Program Completion In Proprietary Schools:

A Phenomenological Case Study

By

Susan Folkman Schulz

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation advisor, Dr. Lucy M. Guglielmino, Department of Educational Leadership, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The College of Education and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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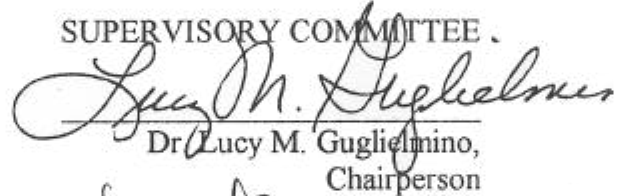

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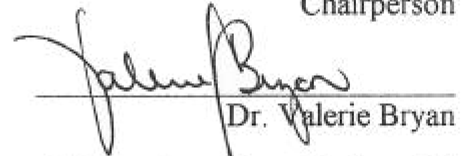

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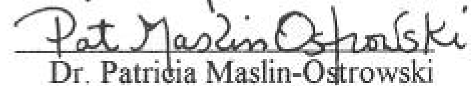

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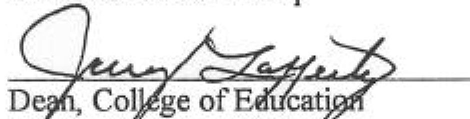

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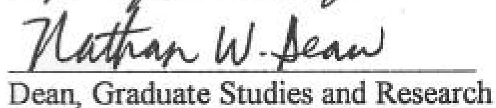

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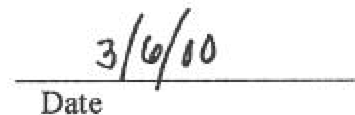

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Abstract

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This phenomenological case study was designed to examine factors that relate to student persistence in proprietary schools. The goals were to gain new understandings about retention in proprietary schools, to describe students who persist, and to explain the personal and institutional factors that contribute to a student's decision to persist or leave. Data were collected by (a) interviewing fourteen students and eight employees who were involved in the school during a two-year time frame, (b) conducting formal and informal observations of activities in which the student could participate from the time of application through graduation, and (c) examining appropriate documents. Data were analyzed and findings developed using qualitative methodology. The findings were presented to student and staff focus groups for feedback.

There were fourteen findings that clustered around four themes: Students, The School Selection Process, The Training Program, and The Influence of the Institution. The specific findings were: 1. Core commonalities of students and applicants. 2. Selection process and the intentional marketing plan. 3. Program length

and the reality of program completion. 4. Negative outcomes of an abbreviated decision-making process. 5. The gap between students' expectations and the training experience. 6. Built-in academic and social integration. 7. Built-in retention and intervention strategies. 8. Built-in formal and informal job readiness and job placement activities. 9. Changes in students' lives as a result of training. 10. The effects of a warm and caring work environment. 11. The effects of staff background on relationships with students 12. The effects of owners' interests and beliefs on school policies. 13. The challenge of predicting student success. 14. The school experience as a rite of passage.

From the findings, the *Proprietary Student Passage Model* was developed. This model describes students' experiences from the time of enrollment to departure. The findings also supported previous research studies. Included are recommendations that can be put in place by postsecondary proprietary schools offering programs other than massage training and postsecondary vocational schools in the public sector. The dissertation concludes with ideas for further study on persistence and retention and recommendations to policy makers.

To my father

"Hy" Folkman

1915-1999

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A primary mission of proprietary schools offering postsecondary career education is to provide adults with job training that will enable them to enter the workplace quickly (Moore, 1995; Pautler, 1988). The impact of job training on employment potential affects both local and national economies. Job skills training is especially needed for adult nontraditional students – individuals who may have limited education and work experience and few skills to earn a living. Proprietary schools can be an invaluable educational resource for them.

Like other postsecondary institutions, proprietary schools share the problem of how to retain students. When students drop out, they fail to get needed training to seek employment. The institution loses tuition revenue, which is crucial to staying in business. Over the years there have been several studies on persistence, retention, and dropout rates. Many of the studies have addressed student persistence in colleges, community colleges, and universities (Conklin, 1993; Stolar, 1991; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991; Tinto, 1988, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993; Villella & Hu, 1991). Research on student retention and persistence in proprietary school settings is comparatively sparse (Capaz, 1990; Gallaway, 1990; Jones, 1990; Mills, 1995; Moore & Smith, 1992; New York State Education Department, 1991; Swanson, 1995; Taube & Taube, 1990, 1991).

Some of the factors found to influence student persistence and retention are age, gender, educational background, family income, grade point average (Feldman, 1993; Haney, 1990), involvement during the school experience (Avalos, 1996),

student integration (Atakpu, 1990; Brandt, 1991; Galloway, 1990; Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Goodsell, 1993; Tinto & Russo, 1994), faculty/student relationships (Huston, 1997; Parker, 1995; Pearlman, 1991; Webb, 1990), and academic advising (Metzner, 1989).

Several studies have focused on predicting postsecondary student persistence in colleges and universities. Krotseng (1991,1992) used the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire to identify potential attrition and showed that the instrument could be a tool to alert faculty about possible non-completers. Cheng (1992) looked at education and socioeconomic status of the students' parents to predict completion. Financial aid and tuition fees were also examined as factors affecting persistence (St. John, Paulsen & Mbaduagha, 1995).

There are research-based studies specifically focused on proprietary schools (Revelle, 1997; St. John et al., 1995; Simox, 1998; Taube & Taube, 1990, 1991; Webb, 1990), but the number is limited. This dearth of research may be a result of methodological limitations, lack of data collection priority, and little perceived need for research, which are the reasons Johnson (1991) lists for limited research in postsecondary vocational settings in general.

There are over 5500 proprietary schools throughout the United States. Proprietary schools offer a wide range of job training, such as welding, court reporting, allied health, business and computer training, jewelry repair, and massage therapy training. For a number of reasons, massage therapy schools provide an excellent setting for research on student persistence in postsecondary proprietary education. There are approximately 1000 massage therapy training schools in the United States (American Massage Therapy Association, 1999). While admissions

procedures and standards vary, the goal of massage therapy school owners (similar to many stakeholders in postsecondary schools) is to enroll students who are likely to persist. Some massage therapy school owners carefully screen prospective students for their interest in the healing arts and a maturity level required in the massage therapy profession. Other schools' admissions policies are driven by the need for enrollments.

Massage therapy schools have experienced rapid growth over the past few years (Ashley, 1999). One reason for this growth may be the strong interest in alternative health care therapies, of which massage therapy is one. A number of massage therapy school owners are enhancing their programs so they can offer associates and bachelors degrees. At the time of the third printing of Ashley's directory of massage therapy schools (1999), there were seven schools listed that offered associates, bachelors, or masters degrees in massage therapy. An increasing number of states are requiring massage therapists to be licensed. These state boards mandate the number of required training hours, with Nebraska and New York now requiring a total of 1000 clock hours (*Massage Magazine*, 2000). These developments are indicators that massage therapy schools are planning for the long term.

Massage therapy schools are competitive, with a focus on seeking and retaining students; therefore, many school owners are motivated to develop the best practices possible. Training programs often take less than a year to complete. The time from enrollment to the workplace is short compared to training for other jobs with similar income potential. The result of training is within sight, as compared to programs requiring over a year of training.

Because of the nature of the training, students work in a close, intimate setting (Ashley, 1999). There are opportunities to be together in class, practicum work, and school activities. Students tend to be non-traditional and goal-oriented (AMTA, 1999). There is ample student data because of statutory and licensing requirements. Given this, massage therapy training schools have several institutional qualities that merit study when investigating proprietary student persistence.

Statement of Problem

Student retention and persistence are issues faced by all postsecondary institutions. A debate sponsored by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1999) indicated that retention is the concern of school leaders of all levels of higher education. Reports issued by the *Chronicle* of a 47% dropout rate in community colleges emphasize how serious this problem is. State licensing boards, departments of education, and national accreditation agencies reinforce attention to retention and persistence by setting minimum standards for their member schools.

Most retention and persistence studies have been in the higher education setting, and most use quantitative methods. To date there are relatively few studies in the proprietary school setting compared to the higher education setting. There are even fewer qualitative studies (Cox, 1980; Galloway, 1990; Morris, 1993; Revelle, 1997; Simcox, 1998; Tinto & Russo, 1994.) Some of the qualitative studies have been phenomenological, but there appears to be no study that is both a phenomenological and a case study.

Researchers in the field of student persistence recommend increased use of qualitative research methods to understand how students are influenced by their

postsecondary experiences (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991). Terenzini and Pascarella believe naturalistic and ethnographic studies may be able to identify indirect and conditional effects of college that are not identifiable through quantitative methods. Tinto (1988) encouraged the use of ethnographic procedures to learn how students view their departure at various points during their studies. The limited number of qualitative research studies may be a barrier to fully understanding retention and persistence. More research is needed to close the gap of knowledge about proprietary schools (Hawthorne, 1995). A qualitative study could give a voice to the proprietary student and assist in developing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors involved in student success in proprietary schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine factors that relate closely to student persistence in proprietary schools. The goals are to gain new understanding about retention, to describe the student who persists in proprietary schools, and to explain the personal and institutional factors that contribute to a student's decision to persist or leave.

Research Questions

1. What are the elements that contribute to student persistence in a proprietary school?
2. What personal factors affect student persistence?
3. What institutional factors affect student persistence?

Significance of Problem

Both the proprietary school owner and the student lose when a student drops out. The student loses time, money, and opportunity for further education, and the loss of tuition erodes the ability of the proprietary school owner to stay in business (Haney, 1990). The economy may also be adversely affected when schools and businesses close and when citizens are unemployable and require increased levels of social services (Baca, 1989). In addition, the student loan default rate increases due to former students' inability to repay (Goodwin, 1991).

A qualitative study in a proprietary school provides the opportunity to determine if heretofore uninvestigated elements exist that affect retention and persistence in such settings. Results from a qualitative study may deepen the understanding of findings in other studies. Qualitative research can provide new information and meaning not available through quantitative methods, thereby opening the door to continuing study.

An increased understanding of persistence and retention in proprietary schools can provide proprietary school owners with valuable information to be used in admissions, student services (MacNeill, 1990), and program enhancement. Effective admissions procedures can be put in place to help identify students who are likely to persist, and student services can be improved to help enrolled students (Catarina, 1990). In addition, directors and administrators can justify the costs of good practices that improve persistence, such as student orientation programs, counseling, and more (Smith & Bailey, 1993).

Operational Definitions

Completer

A completer is a student who has satisfactorily completed all program requirements, such as class attendance and satisfactory assignment and test grades. In most schools, the completer meets all graduation requirements by the completion date announced by the school. The term *graduate* can also be used. A school may follow accreditation guidelines and give the student an additional 50% of the program time for completion. For example, a student may be allowed to take nine months to complete a six-month program, or eighteen months to complete a twelve-month program, and still be considered a completer.

Graduate

Students attain graduate status when they have satisfactorily completed all program and school requirements. The Florida State Board of NonPublic Career Education requires a minimum of 50% completion/graduation status for schools to renew their licenses. Schools participating in Title IV funding are required to demonstrate a 70% completion/graduation rate. Schools recognized by the Accrediting Commission for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET) are required to have a completion/graduation rate of over 66%.

Proprietary School

Proprietary schools have many names, including private career school, trade and career college, postsecondary vocational school, nonpublic career school, and more. Proprietary schools are typically institutions that train students for immediate employment (Moore, 1995). They are private career institutions that offer mostly

occupational training for post-high-school students (Apling, 1993). Proprietary schools offer certificates or diplomas for short-term job-skills training programs, and are profit-oriented and market-driven (Bunis, 1992; Lee & Merisotis, 1990). Proprietary schools are principal vendors of occupational training under the U.S. Education Department Title IV.

Non-Completer

Non-completers are students who drop out of their programs of study at any time, for any reason, but after attending at least one class. The term *non-persister* is also used. The student may have been asked by the administration to withdraw for not adhering to rules and regulations. The school under study categorizes non-completers by voluntary withdrawal and forced withdrawal. A student may be withdrawn and then reenter as an extended student. Students are considered extended when they have extended past the maximum 150% time from enrollment and make special arrangements to return to school and complete their studies.

Non-Traditional Student

Non-traditional students are over age 25, have interrupted pursuing their education (usually postsecondary) one or more times, have a work history, usually work at least part-time while in school, may be married, usually have dependents, and may be the sole support of these dependents (Glass, 1998). Non-traditional students, in contrast to traditional students, typically do not go into postsecondary training immediately after high school.

Retention

Retention refers to students staying in school through program completion. The term *persistence* is also used to refer to students who do not withdraw from or drop out of their training. Licensing and accreditation boards usually have minimum retention rates. These rates are also referred to as *withdrawal, completion*, or *non-completion rates*.

Withdrawal

Students who withdraw either do so voluntarily or are asked to withdraw (forced withdrawal) by administration for not adhering to the rules and standards of the school. The term *drop-out* is sometimes used to refer to students who leave training at any time before completion of the program.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Delimitations

The population for this study included only students who were enrolled in a massage therapy training program; therefore, findings may not be generalizable to students of other career training programs or to training programs that require different time frames for completion.

Limitations

The study may be limited because information was self-reported. Participants may have inflated their goals and abilities to please the interviewer. Some students go back and forth from day to evening classes as their schedules permit, making it difficult to categorize them. It was a problem to interview a sufficient number of students who withdrew early in their program or just before graduation because some

moved and left no forwarding telephone number or address.

Observations were made school-wide and at selected events in which students participated. Observations were limited to one visit at each event (one observation during an admissions interview, one during an exit interview, and so forth). Information gained from one visit may not totally represent the activity. The students and graduates interviewed were not necessarily the students observed. Some faculty and administrators, who may have affected students' success, were no longer at the school and thus were not available for interviews.

Some students who might have otherwise successfully completed their programs are forced to withdraw because of extraordinary life situations. Of such students, the sample included only those who could be contacted and agreed to the interview.

Documents with student completion information varied according to the reason the report was compiled. For example, the school is required to send reports to the state for a June 30 to July 1 reporting period. The reporting period for the accreditation agency is different. Enrollment start and end dates do not always match the required reporting periods. Students are allowed to extend their program completion time or switch from the six-month to the twelve-month program; this affected student information. In addition, at the time of this study the school was in the middle of changing to a new database management system.

Assumptions

There were three major assumptions underlying this study:

1. It is possible to gain an understanding about proprietary school student persistence from a qualitative research study.
2. The factors impacting student success can be described, and this information will be valuable for student admissions, program delivery, and student support services in proprietary schools.
3. Participants would accept the assurance of anonymity and respond openly and honestly to the researcher's questions.

Summary and Overview of Chapters

There are over 5500 private trade and career schools throughout the United States, and this number is growing. There have been a limited number of persistence and retention studies in proprietary school settings, and even fewer qualitative studies. The purpose of this qualitative study is to advance the understanding of why some students persist in proprietary schools while others drop out. The next chapter presents a review of literature focused on articles and studies relevant to student persistence, retention, and dropout research in postsecondary education. Chapter Three describes the methodology for this phenomenological case study. Themes and patterns that emerged, and findings about what contributes to student persistence and what stands in the way of program completion, are presented in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Six presents conclusions and recommendations for addressing concerns identified by the research. Suggestions for continued research are also outlined.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The focus of this literature review is to build a base for understanding proprietary schools. The first part begins with a presentation of proprietary schools and of a specific type of proprietary school: the massage therapy training school. The second part provides an overview of research in the areas of persistence, retention, and dropout in postsecondary education settings. This section includes studies conducted in colleges, community colleges, and universities, and within the proprietary school setting.

Proprietary Schools

School Names and Licensing

Proprietary schools go by many names: private school, private postsecondary school, private career school, private occupational school, private vocational school, non-public career school, non-public postsecondary school, private business and vocational school, proprietary education, for-profit school, and many others. A proprietary school typically offers certificates, diplomas, and occupational associate degrees. There are also proprietary or private schools that offer bachelors and graduate degrees. This research focuses only on proprietary schools with an emphasis on non-degree granting programs of less than two years.

Today most states have licensing boards that oversee the operations and regulation of proprietary schools. Some states, such as Hawaii, Montana, and South Dakota, no longer have such boards. Instead, a school registers in these states as a business and is generally regulated by a government agency such as the Department

of Consumer Affairs. In states that have regulatory boards, schools must be licensed to operate and to offer certificates, diplomas, or degrees. States typically have dedicated boards to oversee proprietary schools that offer programs of two years or less. Separate boards of higher education usually oversee schools that offer associate, bachelors, and graduate degrees.

Accrediting Agencies

Schools may voluntarily seek accreditation from an accrediting body authorized by the U.S. Department of Education. Proprietary schools are often motivated to attain accreditation and thus be eligible to seek approval for Title IV funding. With Title IV approval, students are able to apply for student loans or Pell Grants. Not all schools seek accreditation for Title IV benefits. Some schools seek accreditation solely for the recognition, to enhance credibility and transferability of their courses, and to be competitive.

Agencies that accredit proprietary schools include the Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES), Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET), Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT), Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), National Accrediting Commission of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences (NACCAS), and Commission on Occupational Education (COE). There are also accreditation agencies that are not recognized by the Department of Education, such as the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA). COMTA is in the process of seeking recognition by the Department, and expects to gain it within the next few years.

Program Offerings

Proprietary schools offer many different kinds of career and vocational training. Typical programs include the following: aircraft, automotive, barbering and cosmetology, bartending, business and computer, culinary, diving, electronics, fashion, gaming, inspection, insurance, medical and health, jewelry, legal, private investigation, pet grooming, plumbing, welding, telecommunications, travel, and more. Since the mission of these schools is to place graduates into the labor market, programs offered often reflect current and future labor market needs (Apling, 1993; Kowalski, 1996).

Some schools started out as test preparation training centers or by offering continuing education courses that developed into comprehensive training programs. For example, unlicensed training centers opened throughout the United States to train individuals to pass Microsoft certification exams. The development of technology, the growth of PC computer networking, and the influence of Microsoft promoted the development of these centers. Many state licensing boards recognized that these centers were actually training people for jobs. When training leads to a promise of employment, the training center comes under the jurisdiction of the licensing board; therefore, many of the Microsoft test preparation centers had to restructure themselves as postsecondary proprietary schools, seek licensure, and follow the rules of the regulating body (Florida Board of NonPublic Career Schools meeting, May 1999). The requirement to become licensed as a school has recently occurred in the home health care and building inspection fields as well.

Training programs such as jewelry repair, bartending, and building inspection can be as short as a week, while other programs require one to two years of training. Examples include programs in cosmetology, court reporting, or culinary arts. The number of students per class can be just a few or well over 20. School sizes range from those with one multi-purpose classroom and an administrative office to those with large multi-building campuses.

Proprietary school programs can be offered in a variety of ways. Some are offered strictly at a campus site, others through correspondence, and some by a combination of home study and on-campus delivery. Many schools offer programs through satellite and branch campuses and through partnerships with host schools.

Number of Proprietary Schools

The state licensing boards and accrediting agencies that accredit proprietary schools issue annual lists of their affiliated schools. Statistics on proprietary schools are also gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics (1997). The National Center for Education Statistics gathers proprietary school information each year. The information is self-reported through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Based on the 1997 edition, data were collected from 4212 less-than-two-year schools and 1016 two-but-less-than-four-year schools, for a total of 5228 schools. This is a number similar to the approximately 5500 licensed schools listed by the state licensing and accreditation boards. According to state board school directories, the states with the largest number of proprietary schools are California, with over 1000, and Florida, with over 400. States with over 175 proprietary schools include Colorado, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington

State. Some states have fewer than twenty proprietary schools, including Iowa, Wyoming, Rhode Island, and South Dakota. The number of schools changes frequently, with new schools seeking licensure and others closing.

History of Proprietary Schools

Proprietary schools have been in operation since before the nineteenth century (Hittman, 1995). The schools were generally structured to respond to the needs of the workplace and were typically profit-driven (Honick, 1995; Kowalski, 1996; Lee, 1996). They were often in competition with public vocational schools, such as vocational technical training centers and community colleges (Hawthorne, 1995).

Honick (1995) provides a comprehensive history of proprietary schools in the United States. Proprietary schools began in the Colonial Era. They offered vocational programs to meet the needs of the economy, such as surveying, navigation, business, and building trades. The schools were popular because they reduced the need for time-consuming apprenticeships and took training out of the workday and into the evening. In the nineteenth century, training was formalized to ensure programs met the employment needs of urban centers. Bryant and Stratton College was established during this time. Bryant and Stratton were educators as well as businessmen, and maximized the profit potential of schools by selling franchises (Honick, 1995). Bryant and Stratton colleges can still be found throughout the United States today. The economic development after the Civil War helped to expand the role of proprietary schools.

No regulatory bodies oversaw proprietary schools until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the government initiated reform legislation that would

eventually affect the proprietary schools (Honick, 1995). In addition, some schools were accused of questionable business practices, aggressive marketing tactics, misleading advertising, and poorly-constructed educational programs. These issues, which would continue to plague proprietary schools into the future, brought attacks from labor groups thinking that short training programs would erode the quality of their trades. Attacks also came from business people who favored tax-supported vocational education and were concerned about problems of unregulated proprietary schools.

When the GI bill passed in 1944, several proprietary schools were approved for servicemen and women who wished to enroll. Now government funds were available to pay the tuition at proprietary schools. This was an opportunity for the proprietary school owner, but also a door to future problems. School owners, who could make quick marketing changes, began to use aggressive tactics to reach the veterans' market. New schools quickly opened to take advantage of the federal funding. These developments served to further tarnish the image of the proprietary school. They also led to problems associated with federally guaranteed student loan programs. These problems mushroomed in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a result of rising default rates on student loans; they were coupled with low program completion and job placement rates, and accusations of consumer abuse (Hittman, 1995).

Proprietary schools started as private ventures run by single instructors or as sole proprietorships. They were sometimes referred to as *mom and pop affairs* (Honick, 1995). Since the emergence of state licensing boards, schools are required to

be incorporated in the states in which they are domiciled. These are generally closely held corporations, however, controlled by one or two owners/decision-makers who run the schools as businesses. The profit motive is one of many factors that have resulted in problems and opportunities over the years.

The Role of Proprietary Schools

Proprietary schools developed because they filled a need to train people to meet local and national labor demands. Schools provide short-term education to individuals who want to get into the workplace quickly. Proprietary schools persist because they continue to meet the needs of rapid transition from training to work.

Proprietary schools, unencumbered by layers of bureaucracy and red tape, benefit from flexibility. Programs and class days and hours, for example, can be quickly adapted to meet students' needs. Curriculum can be developed and enhanced to meet the demands of the workplace, particularly requirements in technology. In most cases, proprietary schools offer employment training, without general education courses such as English, science, math, and social sciences. General education requirements are usually difficult for incoming students with weak educational backgrounds (Lowery, 1990).

The Proprietary School as a Business

The proprietary school has always been a business establishment, and as such is market-driven and profit-oriented. School owners are concerned with product and pricing, accounts payable and receivable, cash flow, and other issues of staying profitable and in business. The proprietary school is in education to make money (Hawthorne, 1995). In order to maintain enrollments, schools often seek the

disadvantaged and unemployed, including single parents and those with disabilities (Morris, 1993). The client population of many proprietary schools includes a high proportion of non-traditional students (Cheng & Levin, 1995).

As a result of licensing, accreditation, and Title IV regulations (for schools that qualify), school owners must adhere to many regulatory requirements. Schools are measured by student completion, retention, graduation, and job placement rates. In addition to issues of filling classes and offering training programs, proprietary school owners must focus on ways to enhance student success; their bottom line is affected by whether students persist or drop out.

The Proprietary School Student

Many studies have attempted to describe the proprietary school student (Cox, 1980; Galloway, 1990; Lee & Merisotis, 1990; Morris, 1993). Demographic information varies depending upon school location, programs offered, and local economy. Cheng and Levin (1995) reviewed research investigating gender, age, race, socio-economic status, parents' education level, and students' academic background, and concluded that each study of proprietary school student demographic profiles contradicted another study. The lack of agreement about who the students are may be a result of the complexity of the student body. Cheng and Levin (1995) therefore embarked on a research study to understand the proprietary school student. Their research drew on data from a longitudinal study of high school students sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). They looked at students who attended proprietary schools, private not-for-profit schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions. Findings indicated that students attending proprietary and not-

for-profit schools are twice as likely to be female as male. The lower the socio-economic scale, family income, and parents' education, the more likely the student will attend a proprietary and not-for-profit school. Students who attend proprietary schools also tend to have lower educational aspirations and high school grades than students who attend four-year schools (Cheng & Levin, 1995).

Proprietary schools are gaining popularity with people of color, according to Collison (1998). Proprietary schools that offer degrees appeal to black high school graduates and mature minority students who want a practical education that will get them into the workplace quickly. There are generally minimal entrance requirements compared to public colleges. Forty-five percent of the students in the schools investigated by Collison were minorities, and most were first-generation college students.

Morris (1993) examined students at three proprietary business schools. Student characteristics indicated relative immaturity, dependence on parents, and naiveté about their goals in relation to educational opportunities. As in the Cheng and Levin (1995) study, students tended to be from blue-collar and low-income families, and sought short-term training in order to gain employment. The mean age of the students studied was 26, but most were still claimed as dependents by their parents. Lowery (1990) also observed that proprietary school students generally lack work skills, are older than students in other institutions, and come from economically disadvantaged settings. They are often single working parents.

Summary

There are over 5500 proprietary schools throughout the United States. Most are regulated by state boards. While accreditation is not required, some school owners seek accreditation in order to be eligible for Title IV funding or other opportunities. Proprietary schools offer a variety of postsecondary training programs. New schools open often, offering programs that respond to the needs of the workplace. Proprietary schools have been in operation since the nineteenth century, mostly attracting individuals who want to train and gain employment quickly. Non-traditional and minority students often make up a large part of the student body.

Focus of Research

Massage Therapy Training Schools

Massage therapy training institutions have experienced rapid growth over the past few years (Ashley, 1999). As of the time of this study, there are approximately 1000 massage therapy schools throughout the United States, including branch locations. There has been an 81% increase in the number of schools during the years from 1997 to 1999, and a 300% increase in the number of schools since 1992. This may be a result of the growing acceptance of massage therapy as an alternative health care therapy. The web site maintained by the American Massage Therapy Association (1999) lists several articles citing the benefits of massage therapy. A summary of these benefits follows. Massage therapy is increasingly prescribed by doctors for soft tissue problems and is now being used in pain clinics (AMTA, 1999). Sports professionals have discovered the profound benefits of massage therapy to help recover from injury, to improve performance, and for pre-event warm up. Massage

therapy is also used to enhance the immune system. Massage therapy has been effective in improving the weight and welfare of premature infants. Massage therapy lowers stress and increases responsive social behavior when used on babies whose mothers were addicted to crack cocaine. For the geriatric population, massage therapy helps the older body stay active and flexible, and contributes to good posture. Increased affluence and the growth of spas and health clubs has made massage therapy an important fitness and beauty aid.

Massage therapy training schools are licensed in states where licensing is required for postsecondary schools. School owners may choose accreditation from any number of accreditation agencies recognized by the United States Department of Education. Schools may also seek accreditation from the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA). At the time of this study, COMTA was working toward recognition by the U.S. Department of Education. The approximately thirty-three COMTA-accredited schools are unable to benefit from Title IV until recognition is granted. For now, schools that wish to benefit from Title IV funding must obtain accreditation with a U.S. Department of Education-recognized accreditation agency.

Massage therapy schools are located throughout the United States, with the heaviest concentrations in California, Florida, Texas, and Pennsylvania. Only twenty-nine states have State Massage Boards that regulate licensing exams or minimum training hours to work as a massage therapist (American Massage Therapy Association, 1999). Many of the states requiring licenses use the National Certification Exam for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork as a state licensing exam.

Passing this exam, however, does not necessarily allow massage therapists to practice from state to state. In states where there are no licensing requirements, the practice of massage therapy is sometimes regulated by local municipalities. Some municipalities have requirements that override state laws.

Most massage therapy schools offer programs of at least 500 hours in length, although program length varies from state to state (AMTA, 1999). This number is driven in part by the National Certification Exam, which sets a minimum training length for exam eligibility. It usually takes about six to twelve months to complete training. Programs include classroom, practicum, clinic, and internship experiences. Many schools have in-house clinics where students complete required internship hours. Students usually receive no remuneration during the internship in states where licensing is required. The clinic provides some revenue for the school. To stay competitive, many massage therapy schools offer additional course hours and include specialties, such as sports and geriatric massage and CranioSacral therapy. Most schools also offer continuing education programs. A few schools offer associate level degrees in massage therapy. Seven institutions offered associates, bachelors, or masters degrees in 1999, and this number continues to increase.

Tuition varies from as high as $9000 to less than $1000 according to the school and the length of the program. Most schools are in the mid-range. Since many schools cannot or choose not to tap into federal financial aid programs, they offer in-house tuition payment plans or partner with tuition-lending services.

Required training hours range from as high as 1000 hours in Nebraska and New York to only 200 hours of class and 50 hours of internship in Texas. Florida

massage therapy schools are regulated by the Florida Department of Health, Board of Massage. To work as a massage therapist in Florida, a student must complete a 500-hour program, pass the National Certification Exam, and complete twelve hours of continuing education every two years.

The Massage Therapy Profession

A trained massage therapist has many employment options. Individuals can work on their own or for any number of facilities. Typical places of employment include health clubs, spas and resorts, beauty salons, chiropractic offices, and various health care facilities such as physical therapy clinics and long-term health care centers (AMTA, 1999). Therapists working on their own may also contract with these facilities. Massage therapists can be mobile and make house or office calls. Some fulfill the American dream of setting up and running businesses of their own. Some set up in an office, or affiliate with groups of other people in medical or alternative health-care professions. Some massage therapists specialize in areas such as sports massage, infants and children, expectant mothers, or the elderly. There are different massage modalities, including Swedish, deep tissue, trigger point therapy, and more.

Massage therapists can seek membership in any number of professional organizations. The American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) has been in existence since 1943; its current membership includes 40,000 massage therapists in 30 countries. According to a recent study of its membership (AMTA,1999), the following is a profile of their member massage therapists. Nearly 80% of the membership is female. Two thirds are between the ages of 35 and 54, with an average age range of 35 to 44. Over 90% have some level of higher education. Fifty-four

percent report that they work full time (16 to 20 massage sessions a week). The most commonly charged fee is one dollar per minute. Almost 60% have set up a practice either in their home or an outside office. Over 50 % report that they are extremely satisfied in their career.

Success in the massage therapy profession requires an individual with certain characteristics. Ashley (1999) lists three key qualities for success. First, the individual should be realistic about income. While it appears possible to earn a lot of money ($1.00 per minute), the AMTA survey shows that only 12% of its members earn over $50,000. Second, drive and motivation are vital qualities for success. Since most massage therapists work on their own, it is important to have an entrepreneurial spirit. Third, commitment is also required to complete training, to set up a practice, and to find clients. In addition to these three key qualities, interests in alternative health care and in helping people are essential characteristics for the massage therapy professional.

Becoming a Massage Therapy Professional

Martin Ashley, an attorney and massage therapist, has published three editions of a book on the massage therapy profession (1992, 1995, 1999). Each book is a comprehensive compendium designed to assist people in making the right decision and commitment to the massage therapy field. In its information literature, the American Massage Therapy Association (1999) lists ten points to be considered before selecting a school and training for massage therapy. Ruth Marion (personal communication January 4, 2000), a past director of a large massage therapy school in

Colorado, also lists admissions requirements for the successful student. These appear in a consulting packet she uses while working with massage therapy school owners.

Both Ashley (1999) and Marion (personal communication, January 4, 2000) concur about the importance of learning about the massage therapy profession before embarking on training. This includes learning the requirements in the jurisdiction where the individual will reside and receiving at least two professional massages. Gathering information about the programs and ensuring that there is a match with personal career intentions is vital. Personal time and budget constraints are important to review before seeking enrollment in a school. Marion adds the need to be emotionally mature and stable; to understand the professional and ethical standards of the field; to have a plan to handle financial commitments during training and while building a practice; and to manage demands and obligations of family and work. Ideal applicants should demonstrate a desire to serve the public through caring and competent massage therapy. Marion has prepared a rigorous admissions format to help the school owner select only those candidates who have the characteristics to be successful students and successful massage therapy practitioners.

The Massage Therapy School as a Research Site

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that relate closely to student success in proprietary schools. The goals were to gain new insights about retention, to describe the students who persist in proprietary schools, and to explain the personal and institutional factors that contribute to a student's decision to persist or leave. The following are the reasons that a massage therapy school was selected as a research site:

1. Massage therapy schools have a promising future. There are about 5500 private postsecondary schools in the United States, and approximately 18% are massage therapy schools. There has been a 300% growth rate in the number of schools since 1992 (Ashley, 1999). There are a growing number of schools that offer associate and bachelors level degrees with a massage therapy specialty. Community colleges are developing massage therapy training programs.
2. Massage therapy schools are regulated by one to three governmental bodies. These include school state licensing boards, U.S. Department of Education accreditation agencies, and state massage therapy boards under departments of professional regulation.
3. Massage therapy schools maintain extensive records, providing them with rich information for a qualitative study. These records generally include student demographic information and rates of retention, program completion, graduation, and job placement. Additional information is collected if license exam forms are completed at the school.
4. Massage therapy schools are flexible and respond to the changes and demands of the profession. People who offered massage therapy were once known as masseuses and some were employed in massage parlors. In a few short years, the field has developed into a profession where therapists are considered a valued part of the health care community.
5. Massage therapy schools train non-traditional students, both because the massage therapy profession attracts non-traditional students (AMTA, 1999) and because

non-traditional students increasingly seek training in proprietary schools (Moore, 1995).

6. Massage therapy students train in a close cohort setting. The typical curriculum includes classroom academics, practical experiences, and project participation. Students practice massage techniques on each other, establishing closeness through touching not typical in other training settings. The complexity of the social relationships is unique in the proprietary school context and offers an opportunity for study.
7. Massage therapy school faculty and staff are generally accessible to students and are therapists themselves. The nature of the training helps to foster formal and informal relationships worth studying as they relate to student success.
8. Work as a massage therapist is experienced throughout training. Students generally begin performing massage during the first week of school. Projects allow them to reinforce what it means to be a massage therapist and maintain a clear understanding of the world of work that awaits them. This provides the opportunity to study the effect of the career goal as a motivator for completion.
9. Massage therapy school owners are often concerned that the enrollment process attract and retain the right students. Massage therapy is not for everyone. If marginal students are accepted, special programs must be in place to help them achieve success. The focus on admissions and student services may facilitate the identification of specific institutional factors that influence success.

Summary

Massage therapy schools represent about 18% of the proprietary schools in the United States and have experienced rapid growth in the 1990s. This increase may be a result of the growing acceptance of massage therapy as a health care therapy. Training time is relatively short compared to other professions offering similar salary potential. Trained massage therapists have many employment options, including setting up their own practices.

A massage therapy training institution was selected as the research site because it has many qualities that merit investigation to understand why students persist in proprietary schools. Massage therapy schools have a promising future. They are regulated and required to generate many valuable statistics. Schools attract students of all ages and backgrounds, particularly non-traditional students. The training programs and projects are designed for student academic, social, and institutional integration. Training outcomes are clear, since students begin the practice of massage within the first week of school and the curriculum includes real-work experiences. Instructors and administrators are usually professionals in the field. Massage therapy school owners focus on seeking and retaining students. They are often motivated to develop the best admissions practices, curriculum, and student services possible. Given all this, massage therapy training schools provide a valuable research site for investigating the factors that contribute to student success.

Research Studies

Through the years, quantitative studies have been conducted in the areas of persistence, retention, and dropout. These studies have been conducted primarily in colleges, community colleges, and universities, with little focus on the proprietary school setting. In addition, there has been relatively little qualitative research. The following includes a review of literature on persistence, retention, and dropout conducted in colleges, community colleges, and universities. There are many applications to proprietary schools, particularly from studies of community colleges, since career schools and community colleges are becoming increasingly alike (Clowes, 1995; Hittman, 1995). Studies on persistence, retention, and dropout specific to proprietary schools are also included.

The terms *persistence, retention,* and *dropout* are used in discussions about students and whether they stay in school and complete their programs of study or drop out before completion. There are many ways to categorize these studies. For this review they are divided into four groups: the students, the selection and decision-making process, the training program, and the influence of the institution. Many studies overlap.

The Students

There are research studies that attempt to profile the ideal student and the dropout. The profile includes demographic information to draw a picture of students who stay and of those who leave school before completion, with the expectation that once a model is defined, it is possible to recognize potential dropouts and head off their decision to leave school. Predicting student persistence in school is also

important during the admissions process, to help ensure that students who are accepted are likely to succeed.

Stolar (1991) studied non-traditional students at a community college. His research described non-returning students as primarily white, female, and part-time students who were dissatisfied with job placement, financial aid, student activities, and tutoring services and who experienced financial problems, job conflicts, and parenting issues. Satisfying a personal need was also a reason for not returning. Beachler (1996) followed up former students at a community college. Survey results indicated that older respondents tended to complete their programs of study in larger numbers than younger respondents. There was also a relationship between positive completion status and the students' main objectives for attending school. Students with a goal of transferring to a college or university tended to complete their studies more frequently than those who enrolled for job-related or other reasons.

If completed during the first term or weeks of enrollment, persistence prediction can also identify students likely to experience problems that will influence their continuation. Feldman (1993) investigated pre-enrollment variables as retention predictors in a community college. A lower high school GPA, an age range of 20 to 24, part-time attendance, and being an ethnic minority other than Asian were all factors associated with dropout risk.

Krotseng (1992) looked at the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) to differentiate persisters from non-persisters. Scores on this questionnaire are supposed to provide an early warning for at-risk students in a college setting. The questionnaire particularly looks at academic and social integration. Using

discriminant analysis, Krotseng determined that the SACQ is effective in identifying early college departures.

Similar to studies in higher education, persistence research in proprietary schools often focuses on making effective admissions predictions. Early prediction of potential dropouts is also important. Johnson (1991) has studied non-traditional students in a postsecondary vocational setting. His goal, to create a conceptual model of student attrition and persistence, draws on well-known research on both traditional and non-traditional students. His model accounts for attrition among subgroups of non-traditional students. In addition, the range of the students' institutional commitment and social integration are identified.

Johnson presents a comprehensive overview of studies, completed in the 1970s and 1980s, by prominent researchers on student attrition in college and university settings. These researchers (as cited in Johnson, 1991) include Spady (1971), Tinto (1975), and Pascarella (1983), who applied the model to nonresidential subjects in a commuter college. While some of these models of attrition are appropriate for proprietary school students, Johnson points out that there are many differences between colleges and vocational training institutions, especially the focus on job-related short-term training programs in vocational settings. Dropout prediction findings from other populations may not be applicable to dropouts in short career training programs (MacNeill, 1990).

From the merits and deficiencies of these studies, Johnson (1991) built a new model focused on non-traditional student attrition and retention in postsecondary vocational education. The model includes four sets of variables: background

characteristics, social/psychological integration, academic/institutional integration, and environmentally based mediating factors. Background characteristics include demographic data and educational, social, and family history. Social/psychological integration refers to the students' commitment to their goals, understanding of the usefulness of their training in relationship to future employment goals, self-esteem, and relationships with peers and instructors. Academic/institutional integration includes grades and other indicators of performance, quality of staff, administrative policies, the program, support services, facilities, and instructors. The environmentally based mediating factors refer to student finances, hours spent working and in family responsibilities, and any community agency services in which the student is involved. Johnson believes these variables have an ultimate influence on students' decisions to complete or drop out of their programs of study.

Shank and McCracken (1993) used Johnson's dropout prediction model on a group of non-traditional students attending vocational training programs in Ohio. Results of discriminant analysis indicated eight variables that were significant in predicting dropout and completion at these sites: course/schedule, finances/employment, outside agency support, instructor abilities, physical disability, interpersonal relationships, academic ability/habits, and family responsibilities. Based on these findings, specific recommendations for practice were listed. These included placing students in appropriate conveniently-scheduled classes; gathering information about students' personal, family, and financial needs; reaching more people about the availability of training; monitoring the needs of handicapped students; training

teachers particularly in andragogical teaching techniques; and offering academic skills assistance.

The ability to predict student success may provide ways for schools to identify students likely to drop out. Taube and Taube (1991) looked at student characteristics in proprietary schools by investigating past educational attainment and intellectual achievement as well as student characteristics. They also investigated factors that influenced the probability of a student persisting or voluntarily dropping. Using a single institution, modified case study approach, they found that females, whites, and older students tended to have higher first quarter GPAs. Married students were less likely to drop out than single students, and caring for children had no effect on the probability of dropping out. Unwed mothers were more likely to drop out than single students. Students working longer hours were less likely to drop out. Perceived enrichment from faculty interaction was related to the lower likelihood of the student dropping out. In a study in a technical school in 1990, Taube and Taube determined that gender, race, type of high school diploma, number of absences, performance expectation, and entrance exam scores were predictors of initial success, but that in the second semester, success was predicted by number of hours worked, gender, diploma type, initial achievement, and goal commitment.

Webb (1990) conducted a study of students in ten proprietary business schools. The research indicated that when predicting persistence in these schools, gender (female), high school average, and congruence (similarity of student-instructor educational orientations) were significant predictors of persistence. In his doctoral

dissertation, Capaz (1990) also focused on persistence in a business proprietary school, with similar findings.

In a study in a technology school in Canada, Sarkar (1993b) determined that the most common reason for continuing training was improved job prospects. Prior to enrollment, completers had higher career goals and academic averages than non-completers. In an earlier study, Sarkar (1993a) determined that non-completers were more likely to be disabled, married females with dependent children, employed, and older than completers; they were also less certain about career goals, expressed less goal commitment, and set lower final goals. A 1995 study by St. John used data from about 60,000 students in the 1987 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study. Findings indicated that a large percentage of students who attend proprietary schools are from minority groups and from families with low incomes. Economic background was not a factor in persistence because student aid was sufficient to equalize income differences.

The majority of the literature reviewed contains similar information about retention prediction. Findings vary depending on the research site, but the goals of the schools are similar – to target at-risk students and improve the training environment to increase success.

The School Selection Process

Why students select proprietary schools and a specific proprietary school was the subject of studies by Morris (1993), Revelle (1997), and Webb (1990). Revelle interviewed ninety-three students in three proprietary schools. She determined that short program length and the influence of others were important parts of the decision-

making process. In addition, students saw enrollment as a way to pursue lifelong career dreams. Webb's study looked at student characteristics such as age, gender, race, and parents' education; external influences, including significant persons; and characteristics of the colleges; and the schools' marketing methods. Findings indicated that race, gender, and family income influenced choice of school. The school characteristics that influenced day students were the availability of certificate programs, the job-placement rate, and campus location. Day and evening preference depended on program goals. Morris (1993) looked at the characteristics of students who selected proprietary schools over nearby community colleges that offered the same programs at substantially lower tuition. He determined that these students tended to be immature, were from blue-collar families, and were influenced by the promise of short training programs to gain employment. Pautler (1988) and Moore (1995) also discuss the quick access to employment as a reason to select proprietary schools.

The Training Program

Involvement in school and in a training program is more than just going to class. During the time students are engaged in their educational pursuits, they experience the academic environment in a variety of ways. Some succeed and others struggle. Attending school provides potential social experiences with peers, faculty, and staff, resulting in socializing that ranges from mere class attendance to extensive relationships with others. Depending on what is offered by the institution, students can benefit from a range of student and support services that help them to succeed and to seek employment.

Expectations

For many students, there may be a difference between their expectations of school and the reality. Villella and Hu (1991) studied non-traditional college students in a university setting in order to develop a model for understanding retention and the underlying factors that contribute to retention decisions. Using a questionnaire and factor analysis, it was found that students experienced stress and dissatisfaction when they became aware of the real time constraints and academic rigor required compared to their initial expectations. This dissatisfaction could lead to a student's decision to leave, since non-traditional students already have demanding lives.

The researchers suggested that procedures be put in place to make the process of going to school less stressful. Since academics are a stressor, stress could be reduced if courses were significant to the student. Students could be encouraged to share their work and life experiences with faculty and peers. The gap between students' expectations and experience could also be addressed by effective admissions procedures (Seidman, 1989). Comprehensive information needs to be presented so applicants can determine if the school provides the best fit for their needs.

Academic and Social Integration

The classroom experience may have an effect on student persistence. Because of limited research in this area, Tinto (1997) conducted a study to examine the concept of classrooms as communities in a commuter college environment. His study involved both a quantitative survey and a qualitative case study in a community college Coordinated Studies Program (CSP) where students learn together, work

collaboratively, and share the experience of learning. There were five variables that were significant in predicting persistence: participation in the CSP program; GPA; hours studied; perceptions of faculty; and the factor score on involvement with other students. Qualitative analysis provided information about the underlying forces that link the classroom experience to persistence. Three themes emerged: building supportive peer groups; sharing learning to bridge the academic social divide; and gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge. Friendships with classmates were valued and became a way for students to handle the struggles of going to school. Because of the supportive network of peers, the social and academic worlds were able to co-exist, and grades improved. Students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning processes, which empowered them. Membership within the classroom community helped create pathways to the school environment outside the classroom. Tinto also discusses the temporal process of learning and persistence; he suggests that school experiences cause social and academic involvement to vary over time, in different ways for different students. Looking at the time when students are at risk of leaving may be helpful in determining what kinds and times of intervention would be effective for retention (Desjardins, 1995).

In an earlier study, Tinto and Goodsell (1993) determined that Freshman Interest Groups were a powerful way to affect a student’s first-year college experience. The groups made it easy for students to interact with a consistent set of peers across their classes and to form a strong social network, which aided other academic support mechanisms. In Tinto’s model of retention (1993), withdrawal is related to the student’s family background, skills and abilities, prior schooling,

education goals, and commitment to the institution before enrolling. Withdrawal or persistence is also related to students' integration into the academic and social community of the school. Those who are integrated tend to stay; those who feel alienated tend to leave. In looking at time-to-degree as a factor that affects college retention, Avalos (1996) determined that involvement in college was a major determinant of college persistence. A study of social integration of minorities in a university setting (Zea, Reisen, Beil & Caplan, 1997) found that social integration influenced the commitment to remain in college for both ethnic minority and white students. Academic achievement had a stronger influence on the decision to stay for the ethnic minority group than for the non-minority students. In Galloway's study (1990) of two medical lab technology programs, the two characteristics that most influenced retention were the faculty's role and peer support.

Retention Strategies

Purposeful retention strategies can help to anticipate students at risk of dropping out (Seidman, 1996). Seidman developed a retention formula that requires early identification of at-risk students and specific plans for early, intensive, and continuous retention intervention strategies to keep students in school. Retention strategies and techniques fall into three categories: academic, student services, and student life (Seidman, 1995). All are designed to address problems of academic preparation, study skills, and self-esteem and include advising, counseling, and tutoring. This retention approach is consistent with Tinto's principles of effective retention (1990). Tinto presents the need for schools to address retention early by initiating a variety of retention strategies, including pre-admission programs and

advising during the first year. Tinto further recommends that schools take an aggressive approach, requiring students to receive academic assistance and providing intrusive monitoring of student progress.

Metzner (1989) studied the perceived quality of academic advising in a college setting and its relationship to attrition. Although high quality advising yielded higher levels of retention, even low quality advising had a positive influence.

Goals

In Johnson's model (1991), educational goals and commitment to those goals are associated with student persistence. High personal satisfaction is likely when the student's choice in occupational programs and vocational preference are close. Social/psychological integration relates to a student's goal commitments, perceptions of vocational training's usefulness, alienation, self-esteem, stress, and interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers. In general, research shows that the higher the educational interests and goals, the more likely the student will remain in school. In a study of students in their first term at a postsecondary school, Tucker (1998) determined that students who stated they were happy during their first term had established career goals even before educational goals. Students with less defined long-term goals experienced difficulties.

Career goals may be linked to job readiness and job placement services offered by schools. Job readiness is a process of helping students to clarify personal goals and values and to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Job placement services include resume building and interviewing strategies that are needed for the job search (Talbott, 1997). Talbott investigated stakeholders' views of job placement

practices at fifteen proprietary career schools. She determined that stakeholders viewed job placement as important, but their perceptions of services provided by the school were not always correct. She suggested that faculty take an active role in students' career development by helping them apply what they learn in class to the work setting.

The Changes in Students

Learning often goes beyond acquiring classroom skills and knowledge. When students participate in learning communities, which have a high level of social integration (Tinto, 1997), they discover personal abilities not evidenced before. Students also open up to an appreciation of the richness and diversity of their classmates. In addition, students note their ability to learn more effectively. Tinto discussed how these changes vary over time and at different stages of training. According to Moore (1995), the nature of the proprietary school approach that motivates a student to complete may help to build student self-esteem.

School as a Rite of Passage

In studying residential college students, Tinto (1988) proposed that the stages of the students' college careers could be understood through the anthropological concept of rites of passage. If successful completion of school is a rite of passage, the first stage is separation, when the student leaves family, friends, and a familiar way of life to enter college. Success may depend on the ability to leave or separate from the past. It may also depend on whether students become fully immersed in the school experience or live at home, maintaining a life in both worlds. The second stage is transition. Students are no longer fully members of their home community, nor do

they have all of the norms and behaviors needed for the school environment. Many students drop out at this stage because of the tension between these two worlds. Establishing full membership in the school setting must be accomplished through social interactions with other students and with faculty. Failure to make these contacts may result in non-persistence. Tinto suggests that orientation activities be held throughout the first semester. Public ceremonies for completion might also positively influence retention.

A dissertation by Maniss (1997) viewed the training experience, from application through graduation, as a rite of passage. Drawing on anthropologists such as Arnold Van Gennep and M. Eliade (as cited in Maniss, 1997), Maniss described three stages of passage. Her descriptions were similar to Tinto's (1988). The first stage is the separation of the student from the current environment and preparation for the next stage. This is followed by participation in transition, where the individual faces ordeals, experiences ambiguity or loss of identity, and gains required skills and knowledge with the assistance of teachers and peers. The final stage, incorporation, is when the individual demonstrates the change or transformation by assuming a new role.

Using qualitative methods, Maniss (1997) documented how participants experienced these stages as they completed doctoral studies. The educational process paralleled the stages of a rite of passage. The separation process consisted of applying for school and completing qualifying exams and interviews. It also included difficult changes, such as leaving friends and family or moving to a new city where the school was located. During the transition stage, participants experienced a sense of limbo

and loss of identity as they completed their program requirements. Some were able to get through their training more easily than others by developing relationships with fellow classmates and faculty members. Maniss noted that certain processes of the transition stage seemed to be missing, resulting in some students moving into the third and final phase without fully completing the transition. Each participant experienced the final stage of incorporation differently, depending upon the completion level of the transition phase.

Draper (1991) also used the rite of passage metaphor to describe the freshman experience at a university. During separation, there was a redefinition of relationships with family and friends. Transition was marked by dealing with academic issues and grades. Incorporation was the time when new social networks were constructed. A study of rites of passage of women reentering higher education (Redding & Dowling, 1992) showed the need for ceremonies and rituals in order to facilitate these passages.

The Institution

Postsecondary institutions put procedures in place to attract students who are likely to stay. In addition, schools develop strategies to retain those who enroll. The institutions' instructors, support services, scheduling, and policies all impact the student. Regardless of the best efforts, however, students don't always stay.

Tinto (1990) outlined principles of institutional action for effective retention programs. While designed for the college and university setting, these principles are applicable to most other postsecondary institutions. The first principle is community, or the way the institution integrates the student into the social and intellectual life of the school. Retention is affected when a planned effort is made to encourage personal

bonds among and between students and faculty and staff with frequent and rewarding contact. In a commuter school, the challenge is to make this happen in the classroom. The second principle is the institution's commitment to helping students reach their goals. Commitment is not a program, but a pervasive attitude on everyone's part. Caring and student-centeredness help to retain the student and foster the student's commitment to the school. The third principle is commitment to the student's social and intellectual growth. This involves concern with relevant and high quality educational offerings. Faculty effectiveness is a key to the education process. The quality and involvement of the faculty influence student persistence and learning.

School policies influence retention in other ways. Jones (1990) studied a nursing assistant program that allowed students to complete an open-entry/open-exit competency-based program. This program addressed the needs of students who could not always complete the program in the given time. Results show that there were no dropouts during the first three months of the new program. The graduation rate increased 87.5 % after completion of the competency-based phases.

There are some barriers to education that cannot be remedied by the school, and often have nothing to do with the school. In a three-phase study about why students leave school (Wisconsin State Board of Vocation, Technical, and Adult Education, 1991), it was determined that the most important reasons relate to childcare, financial problems, and illness. In the 1990 study, it was determined that leavers had positive attitudes about instructors and were actually frequent users of student services. Conklin (1993, 1995, 1997) conducted several studies in a community college setting focused on why students leave and what happens to them.

A January-March 1993 survey indicated that students did not return because they had reached their educational goals or other objectives and had improved themselves in a variety of ways as a result of being in college. On one campus, where persistence rates were the lowest, students indicated that they wanted help in developing satisfying social lives. Primary reasons for leaving a community college in Kansas (Conklin, 1992) included work schedule conflicts, completion of desired course work, financial difficulties, lifestyle change, and family personal problems. Galloway (1990) determined that students in a technical school left training because of personal problems such as work conflicts, home environment, and money. None of these had anything to do with the institution and its policies. The study also found no relationship between college services and retention.

A study by the General Accounting Office (1997) looked at the outcomes of proprietary schools that depended on Title IV funds, and determined that schools with heavy reliance on Title IV funds tended to have poorer student outcomes in terms of completion and placement rates. Research conducted in ten New York proprietary schools (Webb, 1990) determined that students who stayed had a sense of belonging, deemed the staff friendly and helpful, and saw the faculty as supportive. The school encouraged this environment.

Moore (1995), a frequent writer on proprietary schools, believes that proprietary students are more likely than college students to succeed because of what drives proprietary schools. Since completion is connected to collecting tuition balances, schools typically earn their profit at the end of the enrollment period, so school owners must focus on encouraging students to complete on a timely basis.

Summary

An overview of persistence, retention, and dropout studies in post-secondary education provides a background for understanding why students leave before completing their studies. Some researchers attempt to predict dropouts and persisters by looking at student demographic profiles before enrollment or during the first term. Results of the use of prediction factors vary, however, and there is often disagreement about how factors (including age, gender, part- or full-time attendance status, grade point average, and ethnic background, among others) influence success.

Research indicates that the dropout has many faces. Some reasons for not returning are being female; attending part-time; having dissatisfactions or outside demands; or satisfying a personal need. Dropouts may go through a decision-making process at various times during their school experience. Stress and dissatisfaction can occur when expectations are not met. Work schedule conflicts, family, and lifestyle can influence the decision to stay or leave. There may be stages, similar to the rites of passage, through which students evolve from applicant to student to graduate. There are many points along the way when a student may fail to adequately make the transition and decide to drop out.

Social and academic integration are strong factors that contribute to student persistence. Interacting with peers, faculty, and administration positively affects persistence. Involvement in school life can also be a major determinant of staying in school. A sense of community, commitment on the part of the school, and a focus on the student’s social and intellectual growth are important retention principles

indicated by these studies. Regardless of the best efforts, however, students do drop out.

A review of literature indicates that student retention is a primary concern of postsecondary educators. There are many studies about persistence, retention, and dropouts, particularly in colleges, community colleges, and universities. There are relatively few studies in the proprietary school setting. Many of the studies provide contradictory results or focus on studying the same factors rather than uncovering new ones. In addition to relatively few studies in proprietary schools, there are also few qualitative studies. Of the qualitative studies reviewed, most have used the interview process. It is not evident that any researcher has used both the case study and the phenomenological approaches to gain an understanding of what influences proprietary students and their experiences as they engage in training.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that relate closely to student success in proprietary schools. This chapter outlines the methodology and design of the research. This is a qualitative study using phenomenological case study methods. This chapter outlines the interviewing, sampling, observation, and document review processes, and describes how the data were analyzed. A massage therapy training school was designated as a research site, and the study participants were selected students and personnel affiliated with the school during a two-year time period.

There are relatively few studies on proprietary school students and on persistence and retention in proprietary schools, particularly when compared to studies in colleges, community colleges, and universities. In most studies, quantitative methods are used to examine persistence and retention factors such as student age, gender, ethnicity, educational background, grade point average, academic and social integration, work, family responsibilities, and institutional policies. There are few studies using qualitative methods.

Design of the Study

This was a triangulated phenomenological case study that included interviews, observations, document analysis, and focus groups. Phenomenological inquiry is used to understand what individuals experience and how they experience and interpret their lives (Patton, 1990). It is the study of lived experiences with the assumption that there is a structure that can be defined (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In this study, phenomenological interviewing was used to examine what it means to be a successful

student at a massage therapy training institution. The case study focused on the entire campus during a specific period of time and included multiple sources of information to paint a detailed picture of the setting (Creswell, 1998). These methods provided data to understand the effects of the school program, policies, and staff on students, especially the influences on successful students.

The primary units of analysis (participants) included students who enrolled during the past two years and personnel affiliated with the school during this period of time. The instruments used were interview guides developed by the researcher. The two-year time span was selected in order to gain a broad sampling of students, including those in various stages of training, those who graduated and were working in the field, and non-completers.

An analysis was made of data gathered during the interviews, observations, document reviews, and focus groups. The perspectives of students were analyzed and compared to those of faculty and staff.

The Research Site

Background

The site for this research was a Florida massage therapy school purchased by its current owner in 1987. According to the 1999 school catalog, the mission of the school is to teach massage and colon therapy in a loving and caring atmosphere. The school president developed the school because of a "strong desire to be able to provide quality education with a spiritual emphasis." Her focus on massage and colon therapy is the result of a strong belief that God provided her with an understanding about the need for a clean and healthy mind and body. Because of the owner's

religious beliefs, the management style is influenced by some of the principles of the Seventh Day Adventists. The school is closed from Friday sundown through Sunday noon. (Similar schools are typically open seven days a week or closed for just one day each weekend.) Courses that are opposed to religious teachings are not offered, and the work setting is positive and supportive. The school is a 10,000 square foot facility located on a main street. In addition to classrooms, practicum rooms, and administrative offices, there is an on-site clinic and store that sells a small variety of massage- and health-oriented books and products. The school attracts students from the local area, elsewhere in Florida, other states, and abroad.

Management

The director of operations and the director of education are instrumental in the day-to-day operations of the school. The president is involved in certain aspects of the operations; she also teaches. In addition, her time is spent on outside ministries. Administrators are all licensed massage therapists with a strong belief in maintaining and enhancing health through natural means.

Program Offerings

The school offers massage therapy training on a full- and part-time basis. Full-time day and evening programs are six months in length and begin four times each year. About 25 to 40 students enroll at each start date. According to accreditation guidelines, students are allowed 150% of the given time to complete their training. This means that they may extend their studies to a total of as much as nine months. There is also a twelve-month program. Students may enroll at any time, but typically start when a new module is introduced. Using the 150% rule, these twelve-month

students may take as long as eighteen months to complete their training. The six-month program is offered during the day and the evening, while the twelve-month program is offered only in the evening. Six-month students are allowed to switch from day to evening at any time during their studies. They do this because their schedules change, to repeat a module, to make up missed work, or because they find the six-month program too rigorous. The colon therapy training is offered only once each year, during the day.

In addition to the two training programs, the school also offers continuing education. It has several on-site and off-campus activities such as massage awareness days, massage-athons, and community outreach programs, including demonstrations at sports events and massage programs at a local Alzheimer's center. This research focuses only on students enrolled in the massage therapy program.

Completion Rates and Student Body

The completion and graduation rates were taken from reports filed with the state licensing board and accreditation agency. Since the school surpassed state requirements of 50% completion, it is no longer required to submit this information. Instead, it submits lists of students and their job placement status. The last report submitted to the accreditation agency showed a 72% completion rate and an 85% placement rate. Completion and graduation rates are difficult to calculate because students are in various stages of completion at any time of reporting.

Regulatory Bodies

The school is licensed by the Florida State Board of NonPublic Career Education to operate as a school and is accredited by a U.S. Department of Education

accrediting body, the Accrediting Commission for Continuing Education and Training. The school owners have chosen not to seek Title IV approval, but do have approval for Veterans Administration benefits.

Why the Site Was Selected

The school was selected because it has been in business for over ten years, is state-licensed, and is accredited by a U.S. Department of Education accreditation agency. It maintains demographic information about its students and student outcome statistics, and surpasses state license and accreditation requirements for completion and placement. Records are maintained because of licensing and accreditation board reporting requirements. The school is run efficiently and its records are up-to-date, although the database was being converted at the time of the study. The owners were agreeable to having a researcher on the premises, which made access easy and provided a place to interview students. The school also allowed staff time away from work for interviews.

Time Periods Selected

This study covered a two-year time frame from December 1997 to December 1999. The two-year time frame was selected for several reasons. It allowed a sufficient population base and range of students, as well as consistent school policies and procedures.

Participants

Participants were selected from all possible students and staff who were enrolled in or worked at the school during the two-year time frame from December 1997 to December 1999.

Students

During the study timeframe, a total of 305 students enrolled as new students in the six-month program and a total of 39 students enrolled in the twelve-month program. See Table 1.

Table 1

New Students, December 1997 – December 1999

Total	Six-Month Day	Six-Month Night	Twelve-Month
344	150	155	39

The makeup of the students during this total time period included currently enrolled students and graduates in all day and evening sessions. Some of the graduates had taken their certification exams so they could practice; others were waiting to take the exam. Some students within this timeframe either withdrew voluntarily or were forced to withdraw by the school because of failure to pay tuition, complete requirements, or adhere to rules. There were also students who were classified as extended. This meant that they had withdrawn but had returned to school to continue working on program requirements. The school made individual arrangements so these students could complete their course work or practicum hours and eventually graduate, even though they had exceeded the required time period from their initial enrollment date. These students also had to pay $150 per month during this extension period. Some students believed they were extended even though their files did not indicate that they had made formal arrangements to that effect. There were also students who were allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony

but who actually had hours to complete in order to obtain their certificate of completion. Table 2 shows student status and provides demographic information.

Table 2

Description of Students December 1997 to December 1999

	Total	6-Month Day	6-Month Night	12-Month
Enrollments	344	150	155	39
Male	118	48	60	10
Female	226	102	95	29
Graduates	120	77	40	3
Working as therapist	113	70	37	6
Waiting to take exam	19	14	5	0
Voluntary withdrawal	65	10	44	11
Forced withdrawal	7	5	2	0
Extended	58	25	32	1*
Age 18-25	180	137	29	14
Age 26-44	123	85	26	12
Age 45 +	41	24	11	6
Caucasian	243	140	78	25
African-American	44	23	14	7
Hispanic	44	26	13	5
Asian	11	4	5	2
Native American	2	0	0	0

* Fifteen are currently enrolled.

Student Participant Selection Process

Qualitative research methods include in-depth interviewing of small samples that are selected purposefully (Patton, 1990). The purposeful sampling allows for the selection of information-rich cases that provide the opportunity to learn as much as

possible about the matter under study. An effort was therefore made to include a diverse range of student participants in the interviewing process, representing current students, graduates, and individuals of both genders and varied ages and ethnic backgrounds. This was done to ensure a maximum variation sampling. According to Patton (1990), with maximum variation sampling

> Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects of impacts of a program. (p. 172)

The school staff, with oversight by the director of operations, developed a list of the 344 students who enrolled in the day and evening programs during the two-year time frame. All these individuals were then sent a letter, under the signature of the director of operations, explaining the research project and introducing the researcher (Appendix A). Seventy pieces of mail were returned because the addressee was unknown or there was no forwarding address. Announcements of the research project were made in each class, and were included in school publications and all mailings for a period of one month. Students and graduates were eager to volunteer, so there was no problem in obtaining a representative sampling.

Students who did not complete the training program, were extended, or dropped out had little motivation to participate. They were therefore telephoned to ensure a sampling from this group. Personal problems had already slowed them down in their studies, so they were not easy to reach or had little time for an interview. The mailing that announced the research project eliminated many of those who had moved, left no forwarding address, or lived in the area only while attending school. Approximately 40 of these students who presumably received the announcement were

telephoned with the assumption that they were still at the address indicated by the school records. Since most of these calls resulted in disconnected telephone numbers, individuals no longer residing there, or non-return of the calls, these phone contacts yielded only a few interviews.

Student Participants

Fourteen student participants were interviewed. This total represented 4% of the students who enrolled during the study time frame of December 1997 to December 1999. Those who had withdrawn were included, as were those who believed they were extended though their records showed otherwise. It was felt that the students interviewed represented a reasonable sampling, even though the study might have benefited from including those who dropped out in the very early stages of their studies. The interviews satisfied the criteria of sufficiency and saturation of information. Patterns that confirmed findings began to emerge early in the interviewing process. The researcher did not personally know any of the student participants.

Table 3 provides a summary profile of the participants. The figures are not intended to calculate completion, graduation, or placement rates. This is because students were enrolled at various start times. For example, some students were in the beginning or middle of their programs at the time of this research study. Students could also take longer than nine or eighteen months to complete their programs.

Table 3

Description of Student Participants

Student	Total	6-Month Day	6-Month Night	12-Month
Total	14	8	4	2
Male	7	6	0	1
Female	7	3*	4	2**
Graduates	5	5	0	0
Working as therapist	3	3	0	0
Waiting to take exam	2	2	0	0
Voluntary withdrawal	2	2	0	0
Forced withdrawal	0	0	0	0
Extended	2	0	2	0
Age 18-25	3	3	0	0
Age 26-44	7	4	2	1
Age 45 +	4	3	0	1
Caucasian	12	8	2	2
African-American	3	1	1	1
Hispanic	0	0	0	0
Asian	0	0	0	0
Native American	0	0	0	0

*One was a transfer student.
**Two switched from the six-month night program.

Profile of student participants. A total of fourteen students comprised the study sample. Seven were male and seven were female. The men were younger than the women. Their ages were 18, 20, 23, 34, 36, 47, and 53. The ages of the women were 37, 38, 39, 41, 43, 46, and 56. Of the men, six were Caucasian and one was African-American. Of the women, five were Caucasian and two were from Jamaica, classifying themselves as African-American.

Education and work experience. Both men and women had extensive education. One man had completed one and a half years of law school. Of the three men who had gone to college, two had completed bachelors degrees. Of the two men who had gone to community college, one had completed an associate degree. One male was a recent high school graduate. Two of the women had masters degrees, one had a bachelors degree, three had nursing training, and one had a high school diploma.

Work experience was diverse for both men and women. The men worked in construction, the restaurant business, and retail. One was an entrepreneur and another was a physical therapy aide. The women came from health fields, teaching, and other fields. One was a practicing psychotherapist, another a news photographer, and another a legal assistant.

Program enrollment, completion time, and work commitments. Six of the men had enrolled in the six-month day program. One had enrolled in the twelve-month program, offered only at night. Of the two male students who had graduated at the time of the interview, both had been enrolled in the six-month program. Two who had withdrawn said they were making arrangements to return to complete their

studies, but had made no formal application to extend and complete. The twelve-month student was extended and believed he had one course to complete.

Three women had graduated from the six-month day program. None of the four women in the six-month night program had graduated. One was within the 150% completion time and was working to complete. The other was extended. Two had transferred to the twelve-month program and had completion target dates.

Of the six men who enrolled in the day program, two did not work at all while in school, three worked 20 hours a week, and one carried a 30-hour workload. Of the women in the day program, one did not work at all and two carried part-time workloads. All four women who were enrolled at night worked full-time jobs during the day.

Faculty and Staff

There were a total of thirty possible employees available for interviewing. This included the school owners, administrators, staff, faculty, and consultants. Some were students who had worked at the school before or just after graduation and before assuming full-time careers as massage therapists. The goal of the research was to interview a purposeful sample.

Faculty and Staff Selection Process

A letter from the director of operations was sent to all faculty, administration, and staff explaining the research study. While participation was voluntary, employees were given time off from work for the interview. Appointments were set at a time mutually convenient to the researcher and the staff member.

Profile of Staff Participants

Eight members of the current staff were interviewed, two men and six women. Three of the women were 26 to 44 years of age; three were 45 or older. Both men were in the 36-to-44 age group. All staff participants were Caucasian.

Education and work experience. The education level of the women included three high school graduates, two college graduates, and an individual who had completed three years of college. Five women were licensed massage therapists. Three of these had been trained at the school. One man had a masters degree, the other a bachelors degree. One man was a licensed massage therapist who had been trained at the school. The work experience of the women included physical therapy, office and restaurant work, administration, and marketing. One man came from an art background, and the other came from the ministry with a physical fitness background.

Work responsibilities at the school. The women interviewed included the president, the director of operations, the director of education, an admissions representative, an event coordinator, and an administrative assistant. One man was an admissions representative; the other had multiple responsibilities, including marketing, teaching, and clinic instruction. Six of the staff participants had other work outside of the school.

Data Collection

This was a phenomenological case study using qualitative research methods to gain an understanding of proprietary school students and what contributes to completion of their training. The study was triangulated, drawing on several sources of data. These included methodical interviews, observations, and document analysis,

as well as focus groups, to gather rich, quality data. It was expected that quality and credibility would be high because of the ability to crosscheck consistency of information from these sources. In addition, focus groups were held where findings were presented to gain confirmation as well as different points of view. The number and diversity of participants also increased the potential for validity and reliability. According to Patton (1990),

> Triangulation is a process by which the researcher can guard against the accusation that a study's findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator's biases. (p. 470)

Student Interviews

Each student participant was asked to schedule an interview of forty minutes to one hour. Interviews were scheduled at the school whenever possible. One was held at the participant's place of work and another at the researcher's office. In-person interviews were conducted in order to develop rapport and increase communication. One telephone interview was held with a student who had withdrawn and could not come to the school. This was done in order to ensure a sampling of non-completers.

Initial Procedures

The first step of the interview included a review of the consent form. This written document was developed according to the requirements of the Florida Atlantic University Institutional Review Board. The consent form included information about use of the data, the right to withdraw, the right to review the written documentation, confidentiality, and legal status of the data. Answers were provided when participants had questions. The participants were asked to sign the

document and received a copy of it (Appendix B). Students were asked for their permission to tape-record the interview. Confidentiality and a code of ethics to maintain privacy were emphasized.

An intake form (Appendix C) was completed during each interview; this took place at the end of the interview so that the interview started off with a qualitative focus. This form asked for basic demographic information, information about program start and completion dates, and information about involvement in the school. The intake form, used to gain basic demographic information and completion status, served as a cover sheet for the transcripts and other data collected about the participants. To maintain confidentiality, names were never used and all data was maintained in the researcher's office.

Student Interview Guide

The method of interviewing loosely drew on the concepts of the three-interview approach outlined by Seidman (1998). Seidman developed an in-depth phenomenological interviewing method, usually used when there are a limited number of participants interviewed. The method consists of a series of three separate interviews of ninety minutes each where the researcher asks about the participant's thinking prior to the experience, then asks what the actual experience was like, and concludes by asking for reflective thinking about the experience. According to Seidman

> The first interview establishes the context of the participant's experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 11)

The nature of this research study did not require three interviews. Because several participants were interviewed, rather than a limited number, and the study was triangulated, this research condensed the approach into one interview.

The following set of questions was used with student participants. A series of prepared exploration questions (Appendix E) was created in order to delve further into the answers and encourage broader and deeper responses, as needed. These additional questions were also used as a list to check that all possible topics were covered after participants had responded to the main questions. Some members of the staff had been students; when this occurred, the questions for students were asked along with those for staff. The main questions for student participants were:

1. Please tell me about the events in your life that led up to your decision to enter massage therapy training.
2. Please tell me what it is or was like to be a massage therapy student.
3. Given what you have said that led up to your decision to enter massage therapy training plus what you have said of your experiences as a massage therapy student, what do you now understand or know about your experience?

Staff Interviews

Each staff participant was asked to schedule an interview of thirty minutes to one hour. Interviews were held on site in the conference room or in an unoccupied office where privacy was ensured.

Initial Procedures

As in the interviews with students, the first step in the interview process was to discuss the consent form and review confidentiality issues. Thought was given to

the possible concern of the school personnel. They might worry that they would be evaluated in a way that would affect their job or salary. Therefore, a great deal of time in the beginning of each interview was spent discussing confidentiality and a code of ethics to respect the privacy of everyone. The explanation also included the fact that if information were revealed to administration, then the site would change or be contaminated, and therefore the results of the research would be questionable.

As in the interview format for student participants, an intake form was completed asking for length of time individuals had been affiliated with the school, professional and educational background, and basic demographic information. Similar to the student interviews, the intake forms were completed at the end of the interview so that the interview started off with a qualitative focus.

To maintain confidentiality, names were never used and research data was filed in the researcher's office. The intake form was used as a cover sheet for the transcripts and other data collected about the participants.

Staff Interview Guide

The concepts developed by Seidman (1998) were also used for the staff interview guide. However, employees were asked a total of four questions, which included main questions plus exploratory questions to encourage in-depth responses. The main questions for the staff were:

1. Please tell me the events that led up to your decision to work at the school.
2. What is it like working at the school?
3. How do you feel you impact the students who go to school here?
4. How do you feel the school impacts the students who train here?

Transcriptions

Interviews were tape-recorded. The phone interview was taped using a speakerphone. The researcher also took written notes to track developing and recurring themes, new questions to ask or reframe, and any significant body language or unusual non-verbal communication that occurred and was not picked up on the tape. At the end of the interview, the researcher documented personal impressions.

Transcriptions of the interviews were typed within a few days of the interview. The researcher typed several of the tapes. An assistant handled the typing overload, following an instruction sheet to ensure consistency. Transcriptions were reviewed as close to the interview date as possible to consider emerging categories and themes, areas that needed clarification, or questions that needed to be reframed.

Member Checking

Participants were asked to review their transcripts and make changes and additions as appropriate. Participants were encouraged to return their comments to the researcher at school, by fax, or by mail. The nature of most changes that were returned consisted of editing words that were transcribed incorrectly or filling in missing information. Changes were incorporated into the transcriptions as appropriate.

Observations

The value of observations is to add to the understanding of what is happening for the participant and to fill in the complexities of a situation (Patton, 1990). Observation takes the researcher into the setting, and provides an insider's perspective of the impressions and feelings of the places inhabited by the students and

school personnel, thus providing the opportunity to learn about the total environment. Observations for this research were made solely at the school. While the student's family, home life, and work life influence student success, it was not feasible to enter these environments. Observations allowed the researcher to better understand what the participants were talking about and to note inconsistencies between what the researcher saw and what the participants said. They were designed to supplement the data gathered from the interviewing and document analysis processes.

Those observed included prospective students, students, employees, and visitors to the school and clinic. There were two kinds of observations: formal and informal. Formal observations included all activities the individual could experience from the time of the first visit to the school through graduation. For this study, these included the interview process and pre-enrollment activities such as Career Awareness and Massage Workshops, admissions interviews, school tour, orientation, the classroom, practicum, clinic training, exit interviews, graduation, the license application process, and job placement activities. Observations were also made at two staff meetings.

The informal activities included transactions of the receptionist, students, and staff in the hallways, lounges, and parking lots. In addition, observations were made of students reviewing the job referral book and eating and socializing in the student lounge. General observations were made of all rooms in the building and also of the building's exterior. The following table indicates total hours of observations conducted.

Table 4

Total Hours of Observations

Observation	Hours
Massage Awareness Program	2
School tour	2
Massage Workshop	4
Admissions interviews	2
Orientation	4
Classroom observations	4
Practicum observations	2
Clinic observations	2
Pre-exit and exit interviews, including license application	2
Graduation	3
Placement activities	2
Staff meetings	5
Informal observations	8

Observations were open and overt. This was because the research project was well publicized and the researcher was on site frequently. It should also be noted that there is a lot of activity on site, so the researcher was not the only unfamiliar face on campus. The researcher's role in this study was one of observer. The researcher had an effective comfort level at the school site and rapport with some of the faculty and staff. The researcher did not have prior knowledge of the students, but had worked with some members of the staff.

The nature of what was observed usually determined the length of time for the observation. For example, an admissions interview typically lasts one hour; graduation programs take place from 6:00 to 9:00 pm; classroom and clinic courses

vary from one to three hours; an exit interview lasts 30 minutes to one hour; and orientation is four hours.

Handwritten descriptive notes were taken using notebook paper at the time of observation. The notes described what took place, the setting, those present, social interactions, activities, the observer's opinions, and other information in order to paint a detailed picture of the observation. Notes were dated, retyped as necessary, and placed in a notebook. A cover sheet was developed as an additional method of organization. The researcher's thoughts were noted, including patterns, relationships, and areas for further investigation. When handouts were available, these were attached to the notes.

Document Analysis

Documents are supplemental information often used in case studies to supplement data from interviewing and observation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). A variety of documents were reviewed in order to develop a history and background of the school up to the present time. The documents provided demographic and student information showing enrollment and student success. Promotional pieces, information forms, and learning materials were reviewed for clarity, appropriateness, usefulness, and ease of use. The documents also included policies and procedures. The document review helped to develop and substantiate theories and themes that arose from interviewing and observations. The following documents were reviewed and analyzed:

1. Materials on display and sold at the school
2. Admissions and promotional materials

3. School publications, including catalog, information sheets, and newsletters
4. Student handbooks
5. Clinic handbooks
6. Clinic forms, such as Medical Intake forms and Client questionnaires
7. Exit interview forms and other forms used to collect student information
8. Learning materials and license applications
9. Accreditation agency self-study reports and license renewals
10. Student and staff files for the past two years
11. Signs
12. Faculty Handbook
13. Staff development program materials
14. Student orientation program materials

Focus Groups

Upon completion of the original and updated transcriptions, the researcher conducted focus groups. Two focus groups were held for students and one was held for staff. All sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for agreements and disagreements with the findings presented. The results were incorporated into the chapters on findings.

Announcements were made in class during the previous week and were included in the weekly newsletter. Students were asked to volunteer, but were told they would get refreshments and a total of one hour of credit toward required practical work for their participation. The first student focus group included students enrolled in the current six-month day program and was held just after a class at 1:00

pm. A total of fourteen day students participated. There were eleven women and three men. The women had enrolled during the past seven months, and had reported on the intake form that they were completing the final requirements to obtain their certificate of completion. Some had participated in the recent graduation ceremony but had not finished all requirements. Two of the men had started in the recent September term. One had started in December 1998 and reported that he had two months to complete. A second student focus group was held on a Sunday at 3:00 pm for all students who attended school at night. The five students present included four women and one man. All reported that they had begun the six-month program during the past seven months and expected to complete on time. Only one of the focus group participants had been interviewed during the interview process. The focus group for staff was held during the last hour of a regularly scheduled staff meeting.

The focus group agenda included introductions, an explanation of the research, confidentiality issues, and the purpose of the focus groups. Participants were asked to sign a consent form. Findings were presented one by one, and students and staff were asked for their thoughts and opinions. Probe questions such as “Does this ring true?” and “What are your feelings about this finding?” helped generate responses. At first the day students were hesitant to speak. However, they quickly got involved after hearing just a few findings. Some of the findings had to be explained further and examples given. As a result, these findings were reframed for clearer understanding. Some of the findings did not ring true at all. These were reviewed and reformatted. The tone of the day students’ remarks was that of general satisfaction. The tone of the night students’ comments was markedly different. They had many

complaints and used the focus group as a way of presenting them. Some of the findings were tempered as a result of their feedback.

During the focus group at the staff meeting, respondents were very receptive to the findings. The staff was in general agreement with all findings and used the information as a springboard for further discussions to improve the school.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted before the start of the formal study. During this study, two currently enrolled students and one employee were interviewed. One informal observation also took place. The purpose of the pilot study was to determine the clarity of the questions and the depth and breadth of responses they would elicit. The pilot also gave the interviewer practice in asking the questions, handling the tape recorder, and finalizing a format for typing the transcriptions. As a result of the pilot interviews, the exploratory questions were restructured to avoid redundancy and an exploratory question was added asking the students what personal awareness they discovered. The researcher discovered that it was easy to conduct interviews, as both students and staff were receptive to talking about their experiences. The pilot also helped the researcher trust the utility of a larger study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of looking at the data for emerging categories, themes, and patterns in order to understand the experience of the students enrolled in massage therapy training and the staff who worked at the school. The researcher used qualitative data analysis methods. The transcriptions of fourteen student and eight employee interviews and three focus groups, notes from over 40 hours of

observations, and many documents resulted in a mass of data. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), data collection and analysis go hand-in-hand. During data collection the researcher watched for commonality in responses and for themes and patterns to test. The researcher used her broad base of experience in proprietary schools and particularly the issues of student retention and success to gain an understanding of the data. In particular, the researcher focused on analytical techniques to uncover new truths.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest six phases of a typical analytic procedure. These include the following:

1. Organizing the data
2. Generating categories, themes, and patterns
3. Coding the data
4. Testing emergent understandings
5. Searching for alternative explanations
6. Writing the report

By following these procedures, the researcher performed the following analytical tasks in order to develop findings.

Organizing the Data

All interview transcriptions, notes, and documents were assembled alphabetically in three large notebooks. The documents were prepared with sufficient white space to write notes. The transcripts and documents were read thoroughly twice. A yellow pen was used to highlight data that seemed unique or recurring.

During the second reading, handwritten notes were added with tentative themes and metaphors.

Generating Categories, Themes, and Patterns

During a third reading the researcher developed a template to organize the emerging categories, themes, and patterns. When this was completed, the information was reviewed again. Similar categories were merged together, themes and patterns that appeared weak were deleted, and higher-level themes based on the organized data were developed. Then the information was reorganized and clustered to form a storyline sequencing the information. By looking at the ordered information, it was possible to note some holes in the analysis. Additional reviews of the highlighted data filled in some of the information.

Coding the Data

The template was filled in with categories, themes, and patterns, and then distilled into higher-level themes. By reviewing the data again, it was possible to fill in specific information such as quotes, observations, or documents to support the themes.

Testing Emergent Understandings

During this phase the coded data were evaluated for usefulness. Did the data support the understandings that emerged? Was there consistency among data sources? Were there data that opposed the themes and patterns? Based on this information, a first draft of the chapters on findings was developed.

Searching for Alternative Explanations

Many of the findings were similar to results from existing research and literature and provided rich data for a fuller understanding. Some of the findings lacked strength. For this reason, the researcher returned to the template for alternative explanations and new interpretations. Upon re-examining the themes and rearranging the categories, it was possible to restructure the findings to provide new ways to look at the data.

Writing the Report

The findings were written to give the reader an understanding of who proprietary students are, what it means to go to a proprietary school, and the influences of the school on student success.

Summary

This was a phenomenological case study. As a result of interviewing students and staff, conducting observations and document analysis, and meeting with three focus groups, several themes emerged that provided new understandings of student success in proprietary schools and particularly in a massage therapy training institution. These findings are presented in Chapters Four and Five.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The Students and the School Selection Process

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to examine factors that relate closely to student success in proprietary schools. The goals were to gain new understanding about retention in proprietary schools, to describe those students who persist, and to explain the personal and institutional factors that contribute to a student's decision to persist or leave. Data were collected by interviewing fourteen students and eight employees who were involved in the school during a two-year time frame from December 1997 to December 1999. Formal and informal observations were made of activities and events in which the student could participate, from application through graduation. A variety of documents were analyzed, including promotional, learning, and information materials; state licensing and accreditation reports; school policies; procedures; and forms, files, and demographic information. Analysis of the data was performed and findings developed. The findings were presented to focus groups comprised of day students, night students, and employees at a staff meeting. Feedback helped to strengthen and substantiate some findings. Other findings were reframed, and some did not maintain the level of strength that was first apparent.

The findings provided information that confirmed many of the research studies on postsecondary student retention. The findings also provided an in-depth understanding of who proprietary students are, why they enroll, what the school experience is like for them, and the institutional and personal factors that affect their

decisions. This study provides a view of the unique aspects of proprietary schools with possible application to other postsecondary institutions.

The findings clustered around four themes, as shown in Table 5. This chapter presents the first two themes, student profile and the school selection process. Findings about the training program and the influence of the institution are presented in Chapter Five.

Table 5

Themes and Findings

Themes	Findings
The Students	1. Core commonalties of students and applicants
The School Selection Process	2. Selection process and the intentional marketing plan
	3. Program length and the reality of program completion
	4. Negative outcomes of abbreviated decision-making
The Training Program	5. Gaps between student expectations and the training experience
	6. Built-in academic and social integration
	7. Built-in retention and intervention strategies
	8. Built-in job readiness and job placement activities
	9. Changes in students' lives as a result of training
The Influence of the Institution	10. The effects of a warm and caring work environment
	11. The effects of staff background on student relationships
	12. The effects of owners' interests and beliefs on school policies
	13. The challenge of predicting student success
	14. The school experience as a rite of passage

The Students

Finding 1. Core Commonalties of Students and Applicants

This study pointed to the fact that both applicants and students have very diverse backgrounds, making it difficult to build traditional predictor models based on demographic information; however, students did share many core commonalties. Many studies in both higher education and the proprietary school setting attempt to predict who will stay in school and who is likely to drop out (Capaz, 1990; Conklin, 1993; Feldman, 1993; Johnson, 1991; MacNeill, 1990; Revelle, 1997; Swanson, 1995). Models have been developed based on student demographic information, socio-economic status, education, and work history. If building a demographic predictor model does not apply, then seeking core commonalties might.

The students at this research site during the time of the study came from all walks of life. As expected, many were from helping professions; for example, nurses, teachers, missionaries, home health aides, and nannies. Others were from service professions where helping and caring are implicit in the job, including flight attendants, legal secretaries, restaurant servers, and bartenders. Some were college dropouts; others had advanced degrees in such fields as microbiology and law. Still others were in work that seemed unrelated to massage therapy, such as a scrap metal owner, a restaurateur, a transmission specialist, and a power company employee. The ages of the students during the two-year time frame ranged from eighteen-year-old recent high school graduates to a seventy-three-year-old woman.

The past experiences and dissatisfactions of the students also varied. Dissatisfactions brought many to the school to seek a life change. The legal secretary sought a change from twenty-eight years of being miserable and exhausted at an

eight-to-five job. The former teacher's life was "programmed out and never changed." The photographer was "tired of working longer and longer hours and making exactly the same ... and just decided to take charge of my life." A fifty-year-old new enrollee said at orientation that she believed training is the "last chance in life to get my professional life going."

Given the disparate backgrounds, what are the core commonalties these students share? Findings indicate that these include personality traits, an orientation to non-traditional approaches to healing, personal experience with massage, and a perceived natural ability and interest in massage. These commonalties are similar to characteristics of a working massage therapist (Ashley, 1999). They indicate a match between prospective students and the professional and personal interests and aptitudes needed for career success in this field. On the other hand, one student said, "Some people are in it just for the money. I don't think they last very long" – a statement that was echoed by staff as well. The influence of friends and family was shared, as were career expectations. The depth of maturity also emerged as a common thread. Participants in both the student and staff focus groups generally voiced agreement with the core commonality of findings related to students.

Caring personality. "Ninety percent of the work is having a caring heart." This was the opening statement made by a licensed massage therapist/employee at a Career Awareness workshop for prospective students. This statement was reiterated in student and staff interviews. "I'm a people person and care about people's needs. ... I thought it would be a nice feeling knowing I can help people," said a twelve-month night student. Other students agreed: "I like helping people." "It's an incredible

feeling seeing people benefit from what I can do." "You can't be a massage therapist and not care. It's almost a contradiction." A review of student application forms continued to repeat this theme. When asked why they wanted to become massage therapists, most applicants wrote that they had always wanted to help others.

***Orientation to non-traditional approaches to healing*.** Many students expressed their interest in massage as a healing modality. Massage eased the pain and speeded the recovery of headaches and knee and elbow problems, and made friends and family feel better. A student who was also enrolled in a community college and hoped to be a medical doctor felt that the benefits of massage and natural healing outweighed some medical approaches: "Most medicines, which seem rather useless, take away the symptoms but don't seem to help," he stated. One student who was about to graduate did not share the opinion about the healing potential of massage: "I don't feel there is a whole lot as far as curing any diseases." He did add that massage can be relaxing and boost the immune system. During the staff focus meeting, there was general agreement that students are caring and do have an orientation to healing.

Personal experience with massage. Most of the students interviewed talked about their personal experience with massage long before they considered training to become a therapist. The former teacher remembered the therapeutic benefits of massage after five knee surgeries: "It was amazing the benefits I could get in such a short period of time." The home health aide learned about massage when she had headaches: "I really wanted to do massage because of the way it helped me." The ex-college student, who was at school on a golf scholarship, had elbow problems and used to get massages: "I feel I'm the type of person to return the same type of therapy

to other people." Both students who persisted and those who withdrew voiced common views. On the other hand, some student participants in the focus groups indicated that they had never had a massage until becoming a student. For some, the lack of personal experience didn't matter. But one student, still working on completion since 1997, felt otherwise: "I didn't like touching people. I didn't like people touching me." He had completed the admissions process, but had not taken advantage of the complimentary massage given to all applicants.

Natural ability and interest in massage. Threaded throughout most discussions was the personal awareness of always being good at massage. It came through in conversation and when asked the question: "How long have you been interested in massage and healing?" A high school graduate answered, "Really, all my life." "I've always been helping my Mom [with stress]. It [massage] comes naturally," said another student. The nurse often gave backrubs to her hospital colleagues: "... everyone says wow, you are so good." The feedback encouraged her to look into massage training.

"I'm good with my hands" was also a common sentiment during the student interviews. The phraseology varied, but the feeling was the same: "I feel I'm very good with my hands. I type 120 words per minute." "I've always been interested in healing people with my hands." A history of giving people massages was repeated by prospective students during a Career Awareness event. An admissions representative summed it up at a new student orientation when she said, "I was like you, always giving massages. So why not make money at it?"

***Influence of friends and family*.** Friends and family were likely to have a positive effect on the student at the time of the enrollment decision and throughout the program. "I brought my mother for a massage ... and she wanted to come back everyday," said a twelve-month student. "My husband was all for it," noted the former teacher. (At graduation, this student's reference to her spouse's support brought a tearful moment.) "Friends and family were very supportive and excited," explained the home health aide. Some students reported resistance from their significant others, but that did not deter their decision to enroll: "My boyfriend didn't want me to. He didn't want me touching other men." The response of this night student to her boyfriend was, "You are just going to have to get secure because this is what I'm going to do."

***Career expectations*.** The massage therapy profession is an avenue to pursue the American dream of working for oneself. Having one's own business and control over one's life was a common theme among students talking about the events that led to their decision to enroll in massage therapy training. Their comments were similar: "Ideally I would like to make house calls." "I've done everything in life except owning my own business." "I want to do private clientele." "I'm going to set up my own business." This student had already thought out many details, such as the color of the uniforms, how she was going to deal with people, and how the business place was going to look.

This finding about core commonalties was tempered during the student focus groups. Many agreed that having a business of one's own was an important goal for

them; however, some realized that they would need to gain experience or work for someone before they could go out on their own.

Maturity. The issue of maturity appeared as a factor to describe students. Maturity was not about age, but more about personal stability and an understanding of and commitment to one's goals. The recent high school graduate demonstrated a sense of maturity by his clear focus on goals. He also took time out of his studies to join the Marines. He expressed this decision as a rite of passage and described it as a sense of responsibility to others. The former teacher talked about nine months of decision-making (coincidentally the period for human gestation) "to sort out what I wanted to do next when I grow up." She reported that her friends are envious because she was able to come to a new career decision. A newly enrolled twenty-year-old student related that he had dropped out of college because he did not want his family to spend money without his having a goal. Another college dropout in her twenties also expressed a sense of goal orientation and maturity – finally. There was also agreement about the importance of maturity amongst the participants at the focus group meetings.

Core commonalties and prediction of success. Admissions departments often try to build models to predict student persistence and success. Admissions departments are also driven to develop a profile of their ideal student in order to market to the best prospects. The findings in this study point to the fact that understanding a student's background goes beyond knowing age, gender, education, work experience, or socio-economic conditions. It may be more important to

understand the core commonalties of the applicants who are attracted to the school and succeed in its programs.

No predictor model is ever foolproof, as the staff and faculty noticed. The director of operations is concerned about enrolling the right people, but is often surprised: “This person doesn’t even appear to have the ability to benefit from this program. ... But then time and again we have been proven wrong.” During the staff focus meeting she added, “People with strong commitment and maturity are more able to succeed. If maturity could be identified in the beginning, then it would be a good predictor. But it is not possible to predict that life will happen.” The president qualified, “Spouses leave, accidents happen, there are job losses, and cars are stolen.” The director of education also commented on how surprised she is about anticipating student success, referencing a student who wanted to leave but actually stayed and completed.

The School Selection Process

Finding 2. Selection Process and the Intentional Marketing Plan

The admissions effort and materials focus on the features of massage training and benefits of the profession to the students. However, there seem to be other major reasons why people decide to enroll in this school – reasons that were not part of the marketing plan. These include the short length of the training programs, flexibility and accommodation to student needs, the caring environment, and proximity to the applicants’ home or work.

Short training program length. Prospective students were attracted to the school because of its six-month program. “I had no idea that one could make such an

income from just a six-month program," noted a recent high school graduate. "I wasn't working at the time and wanted to do it [train] in six months," said the former educator, who always seemed to be in a hurry to get as much as she could from her training experience. While the program length is specified in advertisements, the benefits of quick access to the workplace are not spelled out.

Flexibility and accommodation to student needs. Flexibility is a watchword of the proprietary career school industry (Moore, 1995). Many students reported that flexibility and accommodation to financial and other needs were reasons for enrollment. "I pay what I can. ... this is one of the major reasons I'm able to come to school here. Because most schools are not accommodating," an extended night student revealed. The school also offers prospective students a "test-drive" plan in which they are allowed to sit in class for the first two weeks of the term before making a commitment. For one twelve-month student, the preview was a decision-making factor: "I came here and sat in here for a day and I like what I see." The school also allows students to extend their training, repeat courses until they pass, and get credit for performing community service and participating in events.

Both students and staff at the focus group meetings strongly concurred with this finding. However, the night students in the focus group felt that while flexibility was definitely perceived, it did not exist in reality. At the staff focus group, the president noted that it is hard to market flexibility. As expected, some accommodations – such as allowing slower payments or negotiating lower monthly fees – have an adverse financial effect on the school.

Caring environment. The caring environment, appropriate to the kind of training offered, was noticed immediately by many students when they were applicants. “I came down for a visit and had a great experience with the people I came in contact with. I had a feeling like I belonged here. I really felt welcomed,” noted the former educator. “It seemed to be academic, not posh, not spending too much money on the cosmetic aspect,” said a night student. These viewpoints were shared by employees: “The building on the outside is gorgeous, and when I came in and they had nice music playing, the lights were low, it was very relaxed.” Entrance into the building is from the rear parking lot. The hallway is lined with photos of past graduating classes. There is also a sign that says, “We understand the difference between working for a living and working for a life.” During the staff focus group, the president noted that “people enroll because they know we are morally directed.”

Proximity. Many students chose to enroll in the school because it was close to where they lived or worked. One student researched all the available schools in the area but selected this one because “proximity had a lot to do with it.” “I’m five minutes away. I was at a point that I just wanted to get started,” said another. Students in the focus groups concurred, but some indicated that they actually lived at a distance and enrolled for other reasons.

Finding 3. Program Length and the Reality of Program Completion

The short training length proved to be an important reason applicants enrolled in the school. The reality, however, was that not all benefited from the brief time from training to the workplace. Many students quickly learned that they had 150% of the program time to complete before they were considered withdrawn. This meant nine

months for the six-month students and eighteen months for the twelve-month students. They could also extend past these dates for a monthly tuition fee of $150. Students who enrolled in the night program were told at the time of admissions that they would not be able to complete the program on time. They would not be able to complete the practicum hours if they worked during the day, because the school was closed from Friday afternoon to Sunday at noon. Students discovered that the nature of the program affected timely completion. “You have to kill yourself to finish,” reported a focus group student who was a massage therapist from another state. “If you cut your hand, get pregnant, or let the holidays get in the way, you will get delayed,” said another student in the same group. A graduate who completed on time noted that “only seven in our class of forty really finished.” The others were still completing program requirements. Night students in the focus group agreed that the short program length attracted them. They were midway through their studies and knew that it would really be a year until they could work because there was also a certification exam to apply, prepare, and sit for.

During the staff focus group, many recalled a time when students did finish within the published time frame. This was when the certification exams were only given in June and December. Now exams are offered each month. “When there was a deadline and students had to be finished to apply for their boards, they were finished,” recalled the president. “When the pressure came off, we noticed that students were lingering. ... We didn’t expect the transition where no one would finish on time. ... We weren’t motivating them because we were not giving them a deadline.”

Finding 4: Negative Outcomes of Abbreviated Decision-Making

Some individuals make quick enrollment decisions; others take their time. The length of the decision-making process may have an effect on the individual's ability to successfully assume the role of student. Applicants experience a readiness for change and dissatisfaction with their current careers or life situations, as indicated in Finding 1. Some choose massage therapy because of well-thought-out reasons such as how the profession matches their interests and passions. Others choose training simply because they believe they can earn a high income.

Some applicants may enroll after just one admission interview because they feel pressure to enroll. "There are certain financial realities about enrollment," explained the male admissions representative. "I'm not sure the right people are always here." Other applicants take their time, visit the school, bring family and friends, and participate in career awareness programs and massage workshops. According to this admissions representative, this longer process is beneficial: "For some applicants this is a confirmation that this is the right time [for them to enroll and train to become massage therapists]. For other people it is an event where they can get more information to make a decision." The representative was working on a ten-step decision model: "Applicants go through each one of the steps and come up with a personal awareness [about their fit with the profession and the school]. It's a confirmation/clarification experience for them. Applicants can give and receive massages and test out what it is like to be in class." The female admissions representative also talked about the difference between applicants who enrolled immediately and those who took time in the process. She noted that "when applicants

come in after reading the information, have true questions, come to the events, and want to sit in on a class and learn more – 75% of them will enroll."

If this process is rushed or curtailed, there are negative outcomes. One is the inability of the applicant to make a decision. According to the male admissions representative, "If you put a lot of undue pressure on people to make a decision, they just won't make a decision. They don't have enough financial and psychic space. They go into a decision-making circuit breaker." Another negative outcome may be that the applicant is not ready to transform into a successful student. "For some people the idea to enroll is ill-conceived," continued the admissions representative. "These people are more likely to drop out. They don't have all the information. They don't know what the training is all about. The cost is too high and they discover it is really not worth the effort. Then you are left dealing with people who made false decisions."

During the course of this research, it was not possible to determine the length of the admissions process for each student participant interviewed and compare it to his or her completion status.

Summary

This chapter introduced four of the fourteen findings that developed from an analysis of data collected. It provided a picture of the students and prospective students who are attracted to the school and of their enrollment decision-making process. Chapter Five continues the presentation of findings listed under two themes: the training program and the influence of the institution.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

The Training Program and the Influence of the Institution

Chapter Four introduced the findings and discussed the first two of the four themes: *The Students* and *The Selection Process*. Data indicated that while applicants and students had very diverse backgrounds, they shared many commonalties. These included personality traits, orientation to non-traditional approaches to healing, some personal experience with massage, a perceived natural ability in massage, influence of family and friends, career expectations, and maturity. Applicants tended to enroll for reasons other than those that were advertised as the features and benefits of the school. These included the short program length, flexibility and accommodation to student needs, a caring environment, and closeness to home or work. While short program length was an attractive feature, students actually tended to take longer than the published time to complete their training. Findings also suggested possible negative student outcomes when the enrollment decision-making process is abbreviated. Chapter Five concludes the discussion of findings and presents those listed under the themes *The Training Program* and *The Influence of the Institution*.

The Training Program

Finding 5. Gaps Between Student Expectation and the Training Experience

There was one overarching assumption that was expressed during the interviews and concurred with by members of the focus groups. Most students interviewed expected that the training would be primarily hands-on. They were surprised that the first half of their training program was spent on anatomy and

physiology: “My initial thoughts were that it would be more lab based. By labs I mean actual hands-on.” “Why are they even teaching me this? I want to learn massage.” Most had been out of school for a while and did not have a biology background. “I did not know initially if I was going to be able to retain all that information in my thirty-eight year old brain,” said the news photographer. “It’s like beating your head with a dictionary,” said another student who had not completed his training after more than two years. Even students who had taken anatomy and physiology were surprised at the depth and breadth of what was required: “I did not know I would have to go so deep into it.” “It takes a lot out of you because you are trying to learn so much in such a short period of time.” Whether directly from high school or out of school for some time, almost everyone expressed test anxiety: “I’m sure you have heard this from everybody. The bone and muscle tests. The studying that led up to the tests. Those weeks were absolutely anxiety city.”

Some students, however, expressed an understanding about why so much time was spent on anatomy and physiology. “You really have to know it [anatomy and physiology] because you are applying it on someone. If you do not know what you are doing and what the body parts are you can really hurt someone,” explained a recent high school graduate. One student had sufficient science background not to be concerned. “I had a science background and sat there in a coma half the time.” It was not clear why he was not given the opportunity to test out of this portion of the training. Another student had entered from high school and was enrolled in a community college at the same time. He felt the anatomy and physiology class at the school was more rigorous than the college class and had direct application to

massage. Of the students interviewed, all completed all or a major part of anatomy and physiology, though some had not completed the entire program.

The practicum training is often a surprise to the new enrollee. “I have seen people come in the first day and leave because you have to get your clothes off. ... So the first day there was uneasiness. ... I’m not a prude or anything and it was not anxiety but it was an unusual experience and after the first day it was just commonplace and then I never gave it a second thought,” shared a recent male graduate. Some students learn that massage is not for them, but with some assistance can be helped to stay on track. “I told her [an instructor] that I just do not feel right touching no guy,” said the young man who was still working on completion. He agreed to be paired up with a mature male student: “She had him and me work together I guess to break the ice. So after that I kind of loosened up and it was like okay. It was professional.” This student is near the end of his program but has not finished, even though it is more than two years since he enrolled.

Special arrangements before attending school. Students did not realize what the rigors of student life would be. Only a few participants interviewed reported making any changes to prepare for their life as a student. This may be accurate, but it is also possible that other students did not understand what the question meant, or had made changes before or during school but were not aware of them. The home health aide had a private duty job in a nursing home that allowed her time to study. Her family took on additional chores so she could go to school. The legal secretary, who had switched from the six to the twelve-month program, gave up a full-time job to work at a temporary agency. While she continued to work a nine-to-five job, she

could take off an occasional day to reduce stress or for extra study time. The former teacher made arrangements with her husband to work around a reduced household income. Some students did begin school and then changed their employment by either taking a job or working more. It is not clear whether this was planned or unplanned. Students in the focus group reflected this finding and added, “I wished I had made arrangements before.” A student in the night focus group agreed. “Once I was enrolled I realized what studying entailed and had to make some changes.”

Orientation program. Students are required to attend a four-hour orientation program on the Sunday before the first day of class. Some students do not attend orientation because of personal reasons or because they enrolled after the class start date and have the option of seeing the orientation on video. The agenda for the orientation is lengthy and comprehensive. Books, uniforms, handbooks with rules and regulations, and other materials are distributed.

Everything the student needs to know is presented during orientation; however, there are problems. Four hours is a long stretch of time, particularly for those who have not been in a classroom for a while. The one-time orientation format cannot address the assumptions people bring with them about what it will be like to go to school. Many details have no relevance until applied. For example, the religious orientation of the school limits the days the school is open. Only when students are trying to complete required hours in time for graduation do they understand the effect of the school being closed Friday afternoon and all day Saturday.

Orientation could be a way to address false expectations, but as currently structured, it does not. If students have to overcome these expectations to increase

success, then orientation may have to be revamped. The director of operations frequently commented that students were told starting at admissions about the limited number of days each week for practicums. From comments, however, it was apparent that students were not able to understand the ramifications of this information until involved in training.

Finding 6. Built-In Academic and Social Integration

The nature of the massage therapy training facilitates academic and social integration. This includes the student bond that occurs in the classroom during the first three months, the intimacy of the practicums, the socialization when participating in events, and the relationship with staff. Studies of retention show the connection between persistence and academic and social integration (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991; Tinto, 1988). The massage training program fosters many of these quality interactions.

Classroom experiences. The nature of the first half of the training is academic and rigorous. There are weekly tests and pressure to learn difficult material. During this time, students also have the opportunity to bond with each other and with the faculty. Study groups, which take place both on campus and off, form spontaneously. “They did not assign you,” reported a twelve-month student. “We just did it on our own.” Another twelve-month student noted, “We go for study groups. ... We call each other during the week. It’s camaraderie. We become like brother and sister because we share the same feelings and fears when we know our test is coming up.” Later in the interview she indicated the results of bonding: “Now I’m not as scared to take tests. I look forward to seeing my grade.” Informal study groups made a difference to

students' grades. "I noticed that whenever I went to study groups I did better on my tests," revealed the young man who initially felt set apart from his classmates. The concept of study groups gained the attention of the administration. A formal *Study* was started. Still in its beginning stages, the *Study* is a designated room where students can gather on Fridays, study together, and have an instructor available to answer questions.

When this finding was presented to a student focus group, the term "stickiness" was used to describe how a student sticks to the school because of academic and social integration. A recent high school graduate responded that he was not too "sticky" with the school. When his classmates asked why he mused, "I am hardly ever here. That has already affected my ability. I will have to get more sticky."

Cohort effect. During orientation, the school president talked about growing and bonding. The recent high school graduate affirmed this: "It was and still is very friendly. There was the whole cohort effect. ... We are all going through the same experience. There are a lot of friendships and you keep bumping into people in this manner who work on each other and you just develop this bond." One student said, "We rely on each other ... and assume responsibility to make sure that everybody understands." Another student summed it up by saying, "We hung on to each other like little rats in a flood."

Faculty and teaching style. The program is rigorous, but because of the faculty's teaching style and caring ways, most students can get through the difficulty of the academic training. This teaching style allows the instructors to be approachable. The instructors prove to be quite different from the school teachers

most people remember. The former teacher, who had extensive education (masters degree), said, “I have not run across another teacher like X.” Another student said, “I think she is excellent as a first experience for any student coming here.” A written student evaluation form concurs: “X is a great teacher. I could not wait to arrive in the morning. She is gifted, available, and has the ability to make the material fun. She is the greatest teacher; loving, and caring.” Students and staff alike described her teaching philosophy as very pragmatic. About her teaching style she said, “I *spoon feed* anatomy and physiology – chew it up, moisten it with saliva and shove it down.“ Other instructors also get high marks: “I love M. He has helped me through. He is a great teacher. If you have the same question five times he answers it until you understand.”

The classes are run with the goal of student success in mind. Notes are handed out, review sessions are held before tests, and tests are graded and returned quickly for immediate feedback. Teachers keep students on track. “She has a unique way of keeping everyone involved. If folks are struggling she will do what she can to get you extra help,” noted the former teacher. Students describe teachers as respectful and patient: “They want you to respect yourself as a student.” “The instructors never made me feel like I did not know anything. They never became impatient with me.” Feedback from the night student focus group tempered this finding. They found some of the night instructors to be impatient and condescending.

The practicum training. Touching is a unique way to develop closeness with one’s classmates; this can have a positive influence on staying in school. Students begin practicing massage strokes on each other within the first week of school. They

must complete 100 hours of massage (plus other requirements) to be eligible to work in the school clinic. The experience of massage is a physical experience of giving and receiving. It is also a social experience, and necessitates working with fellow students to arrange for massage partners. A man who completed training in six months commented on the high-level relationships with other students; among the reasons he listed was “the physical touching and communication.” There was agreement at the staff focus meeting. The president summed it up: “You are exposed to so much intimacy and sharing with others. In exposing your emotions and having someone contact you during massage, it changes the way you feel about yourself and others.”

Participation in projects and events. According to Tinto (1997), there is a direct relationship between a student’s involvement in school and persistence. As part of the training program, students have the option to complete certain credits by participating in projects and events. There are two reasons these activities are included in the curriculum. Events give students the chance to work on a greater variety of body types in addition to their classmates; they also allow students to develop communication skills. An unplanned benefit is social integration.

Students either love to work on the projects and events, or they hate them if they had a bad experience. “I had a ball. ... It’s an opportunity to earn this person as a client,” said the former teacher. “I know these kinds of events promote the school so I kind of pulled back,” was an unhappy student’s point of view. Some students are unable to volunteer because of time constraints caused either by their own schedules or by the fact that the school participates in few events on Friday afternoon, Friday evening, or Saturday: “I would have liked to have gone to more because they were so

much fun," one commented. A night student from the focus group planned to take a Friday off from work in order to participate in an event. One night student felt she did not have enough experience to participate.

Relationships with other students. Research has indicated the importance of social integration as a factor for student success (Avalos, 1996; Johnson, 1991; Tinto, 1990, 1997). This includes both peer-to-peer relationships and relationships with faculty and staff. The nature of the training creates opportunities for students to build relationships: they are in an intense learning environment, practice massage skills on each other, and participate in events and projects together. Investigation at this research site also provided information on what students felt about each other and on issues of diversity.

What students felt about each other. "I made friendships here that will last a lifetime," related a male student who graduated during the research. Other students said, "I love the people in my class." "My boyfriend said, gee, you guys really like each other, don't you?" A high school graduate said, "At first they looked at me funny, ... but they got to know me. ... Everybody respected me. I respected them." Many of these students had preconceived notions of their classmates: "I thought they would be, like you know, high school drop out types. That maybe people who washed out of McDonald's or something showed up here. That I would not fit in very well." Despite their preconceived notions, their feelings towards each other were warm and friendly.

Diversity. Each term the class mix is a surprise. Usually there is a diverse range of students of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, education, and experience

levels. The differences and similarities were noted by several students. A twelve-month student observed, “There are no three students in the same class from the same country.” She liked what she could learn from each. “Two of my best friends here are Russian nationals,” said the disgruntled male student. “One was nineteen years old – a big difference in age.”

Relationships with staff and administration. School integration refers to relationships not only with fellow students and teachers but also with staff. A night student who had difficulties in the six-month night program and transferred to the twelve-month program revealed, “The president is like a mother to the students and her husband [vice president] is like a father. ... You talk and they give you their opinion. They make you feel worthy, like you are human.” “This whole place – you have a family sort of feeling,” said another. The written student evaluations repeated the feeling of a loving and caring staff. Students feel that the administration listens to their ideas: “I voice my opinions and have seen some changes. ... I feel I have been listened to.” Both administrators and teachers provide their home phone numbers just in case a student has a problem that cannot wait until the next day. In contrast, the night students in the focus group saw some of the staff as non-caring and judgmental: “I don’t think it is caring. I don’t agree with that.”

Finding 7. Built-In Retention and Intervention Strategies

Upon analysis of the data from this research site, it appears that early, intensive, and continuous retention strategies are implicit in the training program and its structure, policies and procedures. Both formal and informal retention strategies seem to follow Seidman’s (1996) retention strategy formula: “Retention equals early

intervention that is intensive and continuous." The classes are small, and during the first three months the students have one core instructor. The director of education (who is also the instructor for the daytime program) meets regularly with the director of operations to discuss each student. If it appears that a student is struggling, plans are put in place for assistance. These include pairing the student with a classmate, suggesting reviews using the class videos, having the student attend special labs, and scheduling a meeting with the instructor to go over problem areas. Students in the focus group concurred with this finding: "X asked me to help other students. Students can help each other. She [the teacher] cannot do it all." "They gave us credit to go to the special labs." "X made it clear that if we do not get it we should come to her and she will make sure you learn it." These intervention strategies continue throughout the intensive three-month period. "Right to the end she [the instructor] is there for you," a student agreed.

There are also scheduled pre-exit and exit interviews as students approach the end of their programs. During these times, the director of operations works to keep students on track with their schedules by reviewing requirements still to be completed. There was agreement with this finding at the staff focus meeting. An instructor commented, "We read them [the students] continuously by their faces. If they do not get it, we do something about it." In talking about this instructor, the director of operations said, "The list is long of students who were literally scraped from the bottom of the barrel by the instructor, *smooshed* and pushed and molded back into class."

Finding 8. Built-In Job Readiness and Job Placement

Investigation at the massage therapy training school indicates that both job readiness and placement skills are built into the program rather than offered as a separate activity at the conclusion of course requirements. These skills are offered both formally and informally. "Formal job readiness and placement skills begin at the time of enrollment when the student is asked to complete a form indicating whether they are training for personal avocational reasons or to earn an income," explained the director of operations. There are four required professional skill courses: Communication, Personal Development, Insurance Billing, and Marketing and Business Practice. During a class toward the end of the training program, the director of operations reviews the placement books with students. These materials are divided into a section for employers to write up requests for massage therapists and a section for graduates to provide information about their availability to work. There are also samples of how graduates market themselves.

Placement activities occur informally during classes and clinics. As a result of the curriculum, students experience life as professional therapists from the first week when they learn basic strokes. Students function as therapists outside of the classroom at off-campus events and also in the school clinic. The nature of the informal placement and job readiness includes examples and anecdotes presented by the instructors. During a hydrotherapy class, the instructor demonstrated the use of hot paraffin. Afterwards she talked about her own clinic and how she uses the wax to warm her hands on a cool day. Another instructor told about how she used a certain stroke to alleviate the pain one of her clients experienced. These seemed to be subtle

ways students could be reminded of their goals and pre-live their dreams of becoming massage therapists. The students in the night focus group agreed and added that "the visiting instructors are very helpful because they tell you about their clients."

The actual task of job placement is assigned to the director of operations. She is assisted by the entire staff, particularly the receptionist. Students can review a book of job openings that is updated when employers call seeking therapists. Most jobs are part-time. Students are invited to review the book at any time and follow up on their own. The director of operations also maintains Student Tracking and Placement records for every student so she can recommend jobs to those who are interested.

Placement is often informal. When an admissions representative was available, he sat with students, making suggestions about what to do and offering pencil and paper so that the information could be written down. No resume review or interview practice is offered except what is provided in the required marketing course.

While both formal and informal placement activities do take place, the students who were interviewed did not recognize them as training or services. The students in the focus groups did not agree that this was a major finding and were puzzled about the discussion of placement. Perhaps this points to another gap between expectations of training and the reality experienced by the students

Finding 9. Changes In Students' Lives as a Result of Training

The nature of the training program provides an opportunity for increased self-awareness and personal change and development. Getting trained with a view toward a life change can be a motivating factor and influence the decision to stay in school

(Sarkar, 1993a). Analysis of the interviews and focus groups indicated several instances of expanded personal awareness or changes experienced by the students.

"I think it changes their lives," explained the director of operations. "If they give us just a little bit, it can literally change their lives. If they actually take everything that we have to offer, they're in a phenomenal position." This was reiterated at orientation when the president said, "You will never be the same." "It's very life changing, I would say," agreed the recent high school graduate. "I'm a much better person as a result [of training]," the former teacher confided. She had previously revealed how she had been a conservative, closed-minded individual. "To be a good therapist you have to go beyond the five senses," she added. "I did not realize I would go through some of the emotional things."

Students developed self-awareness in other ways. A twelve-month student said, "I learned fast, especially with people from different countries, that I cannot have things done my way." This student said she had always been outspoken and finally learned when not to say things. Students experienced a *learning high* and new awareness about their academic abilities. When asked about the personal awareness she experienced, the legal secretary said, "That I enjoy learning new things. That I feel smarter. I enjoy feeling smarter." Comments on the evaluation forms mirrored these awarenesses:

> My love of learning increased. I take pride in completing the training. After many years I could return to school and do well. I've stepped into more of who I am and have gained responsibility and confidence and have grown in a very positive way. I'm happy with myself.

A student employed full time said, "Coming here was kind of a shot in the arm."

Self-respect was a major issue. During a student focus group, where there was strong agreement with this finding, a waitress finishing up the last few requirements for graduation related, “In jobs like waitressing you are treated like dirt. How can I respect myself? Now that I’m training to be a massage therapist people ask me what to do about their pains and respect me. I do not even have a massage license and they respect me.”

Students talked about their awareness of career goals. “It was really one of the first goals that I had set for myself in terms of a career.” There was also new awareness about personal health. “I was more aware of taking care of myself.” Students talked about taking on more family responsibility, and shared how the physical intimacy of practicing massage on each other tested whether they could disclose themselves in other ways. Students also spoke about what motivated them. This included personal vision and motivation by family. Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel kept one student on course. “The sincere desire to be extremely good at this” motivated another to complete.

Students who were interviewed did not report major problems with family and friends while going to school. In fact, what was discussed was the positive perspectives of friends and family. “My sister has never seen me as positive and enthusiastic about anything in my life,” said the former teacher. “My parents are supportive of me. They want me to finish,” the high school graduate said.

The Influence of the Institution

Every school has a set of formal policies and procedures and informal rules and regulations. Like any business or organization, there is a work culture and

management style. The findings under the theme *The Influence of the Institution* show the unique work environment at the school and the background of the employees. Findings also include the effect of the owners' personal beliefs on the success of the students, the challenges of predicting student success, and the training experience as a rite of passage.

Finding 10. The Effects of a Warm and Caring Work Environment

The staff expressed feelings about working at the school similar to those the students expressed about attending the school. They appreciated the flexibility and accommodation to their needs. "The flexibility here has helped a lot," stated a conscientious employee who occasionally needs to leave early or come in late. "I have never worked in a place like this and do not want to leave." The employee with the advertising background said, "I always felt like they [administrators] were like extended family." She also believes "that God has brought each person, each employee, and student here for a purpose." The employees enjoy working with each other: "We work so wonderfully together. ... We are pillars that hold the building up and always respect each other." "I like them [the people who work here]. Everyone is very respectful to each other."

Work culture. Management style allows employees to be creative and take responsibilities. An employee's comments reflect the positive work environment:

> One of the reasons I absolutely love it [working here] is the flexibility. Upper management allows you to do your job without hanging over your head. They have an incredible faith in the amount and type of work. ... Usually I get things to her [the president] and she's surprised that it's already done. ... She really does acknowledge the staff's input, no matter what level. So, I'm never afraid of suggesting anything because she listens to all ideas, which I think is unheard of from a lot of different companies ...

About respect, one employee stated, “I have never seen anything like it.” “There is such an element of respect for everyone,” commented another employee, who continued, “It seems that the people who are hired fit in. Otherwise they do not last.” “I can contribute more because nothing is squelched,” an admissions representative commented. “There seems to be a more humanitarian focus, a service focus. Not a typical job.”

The problems of time, personnel, and money are challenging to the open management style. Given the limitations, said an employee, “the school is very well organized. They [administrators] have systems intact ... and continue to improve upon them to work more efficiently and more productively. There is not much that falls through the cracks.” The reality, however, is that things do fall through the cracks and there are limitations to what can be done. During a meeting it was discovered that there was no coverage at a planned outside event. During a pre-exit interview, many items were found to be missing from the student’s file. There are instances when students have extended absences, or even leave, without being noticed because of misplaced paperwork. The director of education related that sometimes she does not get the required paperwork that indicates a student has switched from one program to the other. She recalled one student who had dropped out without anyone knowing.

The flexibility and open style also affect students positively. The rules are often bent to help students. This bending can be done as a result of an open environment and because many of the staff are empowered to be instant decision-makers, a result of the school’s climate. In addition, unlike the structure of public

vocational technical or community colleges, there are no bureaucratic layers of decision-makers to prevent reaching solutions quickly.

A disciplinary approach. While there is an open and caring approach, there are disciplinary issues as well. “In reading their catalog I was hesitant to come here,” said one student, who referred to what he perceived to be “a lot of silly rules.” He felt having to wear white was confining. “As I was here I sensed my fears came true,” he commented. Upon a closer look, there was evidence that what he was saying had some validity and was not apparent in the catalog. The catalog outlined the rules and regulations of attending school. Many of the rules were mandated by regulatory bodies. Other rules appeared rigid, such as the rules for attendance and tardiness. Had it been explained that the school is required to report hours to the massage board so the student can qualify to take the exam, the student might have had a different point of view. The word “tardy” is a reminder of elementary school days, and another word could have been used for adult students. In reviewing other documents, it was discovered that the word “reprimand” appeared three times on page two of the clinic manual.

While walking around the school, the researcher discovered several signs that seemed as if they were written for grammar school students: “For school use only. Violators will be subject to discipline.” “Notice: Restricted area. Authorized personnel only.” These signs may undermine the caring environment so pervasive throughout the school.

The director of operations reported that some students are afraid of being reprimanded, and are therefore hesitant to put anything negative on the evaluation

forms. One student did write of her fear of a strict and rigid teacher, adding that he made her feel uncomfortable. As she was reviewing the rules during the new student orientation, the director of operations joked that she felt like an army sergeant.

Finding 11. The Effects of Staff Background on Student Relationships

Findings indicate that faculty and staff have a strong commitment to student success. Reasons may include the fact that many staff members have completed training at the school and have some background in massage therapy.

Background. Not surprisingly, the background of the staff is similar to that of the students. In fact, many were originally students at the school. They had either direct experience as a massage therapist (or in one case was married to a massage therapist), or were from helping professions such as physical therapy and fitness training. Some started work at the request of the owner or director of operations, and only planned to be at the school for a short time. They were enticed into staying because of the satisfaction and challenges. The director of operations began working at the school shortly after completing the colon therapy training. She was given the opportunity to co-author a book with the owner and then stayed on in a new role. The director of education was asked to fill in for a missing teacher and within a few weeks was made director. These individuals have been with the school eight and ten years, respectively.

When new applicants are interviewed, they meet with both the president and the director of operations. The president asks the person about himself or herself and shares her views. An employee hired this year said, “She asked me about myself personally. She told me about herself. Everything was nice. She is a very spiritual

person. So am I. It worked out." Then the director of operations interviews the applicants to see if they can do the job. In most cases friends and family are supportive of the individual working at the school, particularly friends and family in the healthcare field.

The influence of staff on the school and on the students. Many of the employees were graduates of the school or were already massage therapists. They have a good understanding of the rigors of going to school and the requirements of the massage profession. Even the receptionist is a licensed massage therapist. When this finding was presented to a student focus group, one student related what happened the day he was late for an assignment at the clinic: "It was no problem because the receptionist was able to fill in for me until I got there." While there are many benefits when employees know what going to school and working in the field is really like, eventually some personnel leave to pursue their massage therapy careers full-time. This affects workplace continuity.

It can easily be said that most people who work at the school are happy and know implicitly that there is a focus on student success. "The administration basically baby-sits," said an instructor. This was reiterated in a meeting when the director of operations volunteered to "baby-sit" a student who was restarting. "They [the administration] truly want to get the student through the whole program and qualify to take their state boards." In an interview and repeated at orientation the director of operations stated, "We have wide shoulders and we have heard it all. We know what happens in life through school. And we come up with a lot of solutions." The testimonials on her wall and the stack of cards and letters from students prove that she

does what she says. (Similar commendations are found in the offices of the president and the director of education.) An admissions representative said of one of his missions, “I will become sort of a cheerleader for them, motivate, communicate, ask them how things are going. ... I’ll try to be a creative resource for them.”

The caring and concern for the students and focus on their success is also seen in the printed communications they receive. Each Monday, students are given a copy of a four-page newsletter with articles by the president, director of operations, and director of education. This newsletter also includes reminders about tests and assignments for each program; a calendar with important dates; a list of scheduled events, with details about how to sign up; and a summary of comments about student therapists who work on the public. This document also contains information that students need to be current in their assignments and to be motivated to persist.

Finding 12. The Effects of Owners’ Interests and Beliefs on School Policies

Proprietary schools are often established by people with a passion for the training program or a desire to train adults. School owners, like other business owners, often run their schools with their own management style. The massage school was built on biblical principles that strongly influence policies, procedures, and the work environment. For example, the school is closed at Friday sundown and all day Saturday. No events are held and no one may open the school during this time. Certain courses on eastern modalities are not allowed to be taught, since it is felt that they are opposed to religious values. “The school is dedicated to God. God is the chief executive officer,” commented one of the staff.

How does this affect students? A review of the catalog provides no indication of the religious orientation except for the write-up about the president, which references that she "devotes part of her valuable time volunteering as a chaplain." The website has two pages devoted to Christian Ministries with links to Christian Links of Interest. Upon a closer look throughout the school, the religious orientation becomes clearer. For example, there is a framed passage from "Chronicles" in the conference room, and a display rack in the reception area contains religious books.

For many students the religious orientation is simply one more rule that must be dealt with. For others it makes a significant difference. A twelve-month night student spends Sundays with her family and discovered that she could not complete practicum hours on Saturday. This limitation on practice hours almost made her quit. Students have requested on evaluation forms that there be Saturday labs. An employee was asked if students know about the limited hours before they enroll. "Absolutely not," he replied. "It's not kept a secret but it's not advertised."

The religious orientation presents some challenges. In general, there is a pervasive feeling of respect, expressed by both students and staff. There is also a growing number of students and employees from diverse backgrounds, and the school exists in a multi-cultural community. The question is whether the religious orientation infringes on the respect for other religious points of view. Certain meetings and events begin with prayers where participants are asked to bow their heads in the name of Jesus Christ.

For some students and staff the religious orientation is very positive: "I'm so thankful to God that I'm able to work in an organization where I'm able to basically

express my beliefs in God and share them with others." Mature adults tend to understand and respect the religious convictions of others. However, some of the students and staff expressed a feeling that there is an infringement of, and lack of respect for, their religious beliefs.

Finding 13. The Challenge of Predicting Student Success

The students, the training program, and the institution all demonstrate elements that seem to spell success. "We do so much for our students that I am surprised when they do not succeed. I mean I am shocked," was the feeling of the director of operations. However, as other educational researchers (Conklin, 1993; Wisconsin State Board of Vocational, Technical, and Adult Education, 1991) have discovered, no matter what the school does, it simply may not be possible to predict success or retain every student.

Staff view of the applicants, students, and training program. The staff demonstrated an astute understanding of prospective students and expressed their underlying assumption that everyone deserves a chance. Some students slip through admissions and do not belong here, the director of operations noted. "However, ... because of the mission of the school, and the idea to help people, even though they qualify for enrollment, some do not *seem* really capable. Many times it was not thought that these students would graduate. But then time and time again we have been proven wrong," she explained.

The staff seems to have a very positive regard for the students. "They are amazing people." "I have a tendency of liking them." During the graduation ceremony, graduates were recognized with individual comments by faculty and

administration. It was clear that each student was viewed as a unique individual throughout his or her training. On the other hand, some students were a source of annoyance or frustration to instructors and staff. This may be because these students lacked self-discipline and maturity, and made inappropriate remarks during class.

The instructors have a background in massage therapy training, as do most staff members, so they have some qualification to evaluate the program. “I really believe in the program. I think it is very good – excellent,” stated one admissions representative. They all recognize the intensity of the program: “The program has a little too much protein. ... It’s hard to swallow,” continued the admissions representative.

Staff view of what influences and deters student success. The instructors and staff recognize what the school does to help students to be successful, and are also keenly aware of what deters student success. Some students lack self-direction and self-responsibility. Others were absent or dropped out and were not called. Under these circumstances, once they are gone it is hard to get them back. “Their lives get in the way,” said both students and staff. This can include family problems, having to leave town, or a death in the family. There are also people who do not belong there, such as the student who did not like people or those who are just seeking the license for the money. “Caring is vital in this business,” is a common expression. “There are complex reasons students leave and probably as complex as the decision to enroll,” mused one of the admissions representatives.

Students do have struggles and challenges. Some can overcome them and persist. Others are overcome by them. There was agreement at the focus groups about

struggles that students face. Even though students are aware of the formal and informal services the school offers to retain the student, students do drop out. The reasons appear to be struggles that come from within the student and those that are a result of outside forces.

Struggles from within the student. Students experience problems. Some of these problems seem, at least to the students, to have no remedies. Others have remedies that students discover or are shown. Some problems go unnoticed. Problems at this research site included academic concerns, trouble with massage strokes, responsibilities at work, falling behind, finances, being discouraged, and other emotional issues. They were similar to student problems reported in other studies (Revelle, 1997; Taube & Taube, 1990, 1991). There were concerns specific to the six-month students (both day and evening) and concerns specific to students in the twelve-month program. Problems were also related to the school's disciplinary approach and to its religious orientation, which were not generally evident to the students until they were immersed in their training.

Academic problems. Even though the instructors are excellent and have many strategies to assist the student through the academic portion, there are many opposing realities. Many students have been out of school for a long time, have had unpleasant educational experiences, and/or do not possess good study skills. In addition, the anatomy and physiology portion of the program comes first and lasts for three months. The first test is designed to be relatively easy, but students are nervous and overwhelmed: "I'm not a good tester. I know all the stuff, but when I get to the exam

my stomach aches," said a twelve-month student. Some students come in with hidden problems such as dyslexia.

Concerns of the six-month students. Most of the problems that occur with the six-month students result from combining full- or part-time work with training. A student who works full-time during the day attends school four nights a week and can only study on the weekends and complete practicum work on Sundays. These constraints seem to have failure built in. "It was a very long six months – no, eight months in order to complete the everything. The house got to be a mess. I made no plans and took no vacations," said a night student who worked full-time.

Concerns of the twelve-month students. The twelve-month student may enter at any time, but is encouraged to begin at the start of a module. Twelve-month students attend school three nights a week. All requirements can be completed during this time. Sometimes twelve-month students join six-month students when required courses are taken concurrently. The major complaint of the twelve-month students is that they are treated like second-class citizens. During the school tour, an admissions director introduced a twelve-month student as having "down-shifted." The student had started in a six-month program, and this introduction made it sound like she had had to change to the "easier" program. Several students commented on this problem: "The teachers and other students have an attitude. They look at us like we are dumb, slow. That is how we feel because we take twelve months and they take six." "A lot of people are offended by it." "A lot of people have low self-esteem and you make them feel like they are dumb."

Difficulty mastering massage strokes. Some students reported having difficulty mastering massage strokes. “I’m not confident with my hands and I know it comes through,” said a night student. When asked if she sought help, the student replied, “Did not even think of it until you asked.” Asking for help may be a problem. “I have a pride problem,” stated the student still working on his program after two years. “You have to really humble yourself to ask someone for help.” A student who believed he was doing well was told by one instructor to improve his strokes. Because solutions to improve were not clear, the student became discouraged and was close to quitting, though in time other instructors gave him excellent feedback.

Responsibilities at work. Most students worked full- or part-time jobs while attending school. Those who attended the evening class typically worked full-time during the day. Their comments illustrate the struggles: “I was working part-time and even that interfered at times.” “I was working full-time. I did not even know what they were saying [in class]. ... I quit after one week and did not know that I was coming back.” (The student did come back and switched from the six-month to the twelve-month program.) “At one point I was ready to quit,” said another. “You have to be young and with nothing to do.” This student was ready to quit, but also decided to switch to the twelve-month program after conferring with the president, vice president, and director of education.

Falling behind. With the work overload of outside work and the anatomy and physiology course, a student can quickly fall behind. “I kind of felt I was behind a lot,” shared a night student who had recently returned to complete her program. When asked if the school could have helped, the student replied, “That was something I

myself had to deal with." When students do fall behind by missing class or failing a test, there are options. They can see a video of the missed class or retake the failed test. The instructors are always willing to assist. Students going to school at night and working during the day tend to fall behind in practicum hours because of the weekend closing times.

Financial problems. Most students pay tuition on a payment plan. The school is accommodating and works with the student, extending the payment schedule or reducing the amounts. Having to support oneself and pay bills as well as tuition often catches up with students. Many do not really understand the requirements of the financial plan they choose. Others have extraordinary problems, such as suddenly having to contribute to the family household or make car payments.

Feeling discouraged. Feeling discouraged can be the result of one or many circumstances. Some situations can be quite small, such as the personality conflict with the instructor who told the student his strokes needed improvement. Some students do not feel that they fit in because they view themselves as quite different from the rest of the class. For example, some students see themselves as older or younger than their classmates. One young male student felt that the women in the class showed romantic interests: "It was so side tracking. My mind was going this way and that. At one point it was like I cannot come back because it's too stressful. I think that was one of the big reasons why I left the first time."

Emotional issues. Some students come to school to solve problems that cannot be remedied by school: "There are always some that have a void in their lives that are trying to fill it up with something that perhaps massage therapy or the school

just cannot fulfill," said a staff member who also teaches. Others simply do not belong, such as the student "who flat out did not like giving massages." Some students have serious problems.

Struggles from without. Extraordinary circumstances occur. These usually relate to unusual family responsibilities, emergencies, or having to leave town. Generally, a student forced to withdraw because of an external situation will only be able to consider returning when the situation is remedied.

Finding 14. The School Experience as a Rite of Passage

The metaphor of rites of passage has application here. It can be applied to the school selection and enrollment decision-making process, the training experience, and completion. Tinto (1988) suggested the metaphor of rites of passage to describe the stages of enrollment, training, and departure from postsecondary training. Maniss (1997) applied this metaphor to doctoral students, Draper (1991) to college freshmen. Rites of passage suggest that there are procedures and protocols for successfully moving from one stage to the next.

The separation stage occurs at the time of the enrollment decision. The student is either knowledgeable about the training program or has limited background. There may be negative outcomes if this stage is curtailed in any way, as discussed in Finding 4: *Negative Outcomes of Abbreviated Decision-Making.* The training program in this school can be viewed as the transition phase of the rite of passage. Students start training with a range of knowledge about the field, clarity about their goals, and educational expectations, based in part on what occurred in the separation phase. Many, but not all, start out in an intense orientation program (ceremony) to

gain needed tools to get through the rigors of training. They experience ordeals, starting with the anatomy and physiology class. Most find it drastically different from what they expected: “I did not know there would be this much work.” “Why are they teaching me this [anatomy and physiology]? I wanted to learn massage.” Practicum classes are the next ordeal. “I had always given backrubs but this was a little overwhelming.” Students are exposed figuratively when they face their first test grades and literally when they discover they must disrobe during the practicum sessions. In addition to the experiences of classroom and hands-on work, students also have to face the first time they work on the public and are required to take their limited skills outside the comfort zone of their peer group training setting.

Some students in the study felt isolated at first, or even maintained their isolation. “I felt like a black sheep. There were not a lot of people I could relate to.” But eventually students saw that their peers were a valuable part of the training process: “You watch people change. They [students] were so withdrawn and never talked and after a while just open up to become one big family in the class.” Formal and informal relations developed from having to seek partners for massage practice to studying in groups: “They did not assign you. We just did it [formed study groups] on our own.”

Student perceptions of faculty and staff changed through time from authoritarian figures to colleagues: “You see your teacher three hours a day. You can get really personal.” Relationships with family and friends get pushed to the background, with some being supportive and others showing concern.

Struggles emerge during training. Some students are aware of the problems and deal with them. Others do not know there are problems, do not seek help, and fall behind: “Most people are just worn out through the program.” “They are not thinking of anything but just passing their test and what happens is they get tired.” But there are many that seek help and get results. “The successful students definitely adopt the ‘no pain, no gain’ motto and that’s what gives them that courage,” noted an admissions representative. Many are overwhelmed and discouraged by feeling as though they have fallen extremely far behind. Some leave at this point. “I quit after a week,” said a twelve-month student, who did return. For others the woundings were an incentive to continue. “For a few days I was depressed but then I started to pull myself back,” said the student who was not told why his massage strokes were not good. Many experience a loss of self, but soon gain a new sense of who they are and feel changed because of their experiences, as demonstrated in Finding 9: *Changes In Students’ Lives as a Result of Training*.

Awareness of personal goals and of the reason for training can get students through the transition stage; however, not everyone can see the end. Some repeat classes, drop out and return, or take more time to complete requirements. Others drop out at this point and never regain the momentum to return to school.

The purpose of a rite of passage is to leave behind one’s old ways of thinking and being, engage in a transformational process, and develop new skills to assume a new role in one’s community. Students expressed an understanding of these transformations: “I learned so much about myself.” “I am a much better person.” “I have new awareness.” Transformation may require these epiphanies.

An important part of a ritual and rite of passage is the ceremony. At the research site, there were several ceremonies to mark completion. These included a pre-exit meeting to determine what requirements were still needed, and an exit interview, which was a time to ensure that missing requirements had been completed. During this exit interview, the actual diploma is awarded and available staff join the student and director of operations for a spontaneous cheer and applause. The actual graduation event provides a ceremony for both the graduates and the juniors who officially become seniors on that day. The graduation event includes tears, laughter, and other emotional reactions that come with finally succeeding. Friends and family bear witness to the event, and there is food and partying to add to the celebration. If friends and family were not previously aware of the transformation of their loved ones, they hear it in the commendations and learn about the challenges and successes of everyone in class.

Departure from the training program is experienced by all students. Some graduate, others withdraw; some return, some lose all connection with the school. Full involvement in the community does not always occur immediately. The graduate who wants to become licensed must prepare for and take a licensing exam. Once the student has earned the diploma, the test can be scheduled within two months. The eventual role in the community is not clear, as graduates have many choices. They can work full-time or part-time, set up a practice of their own, take on other work while waiting to build up a clientele, or stay in their existing jobs. Regardless of their choices, they integrate back into the community, transformed in one way or another.

Whatever happens, they carry the memories of new friendships and maintain the professional resources of the school.

The members of the staff focus group were receptive to looking at their training program as a rite of passage. The directors of both operations and education talked about the bonding that occurs among students. “It helps take away the pain,” said one. Everyone agreed about the changes that students experience: “They feel unexpected things about themselves.” “The training causes them to take a hard look at themselves.” “Sometimes they are amazed about how good they are because they did not know it before.” An admissions representative had previously talked about the need for a reward (ceremony) after completing a difficult exam: “Reward them [the students] at different points in the program so they have the motivation to go on.” One employee summed it up: “The ordeals become a door to success when there is social integration between fellow students and instructors and staff.” She ended by posing the question, “If the students miss any of these ceremonies and rituals, do they miss the social integration?”

Summary

This chapter presented findings under the themes *The Training Program* and *The Influence of the Institution*. A comprehensive picture was developed of the students’ experiences at school, the impact of the staff, and the policies and practices of the institution that affect student persistence. Chapter Six presents conclusions that stem from these findings, recommendations for further study, and suggested policy changes for proprietary schools.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A phenomenological case study of a propriety massage training school was undertaken to add to the body of literature about student success and persistence in a proprietary school setting. Interviews were conducted with fourteen students and graduates at various completion stages and with eight employees. Observations were made at all events and activities in which the applicant, student, or staff were involved. An analysis was made of documents, such as promotional materials, policies and procedures, forms, learning materials, and reports. Using qualitative methodology, fourteen findings were developed and then refined as a result of feedback from three focus groups: two with students and one with staff. The findings were organized into four themes.

A qualitative study of persistence in a proprietary school was undertaken because there has been relatively little research on these schools, particularly compared to studies in colleges, community colleges, and universities. The purpose of this study was to examine factors that relate closely to student success in proprietary schools. The goals were to gain new understandings about retention, to describe the students who persist in proprietary schools, and to explain the personal and institutional factors that contribute to students' decisions to persist or leave. Previous studies have been primarily quantitative, with subjects who are required to respond to a defined set of questions. It appeared that a qualitative study could broaden the picture of proprietary school students and fill out the details of their experiences. The information gained could have value for all post-secondary institutions. The findings

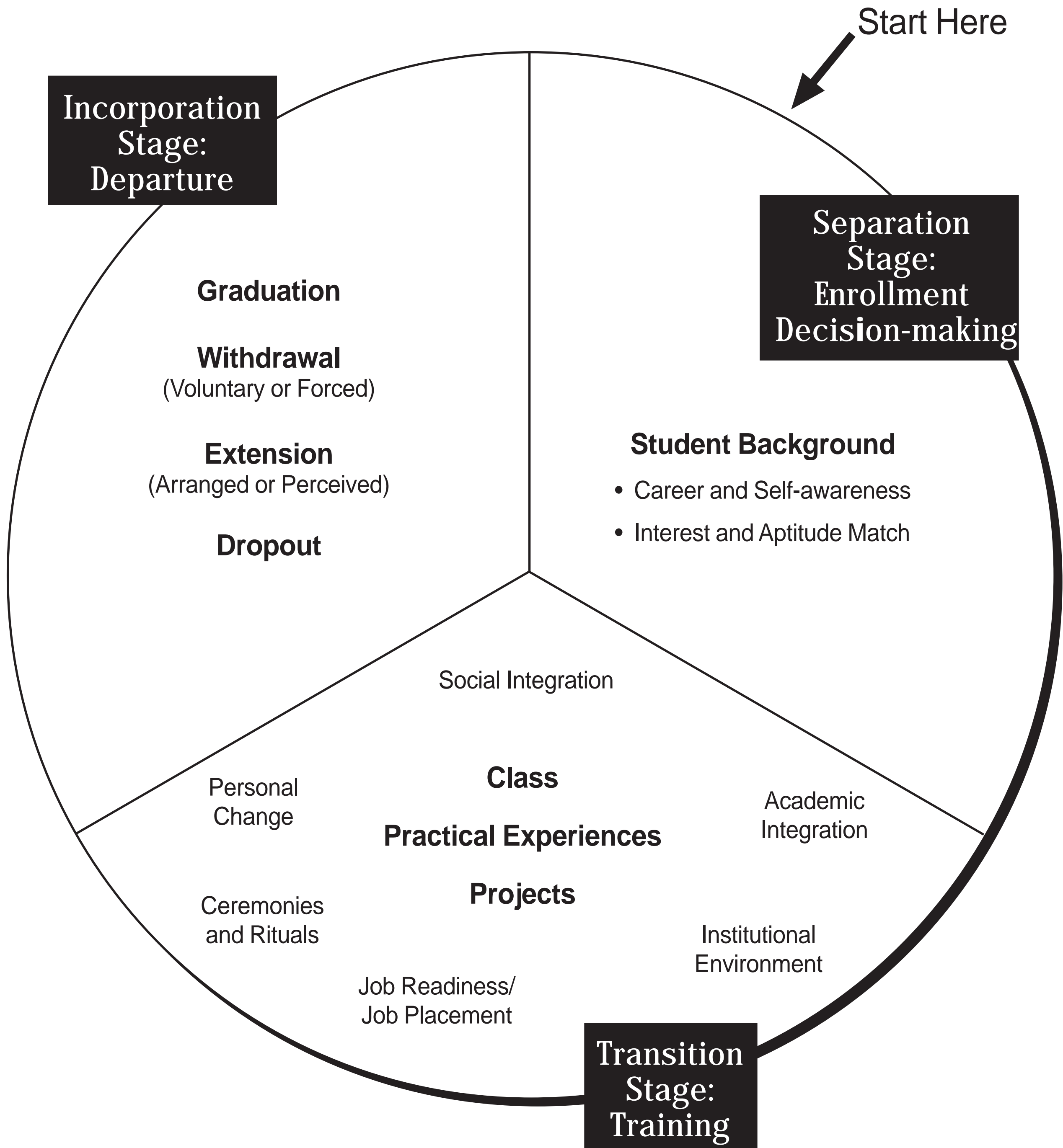
supported other research studies on persistence, particularly those on academic and social integration, retention strategies, and the influence of the school on the student.

Based on the findings, a model was developed to describe the passage or progression of a student through proprietary school training. A discussion of this *Proprietary Student Passage Model* is presented in this chapter. Also included are recommendations that can be put in place by postsecondary proprietary schools offering programs other than massage training. In addition, the concepts may be useful to postsecondary vocational schools in the public sector. This chapter concludes with ideas for further study on persistence and retention and recommendations to policy makers.

The *Proprietary Student Passage Model*

The *Proprietary Student Passage Model* (Figure 1) is patterned after the three stages of a rite of passage. Studies of students going through a variety of post-secondary experiences have been conducted using the rite of passage metaphor (Draper, 1991; Mannis, 1997; Redding & Dowling, 1992). In this proposed model, the *Separation Stage* is the time of decision-making and eventual enrollment. The *Transition Stage* encompasses all aspects of training that occur in the classroom, during practical experiences, and at projects and events. The *Incorporation Stage* is the time when students leave training and depart from the school. Departure can mean graduating, withdrawing, extending, or dropping out entirely. The steps through the stages in this model are circular. Students begin at the Separation Stage, go through Transition, and then reach Incorporation. However, each level of departure provides an opportunity to re-enter the Separation Stage. For example, the graduate who

Figure 1
Proprietary Student Passage Model



Note: Students move clockwise through each stage. The level of completion in one stage impacts the success in the next stage.

becomes a licensed massage therapist may determine that additional training is needed. The graduate then begins to seek continuing education or specialized courses and enters a new Separation Stage (enrollment). The following sections describe the passage in detail.

This model was based on a qualitative research study of one site, and may not apply to all massage therapy training schools or to proprietary schools offering other training programs.

Separation Stage

In the massage school researched in this study, applicants and students shared several commonalities. While individuals were diverse in age, education, and work experience, they had similar caring personality traits, an orientation toward healing, an interest in and often a passion for massage, career expectations of working on their own, and a high level of maturity. These matched many qualities of working massage therapists (American Massage Therapy Association, 1999; Ashley, 1999). Some applicants arrived at admissions interviews with extensive knowledge of the massage therapy field; others had not even experienced a massage. In addition to knowledge about the massage therapy field, applicants brought various levels of awareness of their personal interests and aptitudes. Some were very clear that massage therapy was a life goal and that they had a natural ability. Others were not clear about their personal values and interests, particularly as these related to massage therapy. There were those who wanted to be massage therapists solely for the money, and those who did not like to touch or be touched. Some lacked the maturity required for the field.

The identified core commonalities of persisters related to the applicants' awareness of the field and of themselves. These core commonalities might explain why some students, who were judged as likely to fail, surprised everyone by graduating. For this reason, there may be merit in departing from the attempt to create a demographic student profile. The *Proprietary Student Passage Model* suggests that the most important background information required is the extent of applicants' knowledge about the career and its match to their interests and aptitudes.

Looking at the degree of personal and career awareness the applicant brings may address some of the limitations in previous studies on persistence. There have been many attempts to develop predictor variables for determining which students will be successful (Feldman, 1993), to identify persisters (Krotseng, 1992), and to create dropout models (Johnson, 1991). A problem is that many of these studies produce contradictory results about how such factors as age, gender, and hours worked impact success (Cheng & Levin, 1995). With a 47% dropout rate in community colleges, prediction models based on student background information may not be entirely effective. Therefore, a model that looks at the applicant's personal and career awareness levels may enable other proprietary schools to build a custom predictor model for student persistence. The level of career awareness may also relate to the level of readiness for training.

The amount of career and self-awareness students bring may relate to the gap students experience between their expectations and the reality of training. Research has shown that the difference between what is expected from the school experience and the reality of what it takes to be successful can lead to a student's decision to

leave (Tinto, 1988; Villella & Hu, 1991). At the massage school, there was a difference between the students' expectations about class, practicum work, and classmates, and the reality of what school was actually about. If this gap is too great, it can limit success in the next stage: Transition. The student must then spend time to gain career and personal knowledge, rather than focusing solely on training. The gap might be closed by a comprehensive admissions process prior to the Transition Stage. Such a process would assist applicants in understanding the natures of the career and the training, and how these fit with their goals. An admissions process that has a "retention begins with recruitment" approach (Seidman, 1989) can help address false expectations and increase career awareness.

Transition Stage

The Transition Stage encompasses the entire training experience. The *Proprietary Student Passage Model* suggests that a successful school experience includes classes, practical experiences, and projects. These learning experiences should be structured to enable students to attain high levels of academic and social integration, engage in job readiness and placement activities, benefit from positive institutional policies, and participate completely in all formal and informal rituals and ceremonies. Taking on the uniform of the Transition Stage (in this study, the white shirt and pants) and using symbolic materials (massage tables and oils) are also important. During the Transition Stage, students also need to make significant changes.

Successful completion of the Transition Stage depends in part on the successful completion of the Separation Stage. Tasks missed during Separation

(enrollment decision-making) can be addressed during Transition. The level of completion of the Transition Stage may determine the level of departure evidenced in the Incorporation Stage. A description of the various elements of the Transition Stage follows.

The concepts of social and academic integration are threaded throughout persistence and retention studies (Avalos, 1996; Krotseng, 1992; Johnson, 1991; Tinto, 1988). At the research site, social and academic integration was built into the way the programs were delivered. Students developed both formal and informal relationships with each other, sometimes starting at orientation. Faculty had a caring and student-centered approach that fostered collegial relationships. Administrators had an open-door policy, making them available and approachable. In addition, most students took the opportunity to benefit from the staff's academic and professional resources.

Seidman (1996) developed a formula for retention success. He believes that "early identification and early and intensive intervention may make a difference in whether or not the student leaves the institution prematurely" (p.3). At the research site, methods of retaining students were interwoven throughout training as a result of policies, procedures, and the caring approach of instructors and staff. Teachers watched for students with problems from the first day of class and conferred with the director of operations on how to intervene. A variety of strategies were suggested, including informal study groups, formal review classes, video reviews, special labs, and peer tutoring.

Certainty about career goals can affect persistence (Sarkar, 1993a). Students in massage training perform massage as part of their day-to-day training, work as massage therapists in a variety of supervised settings, and have instructors who act as mentors and professional resources. Career goals and visions of the outcome are evident within the training.

A student often enrolls in a proprietary school training program to make a career change. In addition to specific knowledge and skills, a new sense of self may be required to enter a new career field or make a significant change. Students and personnel at this research site consistently reported how training changed students' lives. Because of the nature of the training, with its challenges, intimacies, sharing, and exposures, students experienced a change in their feelings about themselves and others, and gained a new awareness of their abilities and personal growth. Training for a profession increased their self-respect and self-esteem. Some of their families and friends saw the change as well. This seems to demonstrate how personal change may be an important element of the Transition Stage.

Institutional policies influence a student's decision to stay or go (Webb, 1990). Policies usually refer to the structure of training programs, the types of student services offered, and the rules and regulations that students must follow. The study dramatizes what happens when the underpinnings of an organization are based on the owner's personal beliefs. Management at this school is morally directed. The result is a positive work environment where employees are treated respectfully and in the same way they are expected to treat the students. In addition, employees understand the training program. Students benefit because several of the staff have completed the

same program or previously worked as professionals in the field. Because of the management policies, students encountered trained *elders* who could assist in the Transition Stage.

Incorporation Stage

The *Proprietary Student Passage Model* proposes that all students move from the Transition Stage to the Incorporation Stage. There are many levels of departure. Some, such as graduation, are measurements of success; others, such as withdrawal, extension, or dropping out, are forms of non-completion. For most students and school administrators, the goal of going to school is to complete training and graduate. However, many students withdraw; some withdraw voluntarily, and some are dismissed. At the research site, several students extended past completion time. Some were formally extended, and others believed they were extended although their files did not reflect an official extension status. Some students dropped out and had no further contact with the school.

Students who graduate have many choices. Some work as licensed massage therapists for others or build practices of their own. Others integrate their training into their work. Still others do not use their training at all. Licensed massage therapists often decide to enhance their skills with additional training. For example, those interested in medical or sports massage need specialized courses. For others, massage therapy training is the start of careers in physical therapy, chiropractic, or medicine. Depending upon licensing requirements, massage therapists are usually required to take continuing education courses to retain their licenses. The need for additional training means that these individuals will once again enter the Separation (enrollment

decision-making) stage. During this time they will reevaluate their interest in massage therapy as a career and any steps for additional training.

Students who withdraw, extend, or simply drop out may face the Separation stage again. Those who voluntarily withdraw have the option to return to the same school, or to seek admissions in another massage therapy school or another kind of training school. Those who are forced to withdraw may have similar options, although limited by the reasons for the required withdrawal. Students who choose to extend go through the Separation Stage again. They withdraw, reevaluate their interest in massage therapy, and decide to re-enroll to complete their studies. It is not clear what happens to individuals who lose all contact with the school. They can use their career and self-knowledge and enter the Separation Stage for a new step in their lives, or be constantly poised on the threshold.

The metaphor of the rite of passage forms the base of the *Proprietary Student Passage Model*. The research site is student-focused, with an orientation toward student success. However, students do leave without graduating. Perhaps it is because they have not fully immersed themselves in each step of their *passage*: for example, not bonding with fellow students. They may not have been prepared for each stage, or perhaps they did not completely fulfill the requirements of each stage. They may have missed important rituals and ceremonies, such as orientation, and therefore started training *dis-oriented*. They may have enrolled a day or a week after the beginning of the term. When this occurs, students start out at a disadvantage and often use their energies on catching up rather than on their studies. They may have participated in

certain ceremonies without proper credentials; for example, students who take part in graduation but have not really completed the program.

Unexpected Outcomes

With a background in proprietary schools, the researcher found existing retention studies to be intuitively sound. Many of the findings at the research site were therefore not a surprise. However, the complexity of the admissions and enrollment decision-making process became evident. In fact, the reasons behind the decision to enroll were as complex as the reasons behind the decision to stay in school or to drop out. An admissions representative recognized this dilemma and attempted to structure an admissions process to address these complexities. He developed a questionnaire so prospective students could match their interests and abilities to the massage profession. He wanted to design an admissions process so that students would have a way to determine whether the school programs matched their needs – whether the fit was right. His goal was to ensure that applicants were aware of their career choices, but his attempts were limited because of the immediate need to enroll students and meet required enrollment figures.

Student satisfaction level was also a surprise. Current students, graduates, and students who were extended or withdrawn were interviewed. All had a general satisfaction level with the school, with only a few minor complaints. There seemed to be no major distinctions between those who graduated and those who did not except for the external life circumstances that prevented some students' continuation. These life situations may have limited the ability to fully complete each stage of the *Proprietary Student Passage Model.*

It was surprising that retention strategies need not be complex and can address many types of student problems if implemented consistently. This requires teachers who are in close contact with students and have the ability to identify problems so that they can offer a variety of timely intervention strategies.

There were several lessons learned from this study. Many set the groundwork for further investigation. Some include policies and procedures that can be integrated into program offerings.

Recommendations for Further Research

During the study, it became apparent that there were other ways to approach the research in order to gain new understandings about the differences between proprietary students who persist and those who do not.

Different Sampling Procedures

Findings might have been different if participants included only students who dropped out during the first or last few weeks and were not satisfied. The model might have taken a different form if participants included only students who completed the program within the allotted time frame. The study could have also focused on students who withdrew and then returned. Studying the length of these absences might have provided relevant information, including what motivated students to continue after an absence. It would also be valuable to replicate the study in other massage training schools and in different types of proprietary schools to increase the generalizability of findings or determine new findings.

Admissions

Persistence may increase due to the students' fit with the school and with the career selected. A general interest and aptitude inventory, or one specific to the career training, could be administered to applicants during the admissions process. A study of program completion with such students could help determine how persistence relates to a particular score on the inventory. It might also have been helpful to look at the admissions process and compare it to completion status based on the students' decision-making steps.

The enrollment and retention results of two admissions processes could be compared. One process would be sales-oriented, as are those typically used by proprietary schools. The other process would be oriented toward matching the student with the right career.

Single and Multi-Program Schools

Students may persist if they can transfer to another training program within the school. An investigation of persistence in a single-program school could be compared to schools where there are several program choices.

Orientation

A comprehensive orientation program, with at least five sessions and/or sessions at critical points in the training, could be set up and students required to attend. A study of persistence could be completed comparing students who attended and those who did not.

Job Placement

Job readiness and placement activities might influence persistence by keeping the student's focus on completion. An investigation of persistence could be made among students who attend schools that have full-time active placement departments and full-time personnel.

Formal and informal placement activities in a training program could be investigated. The quantity and quality of these activities could be benchmarked and then compared to student persistence in the school.

Training Program

Weekly student study groups could be recommended. Persistence among these students could be compared to persistence among those who did not participate in the study groups.

A teacher's assistant could be assigned to students in all new classes. The role of this assistant would be to track each student and offer academic counseling assistance when needed. A study of the persistence rate of these students could then be investigated.

A study of the influence of learning contracts on persistence could be conducted. Learning contracts are non-legal documents that students complete. Learning contracts vary, but generally require the student to write in the days and hours of class attendance, lab, homework, and other school obligations. Learning contracts can teach students about the rigors of the training program and head off the shock of the first day.

An investigation of the stages in the program during which students dropped out might yield different results. Understanding these points might help to identify areas of difficulty or frustration, or areas of the curriculum that need enhancing. Such an investigation could also define the points in each stage at which students fall behind and where it is impossible to catch up.

School Management

An investigation of student persistence could be made in comparison to the number of employees at the school who have completed all or some of the training program offered or have a background in the career fields taught. A study of organizational climate and leadership styles also has merit for proprietary schools.

Implications for Policy Makers

There are many levels of policy makers that affect the proprietary school. These include the owners and directors, the state licensing board and accreditation agency, and in some cases, federal government agencies such as Veteran's Affairs and the Department of Education. Each has rules and regulations for running a proprietary school and required rates for retention, graduation, and placement. This study points to additional admissions, training, and placement policies to consider in order to improve program delivery to students and increase the number of students who complete.

Admissions

One suggested guideline is that schools be required to fully disclose the details of their training programs. This could include a display of the books, learning materials, and syllabus; examples of tests and other requirements to be completed;

and demonstrations of the skills and knowledge in which the student will be required to show competency. The ease or rigor of the training should be explained. Many states do require that a description of the program be printed in the catalog. However, the gap needs to be closed between written or verbal descriptions and the actual student learning experience.

Consideration should be given to developing different types of admissions representatives to reflect when the admissions process is sales-oriented and when it is consultative. At this time, most states do not permit the word *counselor* to be associated with admissions. However, boards may consider the appropriateness of *Career Consultant*. For example, at this research site there might be *Massage Therapy Career Consultants* who would lead the student through a process to determine whether massage therapy is the right profession and, if so, whether that particular school is the right choice. In addition to the job title *Career Consultant*, there would also be the title of *Admissions Representative*. This latter job title describes the admissions sales person appropriate for some schools and program offerings. Each type of admissions professional would be required to have relevant job qualifications. These might include work experience and completion of continuing education in the field. Some states already have training requirements and other regulations for admissions personnel.

Training Programs

A requirement for learning contracts might be considered by licensing and accreditation boards. These would be non-legal documents that spell out course requirements and what is expected of the student. Completion times could be

included, such as the days and hours for class attendance, practice time, and homework. These would be developed to present a real picture of what attending school will be like, to encourage making necessary special arrangements prior to the first day of class, and to reduce the surprises resulting from uninformed expectations.

Licensing and accreditation boards might consider requiring orientation programs. This could be another way for the new enrollee to successfully prepare for the first day of school by dealing with real rather than imagined expectations.

Job Placement

Most state licensing and accreditation boards have minimum placement standards. Some even require a description of services and plans for improvement when rates are low. However, few define the depth and breadth of job skills and placement services that are required. For this reason, boards should be encouraged to benchmark Placement Department offerings and establish requirements.

Summary

Proprietary schools have a long history. Today there are over 5500 throughout the United States, with new schools opening daily to serve the needs of a growing number of students seeking job training. In most states, proprietary schools are regulated by licensing boards. Many are also under the regulation of accreditation agencies recognized by the Department of Education. These boards continually work to enhance guidelines so that proprietary schools offer educationally sound programs, maintain business standards, and operate morally and ethically to meet the needs of adults seeking career training.

Boards already have many regulations in place for such areas as admissions, training, and student services. A study such as this one can provide rich detail for board staff and members considering regulatory changes needed to maintain high standards and to serve and protect proprietary school students. In addition, there is an increasing number of individuals entering the private trade and career school business. For example, some attorneys establish paralegal schools, and some home health agencies set up schools to train nursing assistants and home health aides. Flower shop and restaurant owners can designate a part of their business establishments or use adjacent space to train people in floral arranging and culinary arts. Not knowing about the business of education, such individuals and agencies can set up their schools according to state licensing requirements, which vary from state to state. This study can provide the in-depth understanding needed for new school owners to identify prospective students who are likely to succeed, and the detail needed to set up effective policies and procedures focused on student success.

Proprietary schools have been around since colonial times and have adapted to the changing economy, the market, and the demands of government regulations. The next changes include those that redefine the role of proprietary schools in the context of post-secondary education. The findings of this study suggest that newly designed programs need to include built-in social and academic integration opportunities, retention and job readiness strategies, and techniques that enable students to make both personal and vocational changes. School owners may want to consider these options and make needed developments so that individuals seeking training view proprietary schools as a viable choice among their educational options.

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Appendix A

Letter from Director of Operations

Dear Students or Former Student,

The xxxxxxx of Massage Therapy is currently involved in an exciting research project. A doctoral student at FAU is writing a dissertation about career school students. She has chosen our school to study. The findings will assist us in providing better education and ensuring a higher success rate for future students. Your input is invaluable in this endeavor.

The project entails interviews with all people who have been affiliated with the school, including those who either withdrew or dropped out. Interviews will last one hour and can be conducted at the school, at your place of business, or a mutually convenient location. Anything you tell the researcher is kept strictly private as she is bound by a code of ethics requiring that confidentiality be maintained.

This is an opportunity for you to talk about the experiences you had at the school.

Please say yes to this request for a personal interview. You can contact me at the school, or contact the researcher directly. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Gail A. Naas
Director of Operations

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Please contact either of the following to indicate you are willing to be interviewed.

Gail A. Naas
Director of Operations
xxx/568-6200
xxx/568-6100 fax

Susan F. Schulz
Researcher
561/483-9554
561/451-4602 fax

Yes, I will participate in the research study.

Name ____

Start date ___________________________ End date _______________________

Day phone ___________________________ Night phone ____________________

Fax _________________________________ Email
____

Appendix B

Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Predictors of Program Completion in Proprietary Schools: A Qualitative Research Study

Principal Investigator: Dr. Lucy Guglielmino**. Investigator:** Susan F. Schulz, Ed.S.

Purpose: The purpose of this research study is to understand what contributes to student success in a proprietary school.

Procedures: Participation is voluntary. Participants will be asked to meet with the investigator for about one hour to talk about their experiences as a student or as a member of the school staff. They will be asked permission to audiotape the conversation.

Risks
There are no risks anticipated beyond those that occur in daily life. Participants will be volunteers and can withdraw from the project at any time with no penalty.

Benefits
It is expected that results of the study will uncover new understandings of what influences student success in proprietary schools. Given that there are relatively few studies in the proprietary school setting, this will add to understanding of student persistence.

Data Collection and Storage
The investigator will interview the participants and transcribe and maintain all data. All participants will be given an alias or code number. Anything that could identify an individual will be removed. No data including printed transcripts or audiotapes will ever be left at the study site.

Contact Information
For any problems or questions regarding your rights as a participant you can contact the principal investigator, Dr. Lucy L. Guglielmino, 561/ 297-3562, the investigator, Susan F. Schulz, 561/483-9554, and/or the Florida Atlantic Office of Sponsored Research at 561/297-2310.

Consent Statement
I have read and understand the study described above. I am 18 years of age or older and freely consent to participate. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time. A copy of this consent form will be provided to me.

Signature of Participant: _________________________________Date___________

Signature of Investigator _________________________________ Date___________

Appendix C

Student Interview Intake Form

General Information
First name ___________________________ Last name _____________________________

Address _______________________________________Today's date__________________

City ____ State ____ Zip________________

Is your address permanent or temporary during your training?____________________

Home phone [ ] ____________________ Work phone [ ] _____________________
Fax number [ ] ___________________ E-mail ________@____________________

Interviewed by _________________ Permission to tape ☐ yes ☐ no

Program information
ÿ Six months program ÿ 12 months program
Date program began _______________________
Date completed ______or number of months to complete ________
Termination date ____
# of practicum hours to complete _____ # of intern people to complete_______
Date of national certification exam or anticipated date________________________

Education
Indicate all levels of education.
ÿ High school ÿ GED ÿ Vocational training____________________
ÿ Massage training_____________ ÿ A & P courses ________________________
ÿ College _______ hours completed or degree. Major ________________________
ÿ Masters degree ÿ Doctoral degree
ÿ Distance education ÿ Other training ______________________________________

Work Experience
Briefly describe work experience in last 2 jobs. Include military.
Job description_______________________________________ Number of years______
Job description_______________________________________ Number of years______
Homemaker ____ Number of years______

ÿ Never employed ÿ Retired

Personal Information

Gender: Male Female

Age: 18 – 25 26-35 36-44 44-55 55+

Marital status: single divorced widowed married

ÿ Children: Ages ____

Caucasian African-American Hispanic Native American

ÿ Out of state resident International Student______________________________

Participation in inside school events. Check all that apply.

ÿ Massage Awareness Days ÿ Open House ÿ Graduation ÿ Kid Care

ÿ Health Quest

ÿ Other____

Participation in outside school events. Check all that apply.

ÿ Sporting events ÿ Community outreach ÿ Chair massage

ÿ Other ____

Current employment

ÿ In massage therapy field. ÿ In a field outside of massage therapy.

Number of hours per week: _____

Work hours: Days______ Nights______ Weekends ______

Study area *Check all places where you are able to study.*

Home Office With friend or family member Library

Study Group ÿ At school ÿ Other

Additional Information

GPA____ Payment Plan ___ Participated in Orientation ___Video Orientation ___

Appendix D

Staff Intake Form

General Information
First name ________________________ Last name __________________________

Address ___________________________________Today's date________________

City ____________________________________ State ____ Zip______________

Home phone [ ] __________________ Work phone [ ] ___________________

Fax number [ ] __________________E-mail _______________@___________

Interviewed by ________________ Permission to tape ☐ yes ☐ no

Employment information
First date of employment ______________ Last day of employment_____________
Job title(s) ____
Report to ____

Education
Indicate all levels of education.
ÿ High school ÿ GED ÿ Vocational training________________________
ÿ Massage therapy training____
School ____________________________________ Date of graduation _______
ÿ College _______ hours completed or degree. Major _______________________
ÿ Masters degree ÿ Doctoral degree
ÿ Distance education ÿ Other training ___________________________________

Work Experience
Briefly describe work experience in last 3 jobs.
Job description____________________________________ Number of years______

Job description____________________________________ Number of years______

Job description____________________________________ Number of years______

Personal Information

Gender: Male Female

Age: 18 – 25 26-35 36-44 44-55 55+

Caucasian African-American Hispanic Native American

ÿ Out of state resident International ______________________________________

Participation in inside school events. Check all that apply.

ÿ Massage Awareness Days ÿ Open House ÿ Graduation ÿ Kid Care

ÿ Other____

Participation in outside school events. Check all that apply.

ÿ Sporting events ÿ Community outreach ÿ Chair massage

ÿ Other ____

Appendix E

Student Interview Guide

1. Please tell me about the events in your life that led up to your decision to enter massage therapy training.

What were you doing at the time you began to think about going to school?
Tell me about your educational background and aspirations.
Tell me about your work history.
What experience did you have with massage as a treatment or practice?
What characteristics do you think you have that match people who are massage therapists?
What did you know about the massage therapy profession?
What kind of research did you do when looking for schools?
Can you tell me your impressions about the information materials you received from this school?
Why did you think you would be a good massage therapist?
How did you envision using your training once you were licensed?
What kind of income did you expect?
In what way did your friends and family influence you?
What kind of research did you do about the best school for you?
What kind of thinking did you have about the time it would take to study, complete homework, and pass tests?
What kind of thinking did you do about what would actually happen in class and in the practicum sessions?
What did you imagine your fellow students to be like?
What were the main reasons you enrolled in the school?

2. Please tell me what it is or was like to be a massage therapy student.

What was your first impression when you came to the school?
What did you like? What were your concerns?
How do you or did you feel about the people you met at school?
What kind of arrangements or changes did you make, if any, before starting your training? i.e. Childcare, change of employment, a move closer to school, study arrangements.
What has been or was the reaction of your friends and family to your going to school?
What do you think about your instructors?
What do you think about the administration and other staff members here?
What did you think of the academic work required?
What was your impression of the practicum work?
How clear were you about what was expected of you as a student?
The rules?
What kind of concerns did you have as a student?
Did you consider going to anyone in the school to deal with these concerns?
What kinds of frustrations did you have?

How did you deal with them?
What about the frustrations you saw in others? How did they deal with them?
Can you tell me if there were times during your life as a student that you felt like giving up? If yes, what did you do?
If you ended your studies before graduation, what would have made the difference to keep you in school?
If you ended your studies before graduation, what were your future plans?
What kind of inside or outside projects did you participate in?
If you got involved, what was your decision to do so?
If you chose not to get involved, what was your thinking?
What kind of services did you seek while in school? There is counseling, placement, academic assistance, etc.

3. What personal awareness did you develop while in school?

Given what you have said that led up to your decision to enter massage therapy training plus what you have said of your life as a massage therapy student, what do you now understand or know about your experience?
How does working in the field match up with your original expectations?
How did going to school match up with your original expectations?
What disappointed you?
What surprised you?
What would you do differently?
Why do students stay in school?
Why do students drop out?
What could be done to keep students from dropping out?
What did you learn about yourself in terms of the personal characteristics needed to be a student? A massage therapist?
What did you discover that was unexpected?
How ready do you feel for the workplace?
How comfortable are you about being on the right track?
What was the transition like from admissions, to being a student, to ending your training?
How do you see your future or your next steps?

Appendix F

Faculty/Staff Interview Guide

1. Please tell me the events that led up to your decision to work at the school.

What is your educational background and aspirations?
Tell me about your work history.
What experience do you have with massage therapy?
What did you envision happening as a result of working here?
In what way did your friends or family influence you to work here?
In what way did you think you would impact the students?
In what way did you think you could make an impact on the school?

2. What is it like working at the school?

What was your first impression/reaction when you came to the school?
What impressed you? What were your concerns?
How do you feel about the people who work here?
About the students who train here?
What do you think about the training program?
What do you think of the work culture?
What would you change? Improve?
What is working well that you would keep?
What would help you do your job more effectively?

3. How do you feel you have an impact on the students who go to school here?

What are the typical ways you interact with students?
In what way, if any, do you feel you are making a difference in the lives of the students?
What ways could you have a greater impact?
What was your greatest satisfaction with a student?
What was your greatest disappointment?
What do students think you do here?
What do the students look like who succeed here?
What do the students look like who don't belong here?
What do the students look like who fail?

4. How do you feel the school has an impact on the students who train here?

How does the administration affect students?
How do teachers affect students?
How do instructors affect students?
What is done that seems to impact on student success?
What is done that seems to impede student success?
What would you change?
What can be done to keep students enrolled?
Why do students drop out?
What is the one thing that would make a difference to a student staying or going?
Where do you see the school going in the future?
Where do you see yourself going with the school?

Vita

Susan Folkman Schulz

www.susanfschulz.com

Education

Ed.D.	Florida Atlantic University Boca Raton, FL Educational Leadership Advisor: Dr. Lucy M. Guglielmino
Ed.S.	Florida Atlantic University Boca Raton, FL Educational Leadership Advisor: Dr. Lucy M. Guglielmino
M.A.	Columbia University Teachers College New York, NY Student Personnel Administration
B.A.	Boston University Boston, MA Comparative Literature and Secondary Education
Summary of Work	Over 20 years experience training adults in post-secondary education, corporate, and proprietary school settings.
Susan F. Schulz & Associates, Inc.	Consult with owners of trade and career schools and corporate training departments on program development and technical training, operations, marketing including web-based marketing, licensing, accreditation, and compliance. Present adult education, marketing, retention, continuing education, and instructor training. Conduct workshops at national meetings and conferences.
Publications	Bi-monthly newsletter: *Career School Solutions* Workbook: *The Publicity Workbook for Career Schools*
Memberships	Phi Kappa Phi Honors Society AAACE Florida ACE Toastmasters International South Florida Women Divers