baby Boomers. Peters' study sought to determine how Baby Boomers made meaning for themselves in light of the disorienting economic situation, such as a layoff, while enrolled in community college career training. The experiences of the Baby Boomer aligned with Mezirow's ten step phases of transformation whereby the disruptive experience of being laid off from a long-held position resulted in participants' realization of what they could achieve in terms of education and new career pursuits. To better understand the context of the transformation, it is helpful to understand the uniqueness of the community college student population.

Adult learners, transformation, and the relational connection. One of the most prominent distinctions of community colleges relates to the age of students. According to the American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts 2015, 49 percent of community college students are between the ages of 22 to 39 and an additional 14 percent are age 40 or older. Similarly, the majority of the alumni interviewed for this study did not attend college immediately following high school and were older when they enrolled or re-enrolled at Verrazano. As with community college alumni of this study, the adult learners who attend community college campuses have been shown to undergo comprehensive changes during their student experiences. The transformative student experiences were found by Kasworm to be directly related to the relational identity of adult learners. In 2005, Dr. Carol Kasworm addressed a gap in student identity theory. Prior to her study of 28 community college adult learners enrolled in intergenerational classrooms, research had looked at undergraduate populations “through the lens of young adult development theories” (p. 3). Kasworm’s study explored how adult students made meaning and understood their “culturally and socially mediated identities” (Kasworm, 2005, p. 3) finding that “key elements of their relational identity considered their beliefs about the dynamic of acceptance via valued and supportive relationships with faculty, younger students, and fellow adult students” (Kasworm, 2005, p. 12). The relational identity found in Kasworm’s study further solidifies the findings of this study as it relates to the transformational nature of community college student experiences, particularly for adult learners. Furthermore, these transformations lead to the development of relationships with faculty and fellow students that are appreciated which in turn, result in a stronger affinity and connection to the institution. Aside from the complexities of being adult

learners, community college students have several other distinguishing features that set them apart from their four-year counterparts.

The community college student difference. In addition to age, several characteristics have emerged in recent years with community college students being portrayed as part-time enrolled, full-time working, financially independent, single parent, disproportionately racial/ethnic minority, female, lower income, academically underprepared, first generation college, and with limited abilities and time to be involved in extracurricular college activities (Bragg, Kim & Barnett, 2006; Savona, 2010). However, as Savona (2010) points out, “Because of the plethora of programs offered by community colleges and the equally diverse needs of community college students, it is difficult to make broad statements about community college students” (p. 7). While the community college student profile is becoming increasingly more traditional with younger students choosing to spend the first two years at the community college, the average age of community college students nationwide is 28. Madeline, who at the time was the vice president of students and she herself a community college graduate, coined the phrase “community bound” for the students she dealt with at Verrazano. The vast majority of the participants of this study who were community college graduates arrived at the community college as adult learners. Most had either pursued careers straight out of high school, military, or were individuals who had attended multiple institutions without ever having completed a degree. Most of the participants were first generation college students. Nemeč (2012) claims:

The disruption must be accompanied by critical reflection where learners examine their abilities, beliefs, assumptions, and values in ways that change them in some

significant way. This critical reflection typically follows some sort of experience within the classroom and necessarily involves a “deep” dialogue. Learners will only participate in a “disruptive” experiential activity and the subsequent dialogue (and consequently benefit from them) if they have some motivation to learn, a sense of safety in the learner, trust in the educator or guide, and adequate time for the transformation process to occur. These components can be facilitated by a teacher or trainer. (p. 478)

Having had limited experiences prior to their arrival to the college, the transformation these students underwent extended beyond academics. The physical experience of being at college had as much, if not more, to do with the transformation and the transformation was bolstered by positive experiences as students (Jacobs, et al., 2010). These transformations were reinforced by faculty and the institution and further enhanced by building social networks that supported the change.

Student engagement fosters alumni affinity. Similarly, Chen’s 2012 study explored the connection of identity reconstruction of indigenous college students from Taiwan seeking to learn what effects transformative learning had on their self-development and collective action. As “Formosans,” the Taiwanese Aborigines ethnic group, these students had entered college with low self-esteem and “a developed stigmatized identity” (p. 161). By participating in various clubs and service programs, the students gained a new sense of empowerment.

The study also found that transformative learning of college students affected development of their positive self-concepts, interpersonal relationships, and ethnic

and cultural identities. The effects of perceptive transformation also empowered meaningful connections in these students to personal career choices and sustainability of ethnic groups and cultural development. (Chen, 2012, p. 161)

Passing along the effects of the transformation so that students are engaged with their institution beyond their studies becomes the challenge. In order to keep alumni connected, institutions must determine ways to prolong the positive feelings and behaviors of the institutional-student relationship to the institutional-alumni relationship.

Alumni affinity. For the institution, there are three key objectives for building student loyalty: 1) tuition and fees generated from students are sources of income for the institution; 2) actively engaged students positively impact the overall quality of instruction; and 3) actively involved students become actively engaged alumni who support institutions financially (Aritonang, 2014). Transformed as students of Verrazano, the alumni expressed attitudes of gratitude and an affinity for the institution.

Alumni engagement. All of the participants noted having positive student experiences at the institution. The vast majority of the alumni participants' student involvement included roles as student leaders, institutional student representatives, and award recipients. The experiences and level of involvement of these alumni align with what Astin (1999) discovered in his 1975 study of college dropouts. Through this study, Astin developed his widely known Student Involvement Theory which defines student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Astin theorized six factors as being critical to student involvement to include: a) place of residence; b) membership in honors programs, c)

academic involvement, d) student to faculty interaction, e) athletic involvement, and f) involvement in student government (Astin, 1999, pp. 524-526). While Astin endorses these six considerations for student involvement, he does acknowledge the fact that different types of colleges are relevant to the student involvement theory. He admits his concerns about community colleges writing:

Community colleges are places where the involvement of both faculty and students seem to be minimal. Most (if not all) students are commuters, and a large proportion attend college on a part-time basis (thus, they presumably manifest less involvement simply because of their part-time status). Similarly, a large proportion of faculty members are employed on a part-time basis” (Astin, 1999, p. 524).

The concerns regarding the degree to which community college students are engaged and involved are not to be misplaced. Imperative to influencing engagement beyond is the role of positive student experiences. According to Renz (2010):

Alumni involvement begins with a positive student experience. Students who are engaged and involved during their time on campus tend to become more active alumni. The alumni association’s programming efforts are vital to the success of the entire institution’s efforts to maintain a lifelong link to this most important resource. Students are the future volunteers in our clubs and chapters, the members of our schools’ advisory councils, future mentors to our students and, ultimately, donors who are also members of the alumni association. They recognize the importance of giving back to their alma mater, not only financially but also through their ongoing

involvement as volunteers willing to share their expertise, experience and time to enhance the future of their alma mater. (p. 129)

According to Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2008), individuals who are engaged and loyal as students are;

likely to become active alumni supporting academic institutions financially through seeking additional services, such as continuing education or postgraduate studies; engaging in word-of-mouth promotion; participating in university events; and engaging in other forms of cooperation, such as serving as guest lecturers or offering placements. (p. 67)

Finding #4: Institutional culture, communication, timing, and dedicated resources are critical to the successful advancement of the student and college relationship. Four major elements were found to be essential to the foundational development and future sustainment of the community college-alumni relationship. For both alumni and the professionals interviewed, institutional culture was universally thought of as being an important element in the future development and expansion of Verrazano's alumni relations program. Additionally, communication was an important topic and was important to both alumni and the college professionals. While the subject of time was also meaningful to both groups of participants, its significance meant something different for each of the groups. All recognized that only so much could be achieved with the present organizational structure. With limited staff, time allocated for the alumni functions, and a small core group of alumni volunteers, participants began to imagine the possibilities of how best to build the relationships.

Institutional culture. Adopting a genuine practice of customer service is important to the colleges and universities of today as institutions must be deliberate in their efforts to attract and retain students (Bruning, 2002). With multiple institutions oftentimes competing for the same students, the manner in which an institution takes care of their needs is extremely important to the overall academic experience, and important to the overall wellbeing of the institution. Verrazano's exemplary customer service was well demonstrated from the first moment I stepped onto the campus and was aptly documented by all participants during the course of the interviews. Customer service is highly regarded and is an integral part of the institutional philosophy at Verrazano. The attitudes that value students' learning and serving students' needs were pervasive and shared by all of the professionals. When professionals spoke about these particular beliefs, the comments were often tempered with a great sense of pride, particularly for the professionals who were also alumni. This awareness and practice of the alumni professionals is likely drawn upon from their own recollections of being students at the institution. The president of the college, who had worked at various institutions prior to arriving at VCC, said the institution's propensity for assisting students was by far the best he had ever witnessed in his career. This heightened sense of service is consistent with positive relationship management practices and has been shown to be particularly helpful to institutions in developing relationships with alumni. The challenge thus far for community colleges is transitioning this same institutional philosophy to include alumni. According to Daniel, Bellami and Marshall (nd),

The student to alumni experience is unique for each student or alumna/us going through your school's system, and there is the potential for each individual to

influence and be influenced by others in the system. Students can help drive alumni to engage with their alma mater. They are the living, breathing evidence of what a university is like and are the justification for the institution's priorities. Alumni can enrich the students' overall experience. They embody a continuing, reciprocal relationship with the school. (p. 2)

Sun, Hoffman and Grady (2007) found institutions can best augment relationship-building efforts by creating a culture of appreciation for the relationships with alumni.

Leading the way. Building alumni relationships that are worthwhile to alumni and the institution takes concerted effort led by the president of the college. Herbin et al. (2006) write:

The commitment to develop an appreciative culture for the alumni of a college must be an intentional emphasis by the president and the board of trustees, but must be translated throughout the college. Alumni engagement must be defined in both the college's and the foundation's strategic plans... The alumni position is most often placed in the advancement area. Alumni are a college's largest constituency and the same fundraising principles of donor development should apply. The president should always be the key figure in highlighting the college's commitment to alumni development. The president should use alumni quotes and profiles in virtually all external communication about the institution, and team with alumni to insure the alumni focus is comprehensive. The president should also encourage input from faculty, employers, students, staff and the community. (pp. 20 - 21)

During the interviews, Verrazano's president, vice president of advancement, and director of annual giving programs and alumni relations, along with most of the alumni participants expressed their commitment to the alumni relations program. Multiple alumni participants remarked about the level of attentiveness the immediate past president of the college had shown to them as students. With Dr. Fitzgerald's arrival to the institution, he made immediate organizational changes to reflect his interest and awareness to the advancement functions to include the alumni relations program. At the time of the field work for this study, the foundation had recently undergone an assessment with the foundation board. Rebecca, who was new to the vice presidency for advancement role, felt this was a good start in the new reorganization and the best way to determine areas of priority for the various functions of the division. This level of attention toward the alumni function is important in the relationship building process. As Grant (2008) notes:

As community college leaders, it is important to recognize that alumni are critical to the ongoing success of institutions. Just as you take time to craft a valuable mission statement for student entering your college, you should devote equal time to reaching out to alumni – identify the purpose of your alumni association and the audience it serves, and determine how these stakeholders can further the mission of your college.

(p. 18)

Understanding the importance of alumni. While the alumni relations efforts are of concern for those who work directly with the foundation, it was somewhat surprising to find an absence of understanding of the alumni association and its activities among others who work at the college. With the exception of key individuals, many of the staff were limited in

their knowledge of the alumni association and deferred to the foundation staff when the question arose on the interview protocol pertaining to the development of the alumni-institutional relationship and Verrazano's activities. Lertputtarak and Supitchayangkool (2014) claim:

The alumni relationship is essential to an institution's advancement because the alumni are the most loyal support group of an institution. The more alumni are embedded with the institution, then the more relevant as a component they become within its networks and relationships. (p. 170)

Verrazano could likely strengthen the alumni-community college relationship by working to determine additional ways to integrate alumni into well-established activities and programs. Culbertson et al. (1993) said, "There is reason to believe that involvement enhances genuine, long-term behavioral support" (p. 98). A positive example of where engaging alumni is working to assist the college is in the area of marine technology programs. Every few years, the program's allocation from the North Carolina General Legislature is threatened to be defunded and yet, Verrazano's marine technology alumni resist the decision by engaging in a letter-writing and phone calling campaign that has thus far, resulted in the program retaining the allocation.

Communication. The connection Jay and his faculty have with their alumni has come about through careful and strategic messaging and over the course of a 50 year history for the marine technology program. Using multiple channels to communicate from newsletters, phone calls, and social media, Jay and his team are able to engage with their alumni in a way that is meaningful, timely, and beneficial to current students.

As an institution, I know in the last couple of years that Grace and the girls from the foundation have tried to expand incorporating alumni into watershed moments here at the college and maybe not even watershed moments. I wouldn't say every day kinds of stuff, but special events such as basketball games and things like that. Otherwise I am not sure how the institution as a whole incorporates alumni. I will tell you from a department chair point of view, I look at it as part of our job to make sure that the alumni stay engaged. So I don't really leave it up to or count on Grace or the President... for there to be some sort of alumni office. With the program that has 50 years of history to it, and with the chairs that have come before me. They've always taken it upon themselves to stay engaged with the graduates. With the vocational tech programs, when I first got here, I learned early on, that we are all measured by the success of our graduates. And because of that when they leave and graduate, we are completely engaged in where they go, and what they do, and we try to help *every step of the way*. You know, I've got email lists for job boards. We have a Facebook page that has close to 700 people.

According to Amos (2010), "Today, modern alumni relationship building is less about one-on-one interaction and more about mass outreach and engagement. This shift from micro to macro outreach and engagement has especially affected how alumni relations professionals communicate with alumni" (p. 107). Though Amos and his peers at large universities across the nation likely have historical frameworks and time-tested practices from which to form their opinions, the community college alumni and professionals of this study are not in alignment with this notion. Not one of the 12 alumni interviewed for this study, nor any of

the seven professionals for that matter, mentioned a newsletter or particular event as playing a major role in the development of their affinity for Verrazano. Instead, the most compelling of all findings pointed to the significance of the one-on-one interactions and the interpersonal relationships which served to enable each to more deeply connect the students to the college and subsequently connect the alumni back to the institution after graduation.

This opinion is supported by J. E. Grunig (1993), who held that organization-public relationships are both symbolic and behavioral. He argued:

When symbolic (communication-based) relationships are divorced from behavioral (grounded in actions and events) relationships, public relations practitioners reduce public relations to the simplistic notion of image building which offers little of value to the organizations they advise because they suggest that problems in relationships with publics can be solved by using the proper message – disseminated through publicity or media relations – to change an image of an organization. (p. 136)

The community college-alumni relationship discovered through this research decidedly aligns with and advances ideas that support two-way personal communication.

Time. Several of the themes and subthemes presented in chapter four intersected around the topic of *time* or *timing*. Most significant were in relation to the initiation of the relationship and the timing of such as well as to the length of time the alumni relations program had been started, and finally, the time it takes to get an initiative of this magnitude established.

Timing the engagement. When input was sought from alumni pertaining to their ideas of how to enhance the existing program at Verrazano, time was a major consideration

brought forth. All thought the engagement should occur earlier. Throughout the course of the field interviews, participants discussed the practice at Verrazano whereby alumni staff attend graduation rehearsals as a mean of connecting with individuals who would soon be alumni of the institution. Distributing contact cards at graduation rehearsals, the alumni staff members connect with students as a means of capturing accurate forwarding contact information the staff use for future alumni correspondence. While this tradition was discussed by participants of both groups, the alumni were critical citing the timing as being *too late*. Participants indicated that there was a disassociation between the time as students and the connection of when student become alumni of the institution. The alumni interviewed suggested the graduation rehearsals are not the most appropriate time to inform and engage graduates about opportunities associated with the alumni association. With so much going on during the rehearsals, two alumni in particular shared their discontent with this practice saying the entire process was chaotic and did not serve to connect students. Instead, alumni participants felt anything the alumni association and college could do to make the connection much earlier could only enhance the efforts of the alumni programming.

The recommendations of Verrazano's alumni are consistent with existing research that highlights the successes of student alumni organizations. Validating the power of collaborative programming between alumni relations and student affairs, Jablonski (1999) claims, "the students of today are the alumni of tomorrow" (p. 101). Most often the missions of student alumni organizations are to educate participants about the institutions while nurturing the relationship development between alumni and current students. Creating this type of program ensures the relationships are cultivated sooner and last longer (Gaier, 2001;

Jablonski, 1999; Singer & Hughey, 2002; Williams, 1993). Four-year institutions have in recent years revealed the benefits of “orienting and integrating academic affairs, student affairs, and alumni services toward common goals and objectives” showcasing the benefits the individuals and the institutions receive by integrating the student to alumni experience (Singer & Hughey, 2002, p. 52).

Though knowledge is limited about community college student alumni organizations, Herbin et al.’s 2006 study did find that community colleges who reported involving students from the beginning were more likely to have a larger base of engaged alumni. “Colleges that form a relationship with and offer some form of orientation to current students on their role as alumni tend to have a larger base of alumni contacts” (Herbin et al., 2006, p. 27).

Participants of this study were able to immediately envision ways in which alumni and students could connect including recruitment and admissions, orientation, networking, and career development. According to Brant (1993):

Every student advancement program sets out to prepare today’s members to become its institution’s most involved alumni of tomorrow...Motivating your student advancement group to take ownership of their ideas, programs, and fellow members is the single most important leadership tool at your disposal. (p.79)

Appreciating the importance of involving students from the very beginning potentially mitigates the time it takes for the alumni-institution relationship to ignite and the time it takes to build viable alumni relations programming.

Relationships take time. The vast majority of community colleges were founded from the mid-1950s to mid-1970s with the community college resource development functions

being initiated later, with most community college foundations being launched ten to fifteen years later beyond the initial startup of the college. Even more recent is the development of alumni relations programs on community college campuses. Herbin et al. (2006) wrote, “When considering effective alumni engagement, it is useful to consider how long a college has been in existence and gauge the span of time in which colleges have had to build relationships with alumni”(p. 5). Although community colleges are still relatively young compared to most universities, the need to allow time for relationships to build and grow with alumni is not unique. Researchers studying universities advise institutions to be poised to commit no less than ten years toward the alumni cultivation and program development effort before an alumni program is to the point of self-sustainability (Boyd et al., 2009; Perkins, 1990; Shuford, 2007; Van Houten, 1989). Successful alumni relations programs require “a long-term investment of time and cultivating a positive relationship with individual alumni” (Tsao & Coll, 2005, p. 381).

Worth the investment of time and resources. The alumni participants I interviewed were a diverse, engaging and lively group of individuals who care about Verrazano. They all indicated being transformed in some way by the education they received, the people they have met, and by the relationships they have formed while being connected to the institution. The alumni desire meaningful ways to be engaged with the institution and they like being informed about what is going on with the institution. They wish to be a part of the institution’s growth and support of students. They expressed desires to give back through charitable gifts, resources of knowledge, and by volunteering their time. The professionals I interviewed were intensely dedicated to the students and to the institution. They perform their

jobs with passion and a strong commitment to see students do well doing whatever it takes to assist in the students' educational development. The gap it seems in this particular group is bringing the alumni relations effort to the forefront of the institution's strategic goals that will allow for greater numbers to be involved and a seamless transition from student to alumni to occur. In order to ensure growth for the program, the retention of alumni and the cultivation of students who will become alumni, vital resources must be allocated toward relationship cultivation (Water, 2008). Boyd et al. (2009) found, "The [alumni] organization is a long-term effort, and college administrators must be willing to commit both the personnel and financial resources to the program for the long term" (p. 100).

Dedicated resources. The findings noted the overwhelming need for dedicated staff and resources to advance the alumni relations functions. While all were positive about the work of Verrazano's foundation and specifically Grace, for whom the duties of alumni relations is assigned, the participants felt the alumni relations function was limited in its capacity to reach the alumni and the internal campus community. With the function relegated to a portion of one person's position, the alumni relations program is seen as being compromised by all the other duties assigned to one position. All of the participants recognized the need to have additional resources allocated to the alumni relations function.

The significance of dedicating suitable resources in terms of staffing and operating dollars has been noted throughout all of the alumni relations literature. Most recently, Starace (2012) studied community college presidents, advancement leaders, professionals, and volunteers. All agreed that "community college alumni not only enhance the image and reputations of the institution, but also have the potential to be a significant source of financial

support” (p. 38). These presidents too noted that community colleges would only attain this level of alumni support if they too made an investment. According to Starace (2012), “Staffing the advancement department appropriately sends a message to the college community that alumni and fundraising are important priorities of the college” (p. 42). Thus, if community college alumni initiatives are to advance to any level of prominence in terms of funding and programming, there must be an elevated sense of direction, purpose, and strategy allocated to visioning and determining the best ways to connect and re-connect alumni.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present a discussion on the findings of this study based on analysis of the data on community college alumni and professionals and how they understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. This chapter opened with a description and overview of the study to include methodological choice as well as criteria used for selection of the college site and study participants. J. Grunig and Huang’s relationship management theory outcomes were reviewed and referenced to how it was used as the conceptual framework, how it served as a guide in the development of the two interview protocols, and how it provided structure for the initial analysis of the data. Information was provided outlining the four primary themes and sub-themes followed by a detailed discussion of the four findings that were revealed through analysis of the data. From this discussion of findings and in relation to theory, research, and practice, definitive implications and recommendations have been identified which will be introduced in the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

The purpose of this qualitative explanatory case study was to uncover collectively with a sample of 18 participants their understanding of the relationship between a community college and its graduates. The theoretical framework that guided this study was Relationship Management Theory (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; J. Grunig & Huang, 2000). Situated within the context of alumni relations programming at one North Carolina community college, this study explored how graduates and professionals explain and perceive the relationship and the relationship building process, their perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. Prior to this research, three studies focused on community college alumni have informed research and practice. Skari's 2011 dissertation determined who of community college alumni give and finding: a) community college alumni are the largest untapped pool of prospective donors, b) giving predictors are consistent with those of four-year institutions; and c) the likelihood of giving is most closely related to age, wealth, charitable giving behaviors, and student experiences. The fact that alumni who obtain an associate's degree are twice as likely to give is helpful as is the impressive statistic that community college alumni who give to their four-year alma mater are four times as likely to give to their community college (Skari, 2011; Skari, 2014). Starace's 2012 dissertation followed Dr. Skari's by assessing the perceptions of Pennsylvania community college presidents, advancement professionals, and alumni volunteers. "Among the research's chief findings is the powerful extent to which presidents are responsible for the success of their institution's alumni engagement efforts." (Heaton, 2013, np) Finally, research in 2012

conducted by CASE research office in conjunction with CASE's Center for Community College Advancement revealed:

The data indicate that where community colleges intentionally and systematically track and engage their former students, they can expect a corresponding increase in philanthropy... This research also show that, as with other areas of advancement, community colleges have made minimal investments in staffing and resources to develop alumni relations programs. (Paradise & Heaton, 2013, p. 28)

Equipped with findings from these previous studies, this research sought to extend the understandings of community college alumni, and specifically to determine ways to build meaningful relationships with alumni. Major implications from this study reveal that community college alumni want to be involved in the life of the institution after graduation. Institutional culture is paramount in the success of the community college alumni relations program. Presidents and key leaders must communicate the vision and importance of the alumni relations functions and must allocate sufficient funding to allow staff to fully develop the programs. Interpersonal relationships are significant to the development of the student to alumni-community college relationship. The time to begin building these relationships must begin the moment the student seeks information about the institution. Initiating and sustaining the community college-alumni relationship takes authentic commitment, strategic and thoughtful communication, and an appreciative culture that elevates alumni relations as a strategic area of institutional focus.

These conclusions originated from the un-packing of the relationship element by element and the discussion of the findings. Building upon the four relational themes

(relational characteristics, relational influences, relational roles, and relational impact)

introduced in Chapter four, there were four analytic findings introduced and discussed in the previous chapter which are re-introduced below:

Finding #1: The community college-alumni relationship is initiated through interpersonal relationships between individuals or a group of individuals.

Finding #2: The community college-alumni relationship is socially constructed and given meaning through individual and interpersonal interactions built upon trust and commitment.

Finding #3: Personal transformations as students give meaning to the community college-alumni relationship that result in a more profound affinity for the institution.

Finding #4: Institutional culture, communication, timing, and dedicated resources are significant to the successful advancement of the student and college relationship.

The implications are based on the data, findings, analysis, and interpretations drawn from this study and offer an integrated understanding of the community college-alumni relationship.

Highlighted within this final chapter are some of the major insights, challenges, and possibilities of what future researchers might like to know in preparation of further research.

Also included are considerations community colleges might anticipate with the facilitation, development, and sustainment of alumni-institutional relationships. In addition to the implications and recommendations presented in this chapter, I introduce a definition of the community college-alumni relationship. This definition is based on the meanings and interpretations of what I have come to learn from this research.

Furthermore, this study resulted in the new development of the **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle**, a praxis model created to link theory to practice in the context of the community college student to alumni relationship lifecycle. The model consists of six phases beginning when prospective students make initial contact with an institution during recruitment and in seeking information about a particular college. The relationship then progresses through several phases until moving to the final phase – lifelong dedication. At this stage, community college alumni develop a sense of responsibility to the institution and express desires to give back. If appropriately nurtured, this is the stage alumni remain for life. The model will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter. Following the discussion of the new model, this chapter concludes with a brief reflection on this study. First, is an integrated discussion of implications and recommendations related to theory.

Implications for Theory

This study examined the perceptions of the *relationship* in community college alumni relations. The results from this research highlight the appropriateness of framing this type of study with relationship management theory and a qualitative approach. The personal narratives and insights of the participants along with the connections to theory, research, and practice bring a whole new level of awareness to community college alumni relations. The findings from this study of community college alumni relations indicate four primary implications related to theory. Following the discussion of each of the implications, recommendations for the future in building on relationship management theory will be presented.

Relationship Management and Qualitative Research. This study contributes to theory as it confirms the use of qualitative methodologies to assess the relational connections for organization and public relationships. In conducting the search for relevant literature, it was noted that the vast majority of research sought statistical confirmation of the relationship measures and outcomes that have developed from this theory. While quantitative methods are worthwhile, the value of qualitative methods for studying Relationship Management theory should not be overlooked. The personal narratives of the participants provided a rich account of the community college-alumni relationship and added greatly to the overall understanding of the major themes and findings.

J.E. Grunig (2002) proposed:

Relationships cannot always be reduced to a few fixed-response items on a questionnaire. Or, one might want more detail on the nature of the relationship and more insight from member of publics and management on why they have described the relationship as they have done. (p.2)

Relationships are very complex phenomena that require emotional, intellectual, and for organizations, strategic considerations. Obtaining a genuine understanding of organizations, such as community colleges and their publics like alumni, faculty, and staff, requires a more in-depth examination. The qualitative approach then supports the inclusion of contextual distinctions that are difficult to produce from a quantitative research design.

Relational Lens and Community College-Alumni Relationships. The use of relationship management served as an effective framework for this study. Relationship Management theory grounded the complex and nebulous nature of this type of relationship

with specific relational outcomes from which to consider the community college-alumni relationship. Relationship-based models have been predominantly researched in the context of marketing, public relations, and organizational management. What has been learned is that the concept of excellent customer service is not based solely on the service or product being offered, but more importantly revolves around the nature of the relationship in the exchange. When viewed from the stakeholders' perspective, relationships can influence the success or failure of an organization. The relational attitudes and characteristics of how the community college-alumni relationship is defined illustrate strong connections to relationship management theory. The four characteristics of trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction were important elements from which to validate the community college-alumni relationship. An important consideration and connection to theory is the fact that the presence of the relational elements of trust, commitment, obligation, and satisfaction suggest a strong intention toward building and sustaining the community college-alumni relationship (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Previous studies have confirmed the relational elements of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality as factors that are measurable and important to the organization-public relationship. While all four were used in the development of the design, implementation, and analysis, a significant finding of this study was that control mutuality was replaced with obligation. The control mutuality characteristic did not surface as being important to the community college-alumni relationship and was instead supplanted with the expressed sense of obligation that alumni have to the institution, and in turn, one that college professionals have to students and institution. This realization was likely due to the underdevelopment of the community college-alumni relationship and alumni relations

programming. A more thorough understanding of not only how, but why, each element relates to the development of the community college-alumni relationship would further extend the contextual understanding of the community college participants and setting.

Interpersonal Relationships and Community College-Alumni Relations. This study contributes to theory by highlighting the interpersonal relationships aspect of relationship management theory. Most often formed initially between a college professional such as a faculty member and a student, these interpersonal relationships are the foundation of the community college-alumni relationship. Multiple studies have found similar results (Dean, 2007; Gaier, 2005; Skari, 2011) of the influence of the interpersonal relationship. Most recently, Borden, Shaker and Kienker (2013) have called to question the ethical dynamics of the relationships and the consequences of such relationships for institutions that rely so heavily on alumni giving. As community colleges develop more sophisticated programs that are widely supported, the challenge for institutions will be in maintaining mindfulness around the numerous sensitivities pertaining to these relationships. Interpersonal connections influence the quality of the institutional-graduate relationship as students. Likewise, those same interpersonal relationships have influence on the behaviors of the alumni of the institution. This study strongly suggests that positive relationship attitudes aligned with positive actionable behaviors resulted in an increased level of engagement with the institution.

Transformative Learning and the Community College Student to Alumni Experience. This study introduced the notion that when transformative learning occurs as a

community college student it influences the relationships formed while a student and also influences the behaviors of alumni. The alumni participants of this study felt their experiences as community college students improved their overall wellbeing. As introduced earlier, Carter was particularly vocal about his experiences at the community college saying, “Those were the best days of my life!” Not a particularly good student, Carter said he could easily have been sitting on the other side of the law in jail, as opposed to being a successful young attorney. Similarly, Perry was devastated by his job loss to the point his mother said she thought someone had died. However, Perry found himself at Verrazano. He discovered people who cared about him. Today, Perry thrives as he assists other students while working in Verrazano’s Financial Aid Office.

A better understanding of the relational influence and connection to transformative learning is needed. What is known is that the transformative learning process is enhanced as students are supported through their learning and the trying out of new roles. As the students obtain greater knowledge, they have a greater sense of confidence “in their new world view” (Brock, 2013, p. 21). Faculty and staff who interact and form relationships with these students need to also understand the leadership role they have in this transformative process. “This form of leadership involves the creation of an emotional attachment between leaders and their followers, and this emotional attachment helps to shape the values, aspirations, and priorities of followers” (Barrosos Castro, Villegas Perinas & Casillas, 2008, p. 1842).

Recommendations for Theory

- The characteristic of control mutuality should be further explored to understand how the dynamics of power and positionality of the alumni and professional groups encourage or negate mutual control between the organization and its publics.
- Scholars, practitioners, and researchers should work with community college alumni to determine an appropriate research instrument that is specific to better defining the factors that initiate and sustain the community college-alumni relationship.
- A better understanding of the roots of transformation for the community college student and the subsequent role of these transformative experiences is warranted
- The applicability and transferability of relationship management suggests this study or one similarly could be replicated in other contexts, but additional studies in various community college contexts would contribute to the research.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this research offered participants the opportunities to explore and offer their understanding of the relationship with one another and with the institution. The effects of the relationship were noted in chapter four as having cultural, economic, political, and social ramifications. This study's findings generated implications for practice related to the alumni-institutional relationship that triggered the conceptualization of a new definition of the community college-alumni relationship. Additionally, a step-by-step model was created to be a practical tool for building and sustaining alumni relationships. Both the community college-alumni relationship definition and the **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle** will now be presented.

Definition of the Community College-Alumni Relationship

The community college-alumni relationship is the holistic phenomenon that results from multiple interpersonal exchanges that occur at pivotal times so as to lead to the development of feelings that are awakened to the degree that they evolve from being solely interpersonal connections between individuals to a heightened sense of awareness of how the community college-alumni relationship and subsequent relational actions can positively impact alumni and the institution.

The Community College Alumni Relationship Cycle Model

Developing relationships with community college students take time and require concerted efforts in regards to the various stages of relational development, and the uniqueness of the community college setting and its student body. Some of the challenges in developing these relationships pertain to the lifestyles of many community college students who juggle families, jobs, and school simultaneously whereby students stay on campus just long enough to complete classes and required assignments. Additionally, many community college students have sporadic enrollment patterns – enrolling in and out of college, with significant gaps in persistence and degree completion in a timely manner. Similarly, community college students “swirl” attending multiple institutions simultaneously – a common issue at Verrazano given its close proximity to a neighboring university. However, recent national and state attention is shifting the focus to degree completion and successful transfer. National attention has been brought to community colleges via the Building Americans Skills Through Community Colleges, an initiative of President Barack Obama’s with a goal of graduating 5 million more community college students by 2020 (White House

Website, 2015). In addition to the President's agenda, *Completion by Design*, a five-year Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation signature initiative that works with community colleges to significantly increase completion and graduation rates for low-income students under 26 is well underway (CBD, 2015). Within the State of North Carolina, there is a state-wide push for completion alongside its recent overhaul of the articulation agreement with the State's 16 public universities (NCCCS Website, 2015). Through these national and state initiatives, retention and persistence are major areas of focus nationwide whereby alumni could lend volunteer time and share their personal stories in supporting current students. Based on the feedback and suggestions of the alumni participants and the reflection of what they had to say about their impressions, the probability of the relationship positively impacting these areas, and others such as recruitment, are likely. One recurring theme for alumni participants was related to time and timing. According to Karp, Hughes and O'Gara (2008), "Community college students are thought to lack the time to participate in activities, such as clubs, that would facilitate social integration" (Abstract). However, in Karp, Hughes and O'Gara's (2008) study of Tinto's integration framework for community college students, their research uncovered that the majority of community college students do develop attachments to their institutions. Along with attachment, Karp, et. al. (2008) noted that academic and social integration work in concert together to influence persistence student persistence. The earlier the relationship can be cultivated, the more likely students will stay engaged with the college. According to Herbin, et. al. (2006), "Colleges that form a relationship with and offer some form of orientation to current students on their role as alumni tend to have a larger base of alumni contacts" (p.25).

I created a tentative model (see Figure 10) as a means of putting a structured plan in place that can be tested and practiced by community colleges. This model was inspired by the interview conducted with Madeline, who was the vice president of student affairs at the time of the interview. In asking her about the functions of the office, she told me her office consisted of all the “*ations*” meaning orientation, registration, graduation. Reflecting on Madeline’s comments and given the feedback from the alumni participants regarding the need to engage students much earlier, I conceptualized the **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle** (Figure 10) to serve as a structured and practical model for community colleges to strategically plan for and implement student and alumni relationship development and engagement. The **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle model** launches a visual and practical starting place for institutions to use in initiating and sustaining relationships with future students, students, and alumni.

**The Community College Student to Alumni
Relationship Lifecycle Model@Twyla Casey Wells**

**STEP 1: Organizational Assessment
STEP 2: Development of Readiness Roadmap for Engagement
STEP 3: Initiate Personal Connections**



Figure 11 - The Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle Model

As shown in Figure 11, there are two overarching activities – *inform and engage* that are identified as leading to *commitment*. While individuals are being *informed* of the college, they are going through the stages of seeking information and making an application. This stage is critical as it is the first time the connection is made to the student and the opportunity for the relationship to be initiated. The next phase, *engagement*, is supported through the acts of actually registering for classes and actively participating as a student. Lastly, by being informed and fully engaged, it is supposed students develop a commitment that extends and sustains until the last stage as a student leading to degree fulfillment or certification completion. Once the requirements have been fulfilled and the student is no longer actively enrolled, the individual then transitions to the status of alumni. Through activities of involvement, the individual stays engaged with the institution where one develops a lifelong commitment.

Next, the phases are described more in-depth highlighting the ways an institution might consider using the model to lead to development of relationships and implementation of the relational phases.

Phase 1: Recruitment – Information. This initial phase of the relationship begins the moment a student obtains information about the college, whether through being actively recruited or seeking information on his own. Community college students are the institution's future alumni. As such, the manner in which a potential student is treated by college personnel during this initial phase can dramatically influence perception and can move a student from solely expressing an interest in the institution, to actually making an application to the college. Community college alumni can play a pivotal role in the initiation of the

relationship serving as recruiters, volunteers, and as guest speakers in classes to potential students.

Phase 2: Application – Orientation. During the second phase, individuals have made a formal decision to engage with the institution by making an official application to the college. Potential ways a college could involve the full spectrum of the students would be to encourage further involvement with the potential student during the first two phases. This level of engagement early on in the relationship also would involve lifelong dedicated alumni. Examples could include alumni sending a personal note to potential students from their former high schools, or placing a short phone call to the student to address any existing questions the student may have, and to share their personal stories as community college students.

Phase 3: Registration. At this phase, individuals are beginning a more formalized phase of the relationship by committing and enrolling in classes. Alumni can be helpful during this phase in having a physical presence on campus, volunteering to assist in addressing questions, facilitating tours, etc.

Phase 4: Participation. Students are now fully integrated into the life of the institution during this phase. In addition to be enrolled in academic classes, through the assistance of alumni, students can be encouraged to be more fully involved in campus activities and campus life. It was found that student experiences and involvement, along with interpersonal relationships, strongly influenced the likelihood of involvement once alumni.

Phase 5: Graduation. This phase is expected to be the most highly emotional for students. It is a time of personal change for students as they achieve a rite of passage. As

students begin the transition to the workforce or transfer to another institution, alumni can provide important connections to outside networks as mentors, potential employers, and references.

Phase 6: Lifelong Dedication. The final phase of the model, the initial time during this phase is critical for the institution as sustaining the relationship will require tremendous work that is grounded by intentional and well-thought out plans. New alumni will transition to that of mentor and prepare to welcome a new group of students while seasoned alumni will be prime candidates to serve as advisory board directors, guest instructors, and potentially trustees.

Recommendations for Practice. Based on the findings of this study, four additional components were integrated into the proposed model. Just as the *inform* and *engage* stages suggest leading to *commitment*, *institutional culture*, *communication*, *representation*, and *timing* were identified by participants as being critical to the successful development of the community college-alumni relationship. When asked about the future of alumni relations, all of the alumni participants were thoughtful and practical in terms of what they felt would be likely to influence the community college-alumni relationship. This next section provides recommendations for practice that address the abovementioned elements that should be considered in development of this **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle**, or any other model used for engaging community college students and alumni.

Institutional culture and representation. Without fail, the alumni interviewed highlighted the intense level of customer service for which Verrazano is known. As noted by all participants of this study, Verrazano is known for its commitment to students. Countless

recollections were shared showcasing how college personnel were always willing and making extra efforts to assist students. Though the institution had a great sense of service to all students, Verrazano reported being in a state of transition and assessment concerning the college advancement division. The recommendation of the model suggests community colleges institute a strategic area of focus to engage alumni. Alumni convincingly expressed desires to be involved with the institution. All offered assistance and sought meaningful ways to connect to the college leadership, student body, greater college community, and to each other. Providing opportunities to connect to the institution could very well be instituted early with students, and to such degrees that alumni feel like “insiders” in the college community. By instituting the alumni focus as part of the institutional long-range plans, it is imperative human and capital resources are allocated for the foundation and alumni functions.

According to Klingaman (2012):

Efforts to promote culture change in the interest of empowering development must be purposeful, incremental, and permanent. There is not end point at which you exclaim, ‘There, we did it!’ Fundraising is hard, hard work, and the temptation for a community college to put it on autopilot after an initial focus for a year or two is immense. (p. 42)

Community colleges must intentionally incorporate alumni into the institution’s strategic focus. When planning for immediate and long-term success, alumni relations should be integrated into the visions, missions, and goals of the institution and the foundation.

Articulated, envisioned, and led by the president, the college should develop and support an institutional culture that appreciates and engages alumni. Ways to accomplish this are by

developing and supporting the role of faculty and staff in the manners in which they communicate with students and form valuable relationships. Faculty need to know they are the primary links to alumni and should assist advancement staff in determining ways to easily connect their personal relationships with alumni to the broader institutional-graduate relationship. A simple way to accomplish this would be to invite alumni back for a social event such as a coffee and classroom chat so that alumni could visit with faculty while learning about important program updates. Formalizing the role of alumni with specific tasks to incorporate them into functions of the college whereby they present a positive influence for student recruitment, retention, and completion, along with their roles as financial contributors, is important to the successful implementation of the model. Klingaman (2012) suggests, “Consider asking your alumni board to organize an alumni phone night. This works best when alumni are calling former classmates from programs with high levels of affiliation and can be a viable option for any applied program” (p. 148-149).

While results may be modest initially, providing alumni with a demonstrable task with measurable outcomes solidifies the reasoning for their involvement and produces definable results that can be celebrated and increased. With donor acquisition as a primary function of advancement, alumni volunteer donors can play pivotal roles in securing new volunteers and donors. Potential ways to include alumni and influence the institutional culture are:

1. Include alumni in institutional initiatives such as annual and strategic planning. Make certain alumni have a “seat at the family table” to allow alumni voices input and to bridge information back to the alumni constituency.

2. Appoint alumni to serve in pivotal roles as trustees, foundation board directors, and advisory board members.
3. Educate and inform faculty and staff about the alumni relations function and alumni association.
4. Include alumni in fun, social events that allow for natural engagement and relationship building.

Communication and Timing. Communication and timing the engagement are essential to the successful development of the student to alumni relationship. Communication that is both accessible by many and dependable and trustworthy to all is critical to the success of the **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle**. Institutions must investigate best practices and develop communication plans that allow for meaningful two-way communication delivered through multi-channel marketing. According to Proper and Caboni (2014), “Electronic marketing and communication channels available to university marketers and public relations professionals have grown exponentially over the last twenty years” (p. 20). With a plethora of resources available, the task begins with how, when, to whom, and in what market the communication must occur. Alumni can be a part of the internal, external, community, and government sectors; therefore, the messages the institution wants to share must be clearly defined and compelling enough to encompass the relationship building aspect of the communications function. Once the institutional culture has been molded such that alumni relations is an integral to the life of the college whereby alumni play a role in the overall well-being of the institution, communicating and timing become central to the development of the relationship formation. Alumni were particularly vocal about the

timing or initiating of the relationship. Based on the feedback of the graduates, they felt the relationship should originate much sooner than the end of their studies, which has been noted as the practice at Verrazano. The initiation of the community college student to alumni relationship should begin the moment a potential student seeks information. Waiting until the day of graduation rehearsal to initiate the relationship is, according to alumni participants of this study, much too late. Therefore, the **Community College Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle** model allows for engagement at any point of entry where students or potential students make contact, or where alumni become reconnected to the institution. In addition to timing the engagement of the relationship, there is the consideration of time as a resource to be appreciated and cared for by the institution. Being mindful of the complexities of community college students and how best to communicate in a timely fashion what it is you want them to know is of great consideration. This level of mindfulness circles back to the institutional culture and showcases how alumni are appreciated and the alumni relationship is nurtured. The time factor is crucial in terms of what is available to community colleges in terms of building relationships with students and alumni. Considerations of how best to approach this in practice are:

1. Begin treating potential students as your future alumni the moment they seek information about the institution.
2. Communicate the connection to potential students, currently enrolled students, and alumni their importance to the life of the institution. Treat them like family and make them apart of the institutional family.

3. Seek alumni's input to determine the most effective communication plans and strategies.
4. Connect students and alumni through opportunities for advocacy, mentoring, tutoring, career counseling, and institutional fundraising

Dedicated Resources. Though noted in multiple areas throughout this study, I felt it was compelling enough to close out the recommendations section for practice with a distinct section to discuss the need for dedicated resources and appropriate staff to advance the alumni relations functions. As noted in previous research conducted by CASE and countless other studies, community college alumni functions are, as is all advancement, are woefully underfunded in terms of the human and capital resources allocated (Paradise & Heaton, 2012). While all participants were positive about the work of Verrazano's Foundation and specifically Grace, for whom the duties of alumni relations is assigned, the participants felt the alumni relations function was limited in its potential to reach alumni and the internal campus community. With the function relegated to merely a portion of one position, the alumni relations program is seen as being compromised by all the other duties assigned to one position. All of the alumni participants recognized this and remarked on the need to have additional resources allocated to the alumni relations function. The significance of dedicating suitable resources in terms of staffing and operating dollars has been noted throughout all of the alumni relations literature. According to Herbin, et. al. (2006), "Alumni development must be an intentional, comprehensive, and definable commitment by the college" (p. 2). This chapter now turns to the discussion of implications and recommendations for future research.

Implications for Future Research

The importance of pursuing an understanding of the “relationships” of community college alumni relations is supported through the findings of this study and in the higher education and relationship management literature, particularly on the various dynamics and motivators associated with alumni giving, and the relational roles of faculty. Recent studies focusing solely on community college alumni have begun to finally diminish the vast gap in the knowledge that existed for this specific population. Using evidence-based and rigorously designed studies to illuminate a greater understanding of the community college-graduate context, these studies have focused primarily on factors that influence alumni giving (Skari, 2011) as well as the professionals’ perspectives on how best to engage community college alumni (Starace, 2012). In conducting this study, the goal was to try and obtain a deeper understanding of the community college-alumni relationship. Based on what was learned from this study, implications for future research are provided followed by recommendations for future inquiry.

Expanding the Understanding of the Community College-Alumni Relationship Lifecycle. While a growing body of literature on higher education alumni exists, it is predominantly focused contextually on that of four-year public and private universities. In addition, research has been concentrated in recent years on understanding various factors related solely to alumni charitable giving. Recent studies in the community college context are similar to four-year institutions in that Skari’s 2011 study addressed who of community college alumni were actively giving or most likely to give, and Starace’s 2012 qualitative work considered practices that community college professionals view as best to engage

community college alumni. As community college alumni relations programming becomes more established, additional research is necessary to consider the phenomenon from various perspectives and studied over an ongoing period of time.

Recommendations for Future Research. Based on the discussion of implications, the following recommendations are offered to advance future research:

- Determine if any similarities exist with other community colleges. An interesting consideration would be to determine how college culture or college location influences how the relationship might be viewed.
- Extend the understanding of the community college-alumni relationship by conducting a longitudinal study that would follow alumni, faculty, and staff over a period of time.
- Examine the community college-alumni relationship by conducting a quantitative study to determine the generalizability of this study's findings to determine the extent and ways in which the findings can be replicated in other studies.
- Explore in-depth the role of institutional culture in the development of the graduate-institutional relationship.
- Collaborate with other institutions of higher learning to assess the organization-public relational aspect in order to gain a broader understanding of the alumni mindset.
- Research the perceptions and relational habits of unique alumni groups – such as student ambassadors, student government association, Phi Theta Kappa (a national organization recognizing academic achievement in the community college setting).

- Explore more deeply the concept of “institutional family” and the role of this mindset in determining alumni participation.
- Consider the effectiveness and role of alumni relations communications in the overall development of the community college-alumni relationship.

Limitations. While a qualitative study limited to 18 participants is not suitable to proclaim a universal understanding of the community college-alumni relationship, it does serve as a valuable first step toward informing the research and practice communities about the nature of the relationship shared between alumni and the community college. In view of the fact that community college-alumni relationships are complex phenomenon, given that institutional culture plays a significant role in the community college-alumni relationship, and because there are multiple factors influencing the relationship formation and sustainment, the recommendations being put forth should be considered individually for appropriateness and feasibility at any given institution. The findings from this research described the understandings of alumni and professionals of one North Carolina community college. While the desire was to shed insight into the community college-alumni phenomenon, these experiences may be unique to these participants, the setting, and timing of the study and not generalizable to other community college employees or graduates (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). This study’s findings do offer insight into and increase the understanding of how community college alumni and professionals’ beliefs, experiences, and insights shaped their perceptions of the community college-alumni relationship. Because organization-public relationships were the primary focus of this research and relationship

management guided the processes, other considerations or frameworks could potentially result in entirely different understandings of the community college-alumni relationship.

Chapter Summary

It was my desire when settling on a topic for research to study an area within community college advancement that would illuminate the community college setting while celebrating and confirming the merit of studying such a unique group of individuals. With over 1,100 colleges located throughout our country, there are likely none of you reading this who have not in some way been affected by a community college graduate. Emergency medical first responders, local healthcare providers, public safety officers, entrepreneurs, or employees of a key economically stimulating industry – all of our lives are daily impacted by those who receive their education and training at these localized two-year institutions. Because traditional funding sources are steadily decreasing year after year, it is imperative that community colleges establish meaningful and lasting relationships with these students. They are our community workforce and present and future leaders. They are our college's potential advocates, mentors, volunteers, and yes, donors.

Community colleges have for far too long dismissed alumni as not being viable to the overall advancement of the college. America's community colleges have had millions of students enter into the proverbial *open door*. And yet, we stand looking at them walk right back out that same door without so much as an attempt to establish a relationship. I believe, if nothing else, this study shows that community college alumni do care about their community colleges. They desire to have that relationship, because from their profound and transformative experiences, they have gained so much. Similarly, the community college

professionals interviewed for this study are driven by an internal mission to do their very best to help each student succeed. The community college-alumni relationship enhances the lives of students and alumni, inspires and sustains educators and professionals during challenging times, and solidifies the meaning of the *ties that bind* community college students to the institutions. I look forward to further refining the community college-alumni definition as I explore the applicability of the **Community College-Student to Alumni Relationship Lifecycle** model. It will in all hopes be deemed a suitable model to foster community college student and graduate engagement. Once the phenomenon of community college alumni relations are more fully developed, broadly institutionalized, and equitably funded, the programs should serve a critical role in advancing the importance of community colleges thus boosting the institutions to their rightful and deserving status within higher education, educational philanthropy, and our communities across America.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Submission for New Studies

GENERAL INFORMATION

Date Submitted: May 17, 2013
Title of Project: Understanding the "relationship" in community college alumni relations
1. Principal Investigator: Twyla Casey Wells
2. Principal Investigator Email: tcwells@johnstoncc.edu
3. Department: Leadership, Policy, Adult and Higher Education
4. Campus Box Number: 7801
5. Phone Number: (919) 209-2119
6. Faculty Sponsor Name if Student Submission: Dr. Susan Bracken
7. Faculty Sponsor Email Address if Student Submission: sjbracke@ncsu.edu
8. Source of Funding (Sponsor, Federal, External, etc): <i>If Externally funded, include sponsor name and university account number:</i>
RANK: Faculty: <input type="checkbox"/> ; Student: <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate <input type="checkbox"/> Masters <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PhD; Other:

As the principal investigator, my signature testifies that I have read and understood the University Policy and Procedures for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in the Proposal Narrative and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to the Committee in the form of an amendment for its approval prior to implementation.

Electronic submissions to the IRB are considered signed via an electronic signature

Principal Investigator:

<u>Twyla Casey Wells</u>	<u>Twyla C Wells</u>	<u>May 17, 2013</u>
(typed/printed name)	(signature)	(date)

*As the faculty sponsor, my signature (or electronic submission) testifies that I have reviewed this application thoroughly and will oversee the research in its entirety. I hereby acknowledge my role as the **principal investigator of record**.*

Faculty Sponsor:

<u>Dr. Susan Bracken</u>	<u>Dr. Susan Bracken</u>	<u>May 17, 2013</u>
(typed/printed name)	(signature)	(date)

PLEASE COMPLETE AND E-MAIL TO: irb-coordinator@ncsu.edu

Please include consent forms and other study documents with your application and submit as one document. *Electronic submissions to the IRB are considered signed via an electronic signature. For

student submissions this means that the faculty sponsor has reviewed the proposal prior to it being submitted and is copied on the submission.

For SPARCS office use only

Reviewer Decision (Expedited or Exempt Review)

Exempt Approved Approved pending modifications Table

Expedited Review Category: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8a 8b 8c 9

Reviewer Name

Signature

Date

**North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
GUIDELINES FOR A PROPOSAL NARRATIVE**

In your narrative, address each of the topics outlined below. Every application for IRB review must contain a proposal narrative, and failure to follow these directions will result in delays in reviewing/processing the protocol.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Briefly describe in lay language the purpose of the proposed research and why it is important.

The purpose of this study is to explore and better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study will explore how alumni and key leaders of the community college define and perceive the relationship building process, their perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship. Contrary to private and public four-year universities, community colleges have only in recent years begun the development process of alumni relations programming. Employing an explanatory qualitative case study design, one North Carolina community college will be studied as a means of developing a deeper understanding of how community college alumni, development practitioners and leadership define the relationship in the context of a community college alumni relations program.

The following research question serves to guide the overall design and development of this research study:

How do community college alumni and community college professionals each perceive the alumni-community college relationship?

2. If student research, indicate whether for a course, thesis, dissertation, or independent research.

Dissertation

B. SUBJECT POPULATION

1. How many subjects will be involved in the research?

This study will utilize from 15 - 20 community college alumni and community college professional members from one North Carolina community college site for the data collection.

2. Describe how subjects will be recruited. Please provide the IRB with any recruitment materials that will be used.

The site selected for this study will be a community college with its primary campus located in North Carolina. As one of the nation's largest community college systems, the North Carolina Community College System presently consists of 58 colleges. To meet the criteria for my selection, I will seek a community college located within North Carolina that meets at minimum three of five specific criteria. Sites will be prioritized based on the highest number of criteria met with utmost consideration extended to campuses with an established alumni association and/or alumni program existing for three or more years.

Criteria 1: Have an alumni relations program in existence for a minimum of three years.

Given the nature of alumni relations programming and the time involved in the cultivation and development of constituents, the data necessary for the proposed study is expected to come from an established campus site. A newly formulated program will be unable to provide the depth of established connections and experiences with alumni while a developed program will more likely ensure a sufficient number of alumni engaged with the institution as to provide an adequate pool of participants to interview.

Criteria 2: Have an active alumni relations council or alumni association in existence.

Institutions with established alumni relations council or alumni associations speak to the specific strategies the institution has put into place in order to formalize the alumni program as a means of engaging former students.

Criteria 3: Have an alumni director, coordinator or other professional for whom the responsibilities of alumni relations constitutes at minimum thirty percent (30 percent) of their job duties.

Institutional commitment is extremely important in establishing an alumni relations program. It is assumed by virtue of having a person dedicated to the development of the alumni program, the institution's leadership is acknowledging the importance of the program to the overall health and progression of the institution. The dedication of the institution is communicated clearly to alumni as well as the internal and external community when precious funds are allocated to fund a program of this nature.

Criteria 4: Have a structured annual program that appeals directly to alumni constituents.

Relationships are reciprocal with defined and shared goals of the relationship being a central part of the process. Relationship management has theoretically developed primarily through social exchange theory (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Broom, et al., 2000). Social exchange theory suggests mutual benefit and goal attainment for both parties can be brought about through voluntary exchanges. A primary goal of any alumni relations program is to engage and inform.

Criteria 5: Have a community college foundation, working either independently or

interdependently, with the alumni relations program.

Community college foundations are public charities chartered and operated as tax-exempt nonprofit corporations subject to the provision of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and the laws of the states in which they operate. Community college foundations typically exist as per the authority of the Board of Trustees of the institution which the foundation serves. Most community college foundations are administered and governed by an independent board of directors who serve voluntarily and without compensation. Community college foundations serve primarily to secure and receive funding and to ethically and legally manage and disseminate funds according to the wishes of donors and as prescribed by the laws of public charities. Additionally, alumni relations programs are most often situated within the organizational structure of the foundation and advancement divisions.

Initially, participants will be identified by the foundation executive director, alumni director or other designee of the community college. Once identified, prospective participants will be contacted via phone or email by the researcher in order to explain study and gauge level of interest in participating in the study. Subsequently, snowball sampling techniques will be used with committed study participants to recruit additional alumni and professional participants who meet the criteria specified in item #3 below.

3. List specific eligibility requirements for subjects (or describe screening procedures), including those criteria that would exclude otherwise acceptable subjects.

The criteria for the selection of community college professional participants include the following: 1) The president of the institution; 2) the executive director of the college foundation; and 3) the alumni director/coordinator or person for whom alumni relations programming constitutes a minimum of 30 percent of their position responsibilities; 4) full-time members of the student services staff who have worked at the college for a minimum of three years; and 5) full-time faculty who have worked at the college for a minimum of three years.

The criteria for selection of community college alumni participants will be initially those alumni participants who are identified by the institution as being connected to the college via the alumni relations programming through a) service on any institutional advisory or governing board; or b) service to the institution as a volunteer; or c) regular participant in alumni and college functions as an attendee, contributor, or guest speaker.

4. Explain any sampling procedure that might exclude specific populations.

Criteria are based on degree of participation with alumni relations programming. There is nothing in the criteria that excludes participation based on demographics.

5. Disclose any relationship between researcher and subjects - such as, teacher/student; employer/employee.

There are no relationships between this researcher and the subjects.

6. Check any vulnerable populations included in study:

- minors (under age 18) - if so, have you included a line on the consent form for the parent/guardian signature
- fetuses
- pregnant women
- persons with mental, psychiatric or emotional disabilities
- persons with physical disabilities
- economically or educationally disadvantaged
- prisoners
- elderly
- students from a class taught by principal investigator
- other vulnerable population.

7. If any of the above are used, state the necessity for doing so. Please indicate the approximate age range of the minors to be involved.

Not applicable

C. PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

1. In lay language, describe completely all procedures to be followed during the course of the experimentation. Provide sufficient detail so that the Committee is able to assess potential risks to human subjects. In order for the IRB to completely understand the experience of the subjects in your project, please provide a detailed outline of everything subjects will experience as a result of participating in your project. Please be specific and include information on all aspects of the research, through subject recruitment and ending when the subject's role in the project is complete. All descriptions should include the informed consent process, interactions between the subjects and the researcher, and any tasks, tests, etc. that involve subjects. If the project involves more than one group of subjects (e.g. teachers and students, employees and supervisors), please make sure to provide descriptions for each subject group.

This qualitative explanatory case study will include a single group of participants who are alumni and professionals at one North Carolina community college.

Initial contact will be made via telephone or email with potential participants to determine level of interest in participating in the study. As part of this contact, participants will also be asked to identify other alumni and professionals who meet the criteria. Follow-up correspondence will be sent by email or postal letter to confirm the person's decision to participate to include the date, time, and location of the interview. A copy of the informed consent form of which the participant will be asked to sign, will be included in this communication for initial review. Additionally, as part of the pre-interview process, study participants will be asked to complete a brief personal information form to collect data for the development of participant profiles including both personal and professional background data. Participants will be asked to bring the completed personal information form with them to the interview.

The interview process will consist of two phases. The first phase will be face-to-face interviews that will be guided by an interview protocol. Interview questions will be open-ended. This initial interview will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes. The interviews will be recorded using one primary digital voice recorder and a second digital recorder to serve as a secondary source of data capturing should the primary recorder fail to properly work.

Professionals' interviews will be conducted at the college and alumni interviews will be conducted at the community college site, alumni's workplace, or a public place agreed upon by both the alumna(us) and researcher.

At the time of the face-to-face interview, two official copies of the informed consent form will be presented to the participants for final review. Any questions participants may have regarding the research study will be addressed at this time. Both the researcher and participant will sign the copies of the informed consent forms with the participant receiving a signed copy for future reference and the researcher keeping a copy. Personal information forms completed by participants will be collected at the time of the interview. At the time of the interview, participants will be asked to assign themselves a pseudonym to be used to identify participants in data collection, data analysis, and reporting phases of the study. In addition to the interviews, the researcher will inform participants of the researcher's intent to make notes throughout the interview as part of the researcher's data collection process.

Upon completion of the interviews, the participants will be informed they will receive a transcription of the interview for members check. This review process should take participants anywhere from 30 – 60 minutes to complete. Additionally, participants will be informed they will receive a one-page synopsis and prompts for feedback (described below).

Upon collection of all data and initial analysis, a one-page synopsis of the initial findings will be sent via postal mail to all participants. Participants will be provided the synopsis and two – three prompts in order to gain additional feedback and insight from the participants. It is anticipated participants should be able to complete the review and provide feedback during a one hour period of time.

Once participants have provided feedback from the initial findings synopsis, their participation in the study will conclude.

2. How much time will be required of each subject?

In total, participants will be asked for 2 to 3 hours of their time. The initial interviews will be 60 to 90 minutes long. The follow-up activity (member checking) will take 30 minutes. Finally, participant prompts and in-depth member checking could take up to an additional hour and will incorporate a composite single page overview of overarching themes from the interviews across all cases. Participants will be asked to respond to 2 or 3 prompts regarding their initial thoughts, new revelations, or questions from after reading the comprehensive thoughts of all participants. Follow up with all participants will be conducted by postal mail.

D. POTENTIAL RISKS

1. State the potential risks (physical, psychological, financial, social, legal or other) connected with the proposed procedures and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.

There should be no physical, psychological, financial, social, legal, or other risks for participants in this study.

2. Will there be a request for information that subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive (e.g. private behavior, economic status, sexual issues, religious beliefs, or other matters that if made public might impair their self-esteem or reputation or could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability)?

There will be no request for any personal or sensitive information that would potentially impair participants' self-esteem or reputation.

- a. If yes, please describe and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.

Not applicable

- b. Could any of the study procedures produce stress or anxiety, or be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading? If yes, please describe why they are important and what arrangements have been made for handling an emotional reaction from the subject.

It is not anticipated this study involves any subject matter that could cause stress or anxiety, be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading

3. How will data be recorded and stored?

Data will be stored on a laptop computer secured by username and password known only by the researcher. Additionally, electronic back-up copies of data will be stored and locked in a file cabinet located at the home of the researcher.

- a. How will identifiers be used in study notes and other materials?

Participants will be assigned a pseudonym at the onset of the interview. All data collection recordings and transcriptions of participants will be identified in this manner.

- b. How will reports will be written, in aggregate terms, or will individual responses be described?

The data will be written to include the rich descriptive responses in the participants' own words as well as discussions of collective themes found across all participants. The pseudonyms assigned at the interview will continue to be used in the presentation of data and in the findings as needed.

4. If audio or videotaping is done how will the tapes be stored and how/when will the tapes be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

There will be a primary digital recording of participant interviews and a back-up using an additional digital recorder. Interview recordings will be transcribed as soon as possible following the interview with Dragon speech recognition software using a technique referred to as parroting or voice writing. The original recordings (primary and back-up) will be stored in a locked cabinet in the home of the researcher and will be held until the research study has been completed and presented as part of the dissertation process.

5. Is there any deception of the human subjects involved in this study? If yes, please describe why it is necessary and describe the debriefing procedures that have been arranged.

No

E. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

This does not include any form of compensation for participation.

1. What, if any, direct benefit is to be gained by the subject? If no direct benefit is expected, but indirect benefit may be expected (knowledge may be gained that could help others), please explain.

There are no direct benefits to be gained by the alumni participants; however, the findings may prove beneficial to the community college professionals as they seek to enhance their alumni relations programming.

F. COMPENSATION

Please keep in mind that the logistics of providing compensation to your subjects (e.g., if your business office requires names of subjects who received compensation) may compromise anonymity or complicate confidentiality protections. If, while arranging for subject compensation, you must make changes to the anonymity or confidentiality provisions for your research, you must contact the IRB office prior to implementing those changes.

1. Explain compensation provisions if the subject withdraws prior to completion of the study.

There will be no compensation.

2. If class credit will be given, list the amount and alternative ways to earn the same amount of credit.

There will be no class credit.

G. COLLABORATORS

1. If you anticipate that additional investigators (other than those named on **Cover Page**) may be involved in this research, list them here indicating their institution, department and phone number.

There will be no additional collaborators.

2. Will anyone besides the PI or the research team have access to the data (including completed surveys) from the moment they are collected until they are destroyed.

No

H. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

1. Do you have a significant financial interest or other conflict of interest in the sponsor of this project?

No

2. Does your current conflicts of interest management plan include this relationship and is it being properly followed? Not applicable

I. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. If a questionnaire, survey or interview instrument is to be used, attach a copy to this proposal.
2. Attach a copy of the informed consent form to this proposal.

3. Please provide any additional materials that may aid the IRB in making its decision.

J. HUMAN SUBJECT ETHICS TRAINING

*Please consider taking the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), a free, comprehensive ethics training program for researchers conducting research with human subjects. Just click on the

Appendix B: LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

Twyla Casey Wells
(XXX) XXX-XXXX - Home
(XXX) XXX-XXXX - Office
(XXX) XXX-XXXX - Mobile

June 17, 2013

Dr. [President of College]
[College Name] Community College
[Address]
[Town], NC zip code

Dear Dr. [Name of President]:

As a doctoral student in Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University, I am beginning my dissertation research. My research purpose is to explore and better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study will explore how graduate and key leaders of the community college define and perceive the relationship building process, their perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship.

It is anticipated a better understanding of how community college alumni perceive their interactions and relationship with the college will better inform community college leaders with insights as to how to extend the relationship with students once they leave the institution. Additionally, it is the desired intent this research will inform the research community by enhancing the existing knowledge of relationship management.

My interest in this subject comes from my twenty plus years as an advancement professional working in higher education. Over the last twelve years I have worked in the community college setting and from 2008 to present, I have served as the Executive Director of Johnston Community College in Smithfield, NC.

I am writing to ask your help in gaining access to your institution and identifying participants for this study. I am interested in interviewing you, your vice president of institutional advancement and/or executive director of the foundation, and the person for whom the duties of alumni programming resides in their responsibilities. In addition, I ask that the vice president and/or alumni staff member would assist me in gaining access to a small number of alumni, faculty and student services personnel for interviews.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or concerns you may have. You may reach me at 919-xxx-xxxx, or via my email at tcwells@johnstoncc.edu.

Sincerely,

Twyla Casey Wells
Doctoral student
North Carolina State University

Appendix C: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS SEEKING PARTICIPATION

Twyla Casey Wells
(xxx) xxx-xxxx – Home
(xxx) xxx-xxxx – Mobile

Date

First name, last name
Community College
Address
City, State Zip code

Dear Dr./Mr./Ms. Last name:

As a doctoral student in Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University, I am beginning my dissertation research. My research purpose is to explore and make meaning of the relationship between a community college and its graduates.

I am writing to ask for your participation in this study. I am interested in interviewing both alumni and professionals of XXX Community College. For the purpose of this study, alumni are defined as anyone who has a degree, diploma or certificate or who completed a sufficient number of credit hours from XXX Community College in order to transfer to a college or university. In addition to your education, I am seeking individuals who are identified by the alumni relations office as being connected to the institution beyond enrollment.

Your initial involvement would include completing a brief written personal profile and a face-to-face interview. Your face-to-face interview lasting approximately 60 – 90 minutes and would be arranged to be conducted at the college, your place of employment, or a public location convenient for you. After the interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript. You will then be mailed a preliminary analysis findings summary sent to you via postal mail that would seek your feedback. I expect this aspect of your involvement to require no more than an hour.

My interest in this subject comes from my twenty plus years as an advancement professional working in higher education. Over the last twelve years I have worked in the community college setting and from 2008 to present, I have served as the Executive Director of Johnston Community College in Smithfield, NC.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or concerns you may have. You may reach me at 919-xxx-xxxx, or via my email at tcwells@johnstoncc.edu.

Sincerely,

Twyla Casey Wells
Doctoral student
North Carolina State University

Appendix D: LETTER TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROFESSIONAL

PARTICIPANTS SEEKING PARTICIPATION

Twyla Casey Wells
(xxx) xxx-xxxx – Home
(xxx) xxx-xxxx – Mobile

Date

First name, last name
Community College
Address
City, State Zip code

Dear Dr./Mr./Ms. Last name:

As a doctoral student in Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University, I am beginning my dissertation research. My research purpose is to explore and make meaning of the relationship between a community college and its graduates.

I am writing to ask for your participation in this study. I am interested in interviewing alumni and professionals of XXX Community College as a means of better understanding the alumni-community college relationship.

Your initial involvement would include completing a brief written personal profile and a face-to-face interview. Your face-to-face interview lasting approximately 60 – 90 minutes and would be arranged to be conducted at the college, your place of employment, or a public location convenient for you. After the interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript. You will then be mailed a preliminary analysis findings summary sent to you via postal mail that would seek your feedback. I expect this aspect of your involvement to require no more than an hour.

My interest in this subject comes from my twenty plus years as an advancement professional working in higher education. Over the last twelve years I have worked in the community college setting and from 2008 to present, I have served as the Executive Director of Johnston Community College in Smithfield, NC.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or concerns you may have. You may reach me at 919-xxx-xxxx, or via my email at tcwells@johnstoncc.edu.

Sincerely,

Twyla Casey Wells
Doctoral student
North Carolina State University

**Appendix E: CONFIRMATION OF INTERVIEW DATE, TIME AND LOCATION
TO PARTICIPANTS**

Twyla Casey Wells
(xxx) xxx-xxxx – Home
(xxx) xxx-xxxx – Mobile

Date

First name, last name
Community College
Address
City, State Zip code

Dear Dr./Mr./Ms. Last name:

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a participant in my doctoral research study. Based on your feedback, I have scheduled your interview for TIME_____ on DATE _____ to be conducted at PLACE_____.

Enclosed, please find a personal profile document I ask that you complete prior to our interview. Additionally, I have included an informed consent form for your review. At the beginning of our time together, I will present two copies of this form that both you and I can sign. One copy will be for your records. Lastly, you will be asked to supply me with a pseudonym you prefer to be known as during this study in place of your real identify. The pseudonym you choose serves as a tool for me to use so that I may respect and adhere to my commitment to ensuring all of your data is kept confidential.

Please provide a confirmation of receipt of this information to me either via email, or by phone. Additionally, please feel free to contact me at any time with any questions or concerns you may have. You may reach me at 919-xxx-xxxx, or via my email at tcwells@johnstoncc.edu.

Sincerely,

Twyla Casey Wells
Doctoral student
North Carolina State University

Appendix F: INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH
Defining the “relationship” in community college alumni relations

Twyla Casey Wells

Dr. Susan Bracken, committee chair

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this explanatory qualitative case study is to explore and better understand the relationship between a community college and its graduates. Situated within the context of alumni relations programming, this study will explore how the graduates and key leaders of the college define and perceive their relationship, through perceptions of key actions and events that influenced the relationship and its formation, as well as beliefs regarding the future role and importance of this relationship.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to: 1) Sign an informed consent (this document), 2) Take a demographic survey being provided to participants electronically or in hard copy, 3) Participate in a face-to-face interview lasting anywhere from 60 – 90 minutes at an agreed upon location, preferably the site of interest, 4) Receive and respond to a written executive summary of the initial findings of the report with the anticipated time commitment being one hour 5) You will be asked to mail any feedback offered from the executive summary back to the researcher in an addressed and stamped envelope provided by the researcher.

Risks

Participation in this study may bring about emotional reactions associated with telling about your experiences at the community college. At any point during the interview, you are free to ask that we stop the interview, or that the digital recorder be turned off. Your wishes will be honored.

Benefits

It is anticipated a better understanding of how community college alumni perceive their interactions and relationship with the college will better inform community college leaders with insights as to how to extend the relationship with students once they leave the

institution. Additionally, it is the desired intent this research will inform the research community by enhancing the existing knowledge of alumni relations programming as well as extending the empirical knowledge of relationship management. Employing a qualitative case study design, one community college will be studied in-depth to allow for a deeper understanding of how community college alumni, development practitioners and leadership define the relationship in the context of a community college alumni relations program. Fifteen (15) to twenty (20) participants consisting of community college alumni and professionals are being sought for this study.

Confidentiality

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in a locked fire-proof file cabinet stored at the home of the researcher. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide; however, all alumni participants will be provided a pseudonym upon acceptance to participate in this study. This pseudonym will be the identifier associated with you for all study data and/or materials you contribute, or used by the researcher during the collection, analysis and reporting phases of the study. All professional participants will be identified by professional role, such as alumni coordinator, foundation director, etc.

Compensation

You will not receive any form of compensation for participating in this study.

What if you are an employee of the selected site?

Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment at your community college, and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Twyla Casey Wells, at my personal email address: tcwells@johnstoncc.edu, or via my mobile number at 919-524-5406.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate

"I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled."

Subject's signature _____ **Date** _____

Investigator's signature _____ **Date** _____

Appendix G : ALUMNI PARTICPANT PROFILE

ALUMNI PARTICIPANT PROFILE

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM: _____

Age of Participant: _____ Race: _____

What years did you attend XXX Community College? _____

Did you receive a degree or credential from XXX Community College? _____

If you received a degree/credential from XXX Community College, what was it?

Did you transfer to a four-year university?

If yes, what college or university did you attend?

Did you receive a degree from the four-year college or university?

If so, what degree did you obtain?

**Appendix H: COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROFESSIONALS PARTICIPANT
PROFILE**

PARTICIPANT: _____

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM: _____

Age of Participant: _____ Race: _____

How many years have you worked at Johnston Community College?

What is your educational background?

What is your professional background?

Have you ever personally enrolled in a community college? _____

If yes, did you receive a degree? _____

If so, what was the degree? _____

Appendix I: ALUMNI PROTOCOL

Alumna(us) Protocol

Pseudonym: _____

Interviewer: Twyla Casey Wells

Date: TBA

Start: _____ **End:** _____

Place of Interview: TBA

Scheduled Time: TBA

Opening Question:

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself

Questions pertaining to theoretical frameworks.

- 2) What influenced your decision to attend (name of school)?
- 3) How would you describe your time as a student?
- 4) What sorts of activities did you participate in at XXX?
- 5) Looking back, to what extent do you feel (insert actual name) was attentive to your needs as a student?
- 6) Beyond the education you received, what did you feel you received from (insert name)?
- 7) How familiar are you with official alumni activities sponsored by (insert name), such as the Alumni Association?
- 8) Do you follow the news or other sources for information about the college?
- 9) Please describe the ways in which you stay connected to the college.
- 10) Do you stay in touch with former classmates? Please describe.
- 11) How do you decide to participate in college events, such as a golf outing or a distinguished alumni event?
- 12) In what ways do you feel you like your relationship with the college? Are there any benefits that are important to you?
- 13) How do you think the institution should help alumni?
- 14) What do you think alumni's involvement with their alma mater should look like?

- 15) Please describe ways in which you feel committed to XXX college?
- 16) In what ways do you think alumni could interact with current students that would help them?
- 17) How best do you feel the college could develop relationships with alumni?
- 18) To what extent do you think your life would be different had you not attended XXX?
- 19) How would you explain the level of satisfaction you presently have with the college?
- 20) What do you believe XXX's reputation is within the community? As a former student there, do you agree or disagree with that reputation and why?
- 21) Do you feel a level of trust with the college? If so, how?

Closing the interview:

- 22) Do you have anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences at the college?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

Note to researcher: Be certain to provide interviewee follow-up information.

Appendix J: Community College Professionals Protocol

Pseudonym: _____

Interviewer: Twyla Casey Wells

Date: TBA

Start: _____ **End:** _____

Place of Interview: TBA

Scheduled Time: TBA

Opening Question:

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself

Questions pertaining to relationship management and alumni-giving.

- 2) Please describe your role at the community college.
- 3) To what extent do you feel the college is attentive to students' needs during their time at the college?
- 4) To what extent do you feel the college is attentive to alumni's needs?
- 5) How do you define what the colleges' alumni means to you?
- 6) Please define and describe trust as it relates to your development of your relationship with alumni?
- 7) In what ways do you participate with current alumni activities of the college?
- 8) How do you define the relationship you have with the college's alumni?
- 9) What obligation do you feel the college has to alumni of the institution?
- 10) What obligation do you feel the alumni have to the college?
- 11) Please describe your level of commitment to the college's alumni?
- 12) In what ways would you best describe the development of the alumni-institutional relationship?
- 13) Please explain what motivates you personally to stay connected to alumni?
- 14) To what extent do you think the institution would differ if the college's alumni did not have a role?

Closing the interview:

- 15) Do you have anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences at the college?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

Note to researcher: Be certain to provide interviewee follow-up information.

**The ties that bind:
Understanding the “relationships” in community college alumni relations**

<i>Themes and Findings</i>	<i>Interpretations</i>	<i>Conclusions</i>
1. The relational characteristics found to be important to the community college- alumni relationship.	How the findings align with the four relational elements of trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality found to be significant to other organization-public relationships.	Built upon trust and commitment, the community college-alumni relationship is socially constructed and given meaning through personal interactions and positive experiences. These interactions and experiences lead to feelings of satisfaction with the community college that in turn inspires the development of the community college-alumni relationship as well as an expressed sense of obligation to each other and the college.
2. Relational influences important to the community college-alumni relationship.	How the participants’ perceptions of key actions and events influenced the relationship and its formation.	Personal transformations as students result in a more profound affinity for the institution which translates into expressed desires by the alumni to be engaged with the college in ways that are meaningful and beneficial to both the individual and the college.
3. Relational roles important to the community college-alumni relationship. 4. Relational impact the community college-alumni relationship has or could potentially have.	What the participants believe regarding their role and the future development of the community-college alumni relationship.	Institutional culture, interpersonal relationships, communication, and time are significant to the successful advancement of the student and community college relationship; and when strategically planned in a cooperatively shared environment will in all likelihood positively influence the natural progression of the community college-alumni relationship.

Appendix L: Participant Feedback Protocol

The ties that bind: Understanding the “relationships” in community college alumni relations

By Twyla Casey Wells

Overview of Themes and Findings

Based on an analysis of the data from participant interviews, the following Themes, Subthemes, Findings and Conclusions were revealed regarding the understanding of the “relationships” found in community college alumni relations:

Themes and Subthemes

Theme I: Relational Characteristics

- E. Commitment** - Verrazano strong - Just a stepping stone - Juggling priorities
- F. Trust** - College confidence - Developing trust - Two-way street
- G. Satisfaction** - Exactly what I needed - Creating the win-win mentality - Always willing to help
- H. Obligation** - Institutionally driven – Reciprocal - The holistic view

Theme II: Relational Influences

- A. Personal attitudes, beliefs, and values** - Alumni - Professionals
- B. Student experiences** – Learning – Support - Activities
- C. Connections** – Relationships (Personal connections and Like family and friends) – Involvement (Alumni participation/A seat at the Verrazano Family table/Competition for time/Is altruism dead?)- Communication
- D. Future** - Strategic planning - Timing engagement

Theme III: Relational Roles

- D. Alumni** - Connection to the community - Sharing success
- E. Professionals**
- F. Alumni Association**

Theme IV: Relational Impact

- A. Economic** – Alumni employment and workforce – Giving back – Community college value
- B. Social** – College pride - Transformation
- C. Cultural** – Community college versus other higher education – Verrazano community – Institutional philosophy
- D. Political** – Alumni advocacy – Alumni representation

The ties that bind: Understanding the “relationships” in community college-alumni relations

FINDINGS

Finding #1: The community college-alumni relationship is initiated through interpersonal relationships between individuals or a group of individuals.

Finding #2: The community college-alumni relationship is socially constructed and given meaning through individual and interpersonal interactions built upon trust and commitment.

Finding #3: Personal transformations as students give meaning to the community college-alumni relationship that result in a more profound affinity for the institution.

Finding #4: Institutional culture, communication, timing, and dedicated resources are significant to the successful advancement of the student and college relationship.