DELIBERATE ORIENTATION AND TRANSITION PRACTICES AS PART OF A BROADER STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGY: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF THREE LARGE URBAN ONTARIO COLLEGES

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to examine institutional behaviour concerning orientation and transition efforts for first year college students. This case study examines three large urban colleges in Ontario focusing on the orientation and transition approach at each institution and studied the extent to which each is using known best practices in the field of orientation and transition in their effort to generate increased student success. Informed by the related literature with an emphasis on Canadian and Ontario specific content, the study examined findings in relation to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the implications and recommendations drawn from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students to uncover similarities and differences.

The case study employed a document analysis and qualitative interview analysis to examine the extent to which orientation and transition efforts are part of college wide strategic planning and ingrained within the institutions. The information is cross referenced between the document analysis and participant interviews and comparisons are drawn from the key themes
identified within the literature. The findings shed further light on the efficacy of the CCSSE survey instrument and its themes and identify areas for further study in the Ontario college context.

The analysis conducted indicate that there is good model fit with the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework of Educational Effective Practices in the three colleges that participated within this case study. While this study is not generalizable, the findings of this study adds further qualitative evidence that the CCSSE thematic framework is applicable to the three large urban Ontario colleges studied and, in combination with the 2010 Mandarino and Mattern HEQCO study, provides evidence that the CCSSE thematic framework is a reasonable tool to plan and assess orientation and transition practices as part of a broader student success strategy for colleges with similar characteristics. The efficacy of the CCSSE tool can be improved by supplementing it with a survey designed to account for the findings of the 2007 Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.
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“It takes a cohort.” When we started this journey in 2010, our class adopted this moto and it remains as relevant today as it did then. I want to use this theme to acknowledge the many key supporters that made this journey possible. First, I want to acknowledge my close friends from York University that started me down the path to where I am today as mentors and friends: Scott, Jeff, Tristin, Elissa, Clare, Lori, Angelina, Amrit, Dawn, Rob, Louis, Irene, Deb, Beth, Dale and Cora.

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way. Finally, Dr. Brian Desbiens has also been a huge supporter and key advisor during my journey.

Our cohort has also been a source of great support. I have made some wonderful friendships and have been really inspired by their respective contribution to the postsecondary college system. The cohort has been very encouraging at times when it was really needed and offered help and guidance at key times when it seemed that the road ahead was too steep to climb.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated first to the kids who never had the same opportunities that I did to attain a postsecondary education. This includes my late brother Donald and my late father Leo. Both were smart men that did not have the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education. I have no doubt that both of their lives would be very different were they given the same hope and opportunity that was engrained in me. Similarly, my dear friend Donald Bishop did not have opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education to further his creative brilliance. This serves as a reminder to me that there are so many gifted individuals that deserve the chances that I have been given. Secondly, this is dedicated to seven really powerful and important women in my life: Susan, Brenda, my four sisters – Leona, Gloria, Angela and Leanne, and, my mother – Freda.

Susan Stylianos is a dear friend, mentor and honourary mother. She taught me so much about the postsecondary environment and showed me the value of research, data and pursuing further studies. We shared so many laughs while tackling giant problems by using the literature to inform our practice. During the past three years, I have had far too little time for important people in my life and this dissertation is a small offering to recognize how important they are to me. Susan has been in my thoughts throughout this journey and I am very happy to dedicate a part of this to her for the incredible influence that she has had on me.

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Next, I want to thank my four sisters: Leona, Gloria, Angela and Leanne. They inspire me every day and support me in ways that they probably do not even realize. Leona has been a huge supporter keeping me focused and taking care of things at our shared home so I can focus. Gloria can be counted on to bring tranquility and peace and keep me grounded. Angie is a close friend and a strong leader and I can always count on her to help me relax and remember what is important in life. Leanne is an inspiration and role model. I have always been in her shadow and have looked up to her for guidance and new challenges. Collectively, they have 4 girls and 4 boys who have given me so much happiness and made me a very proud uncle and recently a great uncle with the newest addition to our family.

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“It is the people on campus, those who come into contact with students every day, who have the ability to establish a positive learning climate. If we are to create a staying environment, a student-centered outlook must be evident throughout the institution – in the behaviour of the telephone operator, the receptionist, and the clerk at the cashier’s window, as well as teachers, advisers, and administrators. The people in the front-line positions should be those who think that students are the most important people on campus, who believe it is their mission to help students develop as individuals and work toward future success” (Noel - Levitz, 1997).

During the past twenty years, I have watched the evolution of the practice of orientation and transition within the postsecondary environment. During my university studies, I became involved in the social aspect of orientation and transition. This area was largely run for students by students. Students that had started at university had an inherent understanding that helping one adjust to the postsecondary environment was an important aspect of transition. Therefore, large numbers of upper year students were involved in welcoming new students. On move-in day at the university large groups of returning students in bright coloured shirts greeted students as they arrived with their parents and helped load bags, suit cases and computers into residence rooms. Barbeques and fairs, dances and even toga parties were held. The university had academic administrators deliver speeches in large halls and commuters joined the residence students to hear welcoming remarks. Students printed out class schedules and began the journey of tracking down classrooms and buying books. Each element of the program was designed to welcome students and prepare them for a new experience. Overall, the experience was overwhelming for many and in a few short days, students were off to class. For my own part, I attended a university with 38,000 full-time students, 12,000 graduate students and 60,000 parttime students not to mention the thousands of staff that, together, populated the university on a daily basis.
This welcoming experience led me to get involved in the process of welcoming new students in my second and subsequent years at the University. I did so because of what I have come to know as “social belonging” – though truthfully, I wanted to engage in the fun. Each year during my university experience I became increasingly involved – serving in nine elected positions in five years in addition to serving as a residence assistant and Chief Returning Officer for university-wide elections one semester. I was incredibly involved outside of the classroom in the social aspects of the university and in my later years in campus and provincial political activity. In one of the years that I was involved, a Student Affairs professional that became one of my key mentors invited me to attend a conference as part of my student development.

I had the opportunity to attend an international conference dedicated solely to the practice of orientation and transition. 2,500 delegates from across North America gathered to share best practices and learn from one another. Student leaders, staff, faculty, student affairs professionals and senior administrators came together to discuss issues pertaining to orientation and transition for new and transfer students. At that time, I began to understand that this was serious business. I had not yet realized that this was also big business. Behind the conference there were entire groups dedicated to researching the various aspects of orientation and transition and years later, I started to become more interested in this field of study. When I had finally started to pay attention to the academic aspects of orientation and transition, I began to realize that this was not only about the well-being of the individual student by helping to make them feel welcomed but this was about the well-being of the university or college. The well-being of the university or college relied heavily on keeping students and every lost student represented a financial and
reputational loss. My understanding of the simple concept of orientation and transition had transformed into a much bigger question about the roots of student persistence and retention.

Years later, I once again found myself working with students and sharing responsibility for orientation in my professional role at an Ontario college. By this time, I began to understand the connections that needed to be made with the academic departments and started to understand that orientation was not merely an event but a process. During this period of my career, I still focused largely on the social aspect of orientation but I had an expanded focus on the series of events that made up the orientation and transition process and the collaboration with service and academic areas that was needed to manage this process effectively. I had not realized that I was building the foundations of a career dedicated to gaining a deep understanding of orientation and transition practices and student success. I had seen myself as a student advocate and I had always worked with students but I had not yet made the connections about mentorship, teaching and student involvement and how these all contributed to student success. I knew from my personal experience that being involved was just as important to me, than my academic studies and was closely linked to my fondest memories of my university experience. Reflecting on my university experience, I now understand that in fact much of my learning happened outside of the classroom. I learned to programme major events and gained confidence speaking publicly. I learned how to market myself during the nine different elections that I ran in. I learned to manage people and had the opportunity to travel across Ontario and Canada to various conferences and meetings of student leaders to share my perspective and my learning with others. Finally, during the peak of my student advocacy years, I appeared regularly on the news and in media fighting for student access to higher education and learning about various forms of communication.
The next stage of my career was a bit of a departure for me. I had always worked directly for students. I started my career as an elected student leader and, later as a staff person in a student association. During this period, I was still a student advocate focusing directly on issues and how to help students assert their rights. I then made the move to college administration. For several years I worked on other aspects of student service. I was able to use the knowledge that I had gained to serve students in a new way. I was not a pure advocate but I was able to work on systemic student issues with an aim at improving the student experience. I was quickly becoming a student services generalist with a broad range of project activities from building student spaces to fixing complex processes to working on job design.

After moving into an operational role leading several student service areas, I was asked to take on the task of looking at the college’s orientation and transition practices in each of the academic divisions and preparing a report on what needed to be done for consideration by the college senior administration. For inspiration, I attended the same international conference that I had attended years earlier and reconnected to the field of study. For the first time, I was asked to design an orientation program for new students and I was able to ground it in the research.

The research began to identify key players within the field of orientation and transition, retention and student success such as Astin, Chickering, Dietsche, Kolb, Kuh, O’Banion, Pascarella, Terenzini and Tinto as well as the various theorists for student development theory among others. Theories were examined to better understand student development and from these emerged various theories on student retention. All of these researchers are supplemented by the numerous organizations and journals dedicated to the study of orientation and transition and the impact that these programs have on student success. The intersection of these two key elements –
research and practice – complements my own interest in the field. Within the academic world, this field of study is still relatively new.

Early theories highlighted the importance of connectivity between the student and the institution’s staff. The collective work of these researchers have sparked my interest and driven me to examine the interventions that I have had the opportunity to make and what is still needed to increase student persistence leading to retention and student success.

At the first college that I worked at, I had the opportunity to completely redesign the orientation and transition process and learned a lot on that journey. The journey started with taking an inventory of orientation practices and then raising awareness of the need to look at orientation as a process and not simply a welcoming event. This led to redefining the various elements that constitute the orientation and transition process. Each of these elements was then looked at from an outcomes based approach. What was the purpose of running orientation activities? What was the goal? What were the measures and how did this fit into the overarching student success strategy? As such, one of the three pillars of student success was ongoing orientation along with early alert and supplemental instruction.

With this in mind, we went about defining the goals of orientation. Ultimately, we landed on 4 key elements: consistent college-wide welcome, student success messaging, connectivity among peers and connectivity with faculty or staff (Poirier, 2008). These elements were in line with key research just as that done by Tinto. Tinto states:

The theme of isolation/connection denotes a perceived barrier participants needed to overcome to achieve academic success. It is well documented that the inability to develop a connection with some aspect of the university will generally result in failure. Non-integrative experiences of loneliness and alienation were positively correlated with withdrawal from college whereas positive or integrative experiences enhanced student persistence (Tinto, 1993).
I formed an opinion that prior orientation events were largely an information dump. The critical element of helping students make meaningful connections was not explicitly stated as a goal, in fact, there were no stated objectives for orientation at all. Students were given a lecture on the services that were available and what they needed to be aware of. Students were inundated with such information as harassment and discrimination policies, policies and procedures, the need for counselling and disciplinary procedures. By the end of the session, students were likely more anxious and nervous than when they started. Students sat through lectures that were over an hour long and were treated to a series of college officials. This approach was in place despite internal research that identified the importance of connectivity for student retention. In 2000, the College had brought in Jim Black to report on Strategic Enrolment Management. In it he notes: “Focus groups with students, staff, and academic coordinators, overwhelmingly revealed the importance of relationships between students and caring faculty. Student retention research consistently indicates that students often leave an institution because they never connect with anyone” (Black, 2000).

The question that comes to mind is – why did the college not act on the important information contained in this report? Reflecting on this, I have come to understand that the role of orientation and retention needs to be formally stated as a college objective and needs to have leadership associated with these efforts. In 2005, when I was asked to take leadership for this initiative, this matter became a larger priority for the college.

During the first year of this process, initial surveying was conducted to set benchmark data to capture student perceptions of their experience. This focused largely on the 4 key elements identified above. As expected, the results indicated low connectivity and as a result the overall marks for creating a welcoming environment were also lower than desired. In 2005,
among the 6 academic divisions, faculty and staff connection ranged from 31% to 50%, while peer connections were rated between 41% and 63% and, overall 76% to 87% would highly recommend that other students attend orientation (Poirier, 2008).

Armed with this information, I established a team to redesign orientation with the 4 key elements in mind and pilot new activities with one academic area and compare the two models and the results achieved by each. The new pilot model achieved significant results. By 2008, the connection with faculty had increased to 92%, 76% had made useful connections with peers and 92% would highly recommend attending orientation (Poirier, 2008). The increase in connectivity ranged from between a 42% and 61% increase, while the connection with peers increased between 13% and 35% and, overall recommend that others attend increased by 5% to 16% (Poirier, 2008). These results maintained a consistent pattern in all academic divisions by time I left the college in 2010. The overall strategy at the College was aimed at managing the overall student experience and the key subcomponents of it. Black noted in his report:

The capacity to manage “moments of truth” determines, to a large extent, an organization’s image and success with its customers. No organization can afford to disenfranchise its primary customers. Failure to effectively manage “moments of truth” often leads to the dissatisfaction and even the departure of students. To understand the true financial impact of student attrition, add lost tuition and fee revenue with public relations damage caused by dissatisfied students who leave spewing venom (Black, 2000).

In my journey as a student services professional, I had begun to appreciate the full impact of retention on the institution. As an administrator, I was beginning to comprehend the potential impact that a meaningful retention strategy could have on the institution’s resources and that the benefits for the individual would be equally rewarding.

According to Noel-Levitz, the following major deficiencies in the majority of two-year college’s enrolment programs – lack of a comprehensive, annual, written
marketing/recruitment and retention plans. Student retention is a significant problem for some academic programs at the College. The best recruiting strategies will not overcome serious attrition. It does little to bring a cohort of students in through the front door only to have them exit prematurely (Black, 2000).

During challenging times for colleges and universities, competing for limited resources and facing the need to deliver a broader range of services to support a student’s journey towards success, retention needs to be an important aspect of college strategic planning efforts.

My personal passion for access to education had always given me a strong understanding of the individual effects of not attending postsecondary education. I was now becoming more aware of the need to foster an environment where student persistence was as central to the dialogue as retention was for college and universities. This awareness and my long-standing belief that engaging students was the most effective way of retaining them was becoming central to my personal philosophy on education. My final piece of work at the college would take all of these themes together under a major research project on the student experience. The results would reaffirm for me that the majority of students wanted to get more involved at college and that those that did were more likely to be satisfied with their college experience (George Brown College, 2010).

Having just completed this research, an opportunity arose for me to take on a new leadership opportunity at another large, urban Ontario college. At this point, I had well-formed opinions that are supplemented by my own journey through graduate studies and my work in the field. In 2011, I was charged with the full responsibility of designing a detailed vision for student services that would transform the college experience. My personal bias towards orientation and retention would form a major component of my vision along with a college-wide concentration on student engagement through advising and co-curricular involvement. Within the realm of
advising, I have been stressing the need to move beyond traditional advising models and emphasize the need for meaningful interventions that are grounded in predictors of success such as career goal clarity and academic preparedness along with other known risk factors coupled with early-alert strategies and effective supports.

As I began down this journey of leading a major change initiative at a new college, there have been some encouraging studies that speak to the need for an even greater concerted effort towards orientation and transition. In Ontario, the lower grades of entering students contributes to the 43% attrition rate in Ontario’s colleges (Drea, 2004). The various factors that collectively make up the student demographic in Ontario’s colleges increases the need for effective strategies related to all aspects of student success. Supporting students with clarifying career and study goals is needed before a student ever starts class. Assessing students’ readiness before they start college, using risk factors to support strategic and targeted interventions and, designing orientation programs to support personalized approaches to each student’s needs is required more than ever.

As I continue my journey to lead change initiatives related to student success and I continue my work towards gaining a deeper personal understanding of the variables - the interrelationship between student engagement and student success is becoming more compelling for me to examine further. Orientation and transition is an essential part of the student success equation as it sets the tone as students embark on their journey through higher education. How colleges and universities start introducing students to the college environment, what expectations are set and how we engage with our students can have a meaningful impact on students and ultimately contribute to their success and their personal development as a student and a citizen. All of this led me to the subject of this current research. This comparative study will examine
these themes and these issues and it is my intention to shed light into this critical area of research to ensure that more students that start their studies are able to achieve their goals.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Higher Education Triad – Access, Quality and Finance

College and University administrators and educators have been concerned with the tension among and between the Higher education triad of access, quality and finance throughout the history of postsecondary education. The evolution of access to higher education has undergone major changes transforming from an elite system for the financially privileged minority to a system where, increasingly, the broader population is encouraged to - and desire the right to - participate. Ken Robinson states:

As millions of workers migrated from the countryside to the cities… a third social group began to take shape: the urban working classes. For some pioneers of mass education, schools were a way to raise the aspirations of the working classes and to lift them out of poverty and despair. Others saw education as the best way to promote the values and opportunities that are meant to lie at the heart of healthy democracies (Robinson, 2011 page 54).

Other factors that affected access to higher education arise from the social impacts of the Industrial Revolution including the rise of skilled labour, an increase in technological, administrative and professional fields. World War I and II further broadened participation by the masses and the return of veterans came with a commitment to retrain and educate them. As the sons and daughters of the working class began to enter the halls of higher education institutions, new challenges arose in the quality and finance areas of the triad.

The increasing numbers of students entering postsecondary education through mass education and greater access ensured that the quality of education became an increasingly important element of the triad (Trow, 1973). The original model of higher education was based on small numbers of students studying with an intensive focus on a subject, question, or field.
This model was also premised on a homogenous population of learners that were well prepared and shared many common traits including coming from the same social status or class. Mass education starting with the turn of the century introduced new social structures and varying degrees of student preparation. “In this period, skeptics argued that to attempt to educate the children of working class families was a waste of public resources as these children were incapable of learning” (Robinson, 2011 page 55). Quality, in many ways, became a benchmark for the “survival of the fittest”: those that were academically gifted or those that were the most determined to succeed by seeking support would survive, while those that were unable to would not make it. This principle was widely accepted and remains prevalent among many faculty members in modern institutions. Despite this basic principle, many institutions took actions to attempt to level the playing field. Some institutions raised admissions standards to ensure that only the most academically qualified or gifted students were admitted, while others designed more open admission requirements and offered support services to assist students that needed extra help. The emerging differences among students saw the need for support services within academic institutions and opened up a new realm of professional areas within the academy to address these differences. This case study will explore the advent of support services and this subject will provide the context for its central subject – the practice of new student orientation and transition as part of broader student success strategies.

The third element of the higher education triad is finance. The financing of education has implications for the individual, society as a whole, the taxpayers that contribute to education and the institutions that need to operate in a sustainable way. An important question is: who funds higher education? While the answer to this basic question has evolved over time, it has always been a key factor in who attends higher education and how their education is financed. In
medieval times, the Church and the various monarchies had a vested interest in educating their own class and therefore, funded higher education with access limited to the nobility or clergy. As states became involved and more educated individuals were needed to lead industry and commerce, the upper classes were further engaged and later veterans and the broader population were engaged more rapidly at the turn of the century.

With the advent of mass education, states became increasingly involved in financing institutions of higher learning. Financing of education continues to be an important dynamic that institutions struggle with and has occupied government and the public throughout history for the individual, institution and society as a whole. With the increasing need for higher education and skilled labour, the financing of education dominates policymakers today and is watched closely by the public. Financial policy decisions often dictate the very nature of investment and focus of postsecondary institutions. In fact, one of the impetuses for this case study is the inherent impact that student success has on the financial viability of the institution and the personal impact finances have on the individual student as well as taxpayers.

1.2 Professional Significance

Within this higher education triad of access, quality and finance, the question of transition to higher education has been the subject of considerable study. In North America, studies have focused on the various supports provided to students transitioning to postsecondary education. The broader goal of these academics has been to increase retention of students within postsecondary education and to improve participation rates. From a students’ perspective the aim has been to improve student persistence in an effort to improve student success. In support of these efforts, numerous organizations have been established to provide support and share information and best practices within the field of student services. Organizations such as the
National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) have brought together educators from student services for years to study practices which help students transition to the higher education environment. The International Conference on the First Year Experience brings hundreds of faculty and student services staff together to share information about interventions with first year students that are promising or known to improve student success. Both these organizations and many more hold conferences to share best practices and both have journals that publish studies concerning issues of transition, orientation, and retention of students.

In the Canadian context, organizations such as the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), Colleges Ontario (CO) and the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) provide forums to discuss and share best practices surrounding the broader field of student services and affairs. Despite the wide range of organizations dedicated to this purpose, upon reviewing the literature, there continues to be a lack of Canadian longitudinal studies on student services. Thus, I have found that, the strategic approach to orientation and transition lags behind the leading institutions in the United States in the Canadian literature. Further, I have observed that within the leading American associations, there are relatively few Canadian institutions present as active members. Among Canadian associations dedicated to student services, very few, if any, focus on the sole issue of orientation, transition, retention, and student persistence. In Ontario, there is a comprehensive body of student service professionals yet none focuses on this issue as their primary mandate.

Through the 1980’s and 90’s, North American postsecondary institutions concentrated on strategic enrolment management as their primary strategy for addressing student recruitment and retention (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2001). Even with the advent of strategic enrolment management within the Canadian context, I have found
that the focus amongst postsecondary institutions has been concentrated on recruitment and marketing with less emphasis on retention and student success. In Ontario, retention has become the subject of greater attention as the province has set targets for participation and educational attainment and forecasts for enrolment growth appear to be slowing (OCAS, 2013). Given this, Ontario postsecondary institutions must adapt to include student retention as a more central principle for their strategic mandates. This area of study has a major impact on society’s goal to increase participation rates and meet the demands of a skilled and educated workforce. In Ontario, the government has called upon postsecondary institutions to ensure that at least 70% of the population attains a postsecondary education (Rae, 2005). In order to achieve this goal, the gap between those entering higher education and those graduating needs to be closed. Although Canada has amongst the highest educational attainment rates among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations, addressing the retention challenge remains a focus of interest for all levels of government (OECD, 2012). The major question that surrounds determining what supports and interventions are effective in increasing retention of students within postsecondary education.

1.3 Background of the Study

For more than one hundred years, educators have been coming together to share best practices and examine the kinds of supports needed to help students succeed (National Orientation Directors Association, 2011). Researchers have also studied the problem to gain an understanding of student behaviour. In the 1970s and 1980s, research evolved from a narrow focus on student development and broadened to look at how the college environment has an impact on the individual student. The early research identified challenge and support (Sanford, 1962), social isolation (Tinto, 1975), and student involvement (Astin, 1984) as some of the key
elements to student success. Tinto’s student departure theory established ground breaking research on student attrition. (Tinto, 1975, 1993) This research, among other studies, opened the door for a more comprehensive understanding of student engagement and the importance of engaging students both inside and outside of the classroom. Researchers such as Pascarella and Terenzini, (1991, 2005); Dietsche, (1990, 1995, 2005); Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot (2005), Kuh and Whitt (1988), and, Kuh (2009) provide further insight into the impact of college environments. Each of these authors’ theories, models, and research studies collectively inform the current understanding of best practices concerning orientation and transition, student engagement, retention, and success. The research expanded to focus on a variety of areas under the umbrella of student success. Collectively, these studies have highlighted the importance of connecting students to their learning environments, their peers, faculty members, staff, and educational goals in order to ensure student success and retention.

Through a detailed literature review, I examine the evolution of student development theory in order to develop an historical understanding for the various disciplines and professions that have shaped our current understanding of student involvement and engagement, orientation and transition, the first year experience, the focus on early alert and intervention as well as the emerging significance of career clarity for Ontario’s college students. These various areas of study evolved and have become particularly important elements of the complex equation of student engagement and student success. Understanding the various components of the research and how they influenced the student affairs profession is essential to gain a full understanding of college impact theories and models.

The aforementioned literature as well as other prominent scholarship influenced the student affairs profession to focus on orientation and transition as a key component of student
engagement: If students at risk are identified and reached early in their academic careers, they stand a greater chance of reaching their educational goals (Tinto, 1993). As the study of student behaviour continued to evolve, the focus broadened to student engagement with a particular focus on the first year experience (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). The nature of student involvement (Astin, 1985), the effort that a student brings to their education (Pace, 1984), the academic and social atmosphere at an academic institution and the student’s integration into that environment (Tinto, 1987, 1993, 1997) as well as the effects of intentional student engagement efforts on student persistence, retention and development of students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) have all been examined extensively in the four-year liberal arts settings.

While much of the research has been focused on four-year liberal arts education, some studies have attempted to demonstrate the usefulness of these practices for two-year technical or community colleges. In 2006, McClennen and Marti “provided evidence of these associations in the two-year college sector as well” (Mandarino & Mattern, 2010). The study showed a positive correlation between student engagement and retention in Ontario and the Canadian college context. While it is difficult to isolate the exact interventions that have contributed to student success, the body of research does express the central importance of student engagement as an important element, if not the most important, component of Canadian student success. Within the broad field of student engagement, it is clear that early effort’s to support students and help them make a successful transition to a new environment through the process of academic and social orientation is a critical element of student success through the prevention of social isolation and to counteract early departure (Tinto, 1993).

In the Canadian context, important contributions have been made by Dietsche (1990, 1995, 2005), McMurray (2009) and Finnie (2010) among others. Organizations such as the
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) and Colleges Ontario (CO) also contribute important pieces of research to help understand Canadian student success research and in particular focus on some of the unique system design considerations in Ontario. In order to fully understand the Ontario context this study will examine, Dietsche’s work with college students (Dietsche, 2005), Finnie’s work with understanding long term student success (Finnie, 2010), the ACCC Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students (Dietsche, 2007) and various HEQCO studies in order to connect the broader body of literature to the Ontario college context.

Dietsche identified key elements that are somewhat unique to vocationally focused college students and to date, represents the most comprehensive examination of Canadian college students (Dietsche, 2005). In particular, he noted that a focus on career and goal clarity were important factors alongside student preparedness and effort (Dietsche, 2005). Finnie contributes further research that supports the notion of career and goal clarity as identified by early leavers as well as greater student completion rates over time (Finnie, 2010). McMurray also contributes important information about the value of student engagement and the campus experience (McMurray, 2009). The implications for the broader study of student engagement for Ontario students is that specific attention needs to be paid to career and goal clarity, motivation, and effort when engaging students and in particular through the orientation and transition process.

Given that orientation and transition is such an important element of student engagement, numerous questions are brought to the fore: What programs, activities and supports are needed to increase the likelihood of student persistence? What processes are in place to reach at-risk students early? What tools are used to identify and reach out to students at risk of early leaving? What activities and programs are in place to help students make a successful transition to the
college environment? How can education professionals isolate campus interventions to examine their impact? To what extent are Canadian postsecondary institutions using North American educational best practices? Are these efforts deliberate and planned or disparate? These are important questions that need to be studied in order to help institutions effectively rise to the government’s challenge to support the success of more Ontario students. With these questions in mind, this study considers four primary research questions as follows:

1. What student orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?

2. To what extent are three large urban colleges utilizing comprehensive and deliberate approaches to student orientation and transition?

3. To what extent are these three colleges using student orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?

4. To what extent do these practices relate to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

Educators need to advance research in this important area and share promising practices. This comparative case study attempts to identify what processes are in place at three large urban colleges in Ontario with respect to orientation and transition and provide insight into the preceding questions.

Many institutions have tried pilot programs, run orientation programs, have designed transition strategies and supports and have conducted research about these specific questions. As noted previously, key researchers in the field of student services have developed theories about student persistence and success. Much of the early research in this area has come from American
institutions and major researchers in the field of student development and student success. Key studies from authors such as Astin (1973, 1984, 1993), Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993, 1997), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Kuh (2005, 2008) have contributed to the contemporary understanding of student behaviour and success. Large longitudinal studies such as the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) starting in 2000 are widely administered and have been used to measure student engagement. In fact, NSSE is being administered annually with “more than 1,400 different colleges and universities in the United States and Canada participating since it was first administered in 2000” (NSSE, 2010). The survey is widely used in an effort to better understand student behaviour and institutional characteristics that affect student success and provide important benchmarking in relation to other institutions of higher learning in the fouryear college and university environments.

Recognizing the potential differences between four-year liberal arts institutions and twoyear technical and career college students, the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) was launched in 2001 with more than 550 community colleges participating in 48 states and 3 provinces (CCSSE, 2010). Given that this sample of community colleges is predominantly U.S. based, a question of validity arises within the Canadian context and particularly in Ontario given some of the unique system design issues related to Colleges in this province. In 2010, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) and Humber College in Toronto examined this issue to determine the extent to which the findings were applicable to Ontario colleges (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010). I explore this further and based on the HEQCO findings, I used the CCSSE framework as a thematic guide to frame my examination of orientation and transition practices in place at the three large urban colleges in Ontario.
Throughout this study, I referenced this thematic framework as a tool to uncover similarities and differences and identify areas for further examination, research, and promising best practices. In order to maximize the sample size of Ontario students, this study examined three large urban Ontario colleges. Being that these colleges are geographically adjacent to one another, they serve to cover a large segment of Ontario’s population – and thus Canada’s population as well – and represent a significant piece of the total enrolment of urban Ontario college students. The specific population data and college enrolment data is examined as part of the site selection component of the methodology section of this study. It should be noted that the sample may be geographically and demographically skewed and therefore, the findings are not generalizable. Notwithstanding the sample considerations, the findings may shed light on areas for further research among three of Ontario’s largest colleges representing a significant population of college students.

With this in mind, I examined practices and strategies in place in Ontario and Canadian colleges and universities aimed at affecting student success as well as improving student retention. I examined the research of Dietsche, Finnie, and various ACCC, HEQCO and Colleges Ontario studies to shed further light onto the Ontario specific context and to expand on the CCSSE thematic framework as needed. In particular, I examined the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students to account for Ontario and Canadian specific content.

Many institutions have run orientation programs but to what extent is orientation tied to strategic objectives? Are orientation and transition efforts a part of a broader student success strategy? How well do interventions work in order to positively affect student persistence and retention? How much research has been done in Canada to understand the issue and is American research applicable in the Canadian context? What differences exist between the university and
college systems? These are all questions that I intend to address through a literature review with a special focus on Canadian research. Due to the nature of the research question, a look at North American practices is needed to help evaluate the extent to which Canadian institutions, and Ontario colleges in particular, are using these principles and advancing the student success agenda.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to examine institutional behaviour concerning orientation and transition efforts for first year students. In a comparative study, I examine the three large urban colleges in Ontario to examine the orientation and transition approach at each institution and then study the extent to which each are using known best practices in the field of orientation and transition in an effort to generate increased student success. The research is organized using four primary research questions as follows:

1. What student orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?
2. To what extent are three large urban colleges utilizing comprehensive and deliberate approaches to student orientation and transition?
3. To what extent are these three colleges using student orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?
4. To what extent do these practices relate to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

As I explore the research questions, additional questions are explored to answer the primary research questions. Are the efforts surrounding orientation and transition a part of a
larger student success strategy and to what extent are these practices deliberate and ingrained in institutional strategic planning? Are the efforts undertaken comprehensively or are there components of best practices that are not in place? Are the orientation and transition programs aligned with best practices for student engagement that have been shown to positively affect retention? In order to compare these colleges, the literature review will focus on the evolution of student services, North American best practices and a review of Canadian studies to examine what examples of Canadian research is available that focused on colleges and further refined the study to ensure that it is viewed from the perspective of the Ontario college system.

The study examined orientation and transition practices in use at the three colleges. I examined organizational documents to examine the extent to which these initiatives are part of college wide strategic planning and ingrained within the institutions. I also utilized interviews of senior student affairs administrators and front line managers, faculty, coordinators or staff responsible for orientation to cross reference institutional documents with the qualitative interviews. Finally, the interviews and key documents are examined in relation to the CCSSE thematic framework to identify similarities and differences. The CCSSE thematic framework is used to organize the interviews and document analysis into themes. The findings attempt to shed further light onto the efficacy of this survey tool and its themes or identify areas that need to be further refined or added in the Ontario college context. Finally, the themes are examined in relation to the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students as well as emerging areas of focus with the research and related to Ontario colleges to further examine similarities and differences.
1.4.1 Rationale for the Study

In order for Ontario and Canada to further increase participation and graduate rates at a time when higher education is needed in most areas of the economy, and to maintain Canada’s prosperity as a major player in the knowledge based economy of the twenty first century, postsecondary institutions must pay greater attention to student success and retention. Within the postsecondary education environment, there has been a general trend towards strategic enrolment management to achieve these objectives. Within this area, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on recruiting students and on overall enrolment. However, within this model, less attention has been paid to helping students succeed and therefore to the retention of these students. The study compared three large urban Ontario colleges and situated the respective efforts of each of the three institutions in relation to North American and Canadian best practices. While there are various models that have studied student behaviour and early departure, I focus specifically on orientation and transition as a critical component of broader student engagement and student success practices. In my experience, the effort placed on the process of orientation and transition is often an indication of the institution’s approach to and emphasis on student engagement.

Given that there are models of student engagement that have been widely tested in the United States, are longitudinal, focus on two-year community colleges and have been applied to Canadian colleges through participation in the annual surveys and validation of the survey as a tool specifically in the Ontario context, I examined the extent to which orientation and transition practices at the three colleges align with the thematic framework of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The CCSSE survey tool focuses on five areas that include active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student – faculty
interaction and support for learners (CCSSE, 2013). This study may serve to reveal gaps or leading best practices that can be further studied or replicated at other Colleges. The study also considered the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students and emerging best practices.

The Ontario context is such that any promising practices should be shared to help the collective goal of achieving higher educational attainment for Ontario and Canada. Ontario has a substantial population with more than 47% of Canada’s total population and the overall number of students enrolled in colleges is significant (Government of Ontario, Spring 2013). Among Ontario’s colleges, the three colleges that were examined in this study represent a significant proportion of Ontario’s college students at 20% and the campuses of these three colleges are situated in six adjacent cities capturing a significant amount of Ontario’s overall population at over 52% (Government of Ontario, Spring 2013). A detailed look at the demographics of these colleges and the cities in which they are located is included in the site selection section of this study. In Ontario, research can contribute to system wide practices shared and replicated through provincial organizations such as Colleges Ontario. Any findings from Ontario, while not generalizable, may provide important insight into the broader Canadian college context.

As a practitioner in the field, while I continue to have a strong interest in helping students to have positive transitions to college and make meaningful connections with peers, my focus has shifted to helping students become more successful and thus I want to better understand what interventions are needed to help students succeed. In light of this, I approach research from a very pragmatic approach. What programs are in place? To what extent have they been successful? Are they grounded in research? Do they achieve the desired outcomes? As an orientation practitioner and student affairs professional with close to twenty years of experience in this area, I am driven by the need for constant exploration and continuous improvement.
Throughout this study, I will reflect on how the practices in place at each of the colleges are a product of the historical and political landscape in Ontario as well as the advances in the academic understanding of student success. While this study does not employ a mixed method approach, I grounded my exploration in the quantitative findings of the longitudinal CCSSE studies and I used the conclusions and recommendations of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students (Dietsche, 2007) as a further lens to examine similarities and differences. This study also examines three of the largest colleges in Ontario whose campuses are situated in six adjacent cities representing a substantial proportion of the overall Ontario population. The significant population base and total college enrolment will therefore represent an important segment of the overall Canadian landscape and will provide invaluable insight into directions needed to assist Ontario student affairs professionals make advances in student success and retention.

1.5 Problem Statement

As Ontario sets aggressive targets to increase educational attainment to 70% of its population, there is a gap that needs to be bridged in order to meet these goals (Rae, 2005). Postsecondary educational institutions will need to better meeting students’ needs and establishing supports which increase the likelihood that students will be successful. Student affairs professionals will need to work collaboratively to support their academic colleagues if progress in this important area is to be made. Finally, research on the topic of orientation and transition practices is needed to help professionals in the field design and evaluate programs or to develop student success strategies that are grounded in research.
1.5.1 Research Questions

1. What student orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?

2. To what extent are three large urban colleges utilizing comprehensive and deliberate approaches to student orientation and transition?

3. To what extent are these three colleges using student orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?

4. To what extent do these practices relate to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

1.6 Overview of Methodology

This comparative case study uses a qualitative approach in conjunction with a document analysis of each of the three institutions for the period between 2005 and 2010. In order to analyze documents and information contained within the study, I focused on a retrospective case study for the period between 2005 and 2010. This allowed for a full review of historical documentation that was recorded and reported publicly. It should be noted that in an academic environment there is often a delay in the release and publication of data until after the conclusion of the academic year. Therefore, the most recent data that were examined for the document and interview analysis reflects the 2010-2011 academic year. The period 2005 to 2010 was chosen because it was a 5 year period with a number of interesting events happening simultaneously. The ‘Rae Review’ was commissioned by the Ontario government calling for Ontario to reach a 70% postsecondary attainment rate. The Ontario government also introduced new reporting requirements for colleges under the Multi-Year Accountability Agreements (MYAA) with the
introduction of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) in 2005. It was
during this period that I worked within the Ontario college system at one college and transitioned
into my current role in 2011 at another. Finally, the data was publicly available by late 2011 and
therefore, could be analyzed. Participants were also asked in one of the standard interview
questions to share new developments that were undertaken after 2010.

Gay, Mills and Airasian state: “historical research (allows one) to systematically collect and
evaluate data to understand and interpret past events” (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006, p. 401).
The examination explores whether the efforts surrounding orientation and transition are part of a
larger student success strategy of these institutions and to what extent these practices are
deliberate and ingrained in institutional strategic planning. The retrospective case study
methodology was chosen to allow for an in depth review of documents that shed light on the
topic as well as interviews of key informants. The study utilized a qualitative format with
standard interview questions for two participants at each of three institutions being studied. The
two informants are key players that are responsible for student success strategy and the design,
planning, organization and implementation of orientation and transition programs at each of the
three colleges. The interview questions were designed to gain an understanding of the
perceptions of key informants through interviews related to the questions that form the basis of
this study. This allows for different perspectives from different informants within the institution.

1.6.1 Theoretical Framework

In order to examine the issue of orientation and transition as it relates to student success
through persistence and retention, this study examined the evolution of student development
theories as they have had a significant impact on the student affairs profession. The student
affairs profession, in turn, has had a major impact on the design and delivery of orientation and transition programs as well as other key services within the campus environment and student success more broadly. Having an understanding of these early theories and the study of student development is a precursor to understand other prominent researchers Astin (1977, 1984, 1993), Tinto (1985, 1993, 1997), Pascarella (1983), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), Kuh (1996, 2005), Dietsche (1990, 1995, 2005), and Finnie (2010) among others. Collectively, these theories and others describe the evolution of research and practice of the student affairs profession in relation to student engagement to contribute to retention and student success. In order to develop an understanding of how orientation and transition is widely understood as a major component of any modern student success strategy, an examination and understanding of the body of research is needed.

For the purpose of this study I analysed the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) as it identifies key themes that have been found to have a positive correlation to student success in an Ontario college with similar characteristics and in the same region as the three colleges that will be examined in this study (Mandarino & Mattern, 2010). This survey is an extension of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) developed in 1998 and delivered in 2000 to measure the extent to which four-year college students engage in *Known Effective Educational Practices* (NSSE, 2013). NSSE has been widely used across North America, is a longitudinal study and is grounded in many of the theories previously discussed.

In 2001, the NSSE tool was adapted to look at two-year community colleges as a means to measure similar traits within the two-year context (CCSSE, 2010). While CCSSE has been widely used on the United States, there have only been a few Canadian colleges that have used it.
With this in mind, Humber College in Toronto and the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario used the survey tool and studied it as it applied to Humber College students in order to test the applicability and validity of the survey in the Ontario context based on the unique postsecondary educational system design (Mandarino & Mattern, 2010). The Humber College study is particularly important and will be examined further on as it is a comparable college to the three within this study. The findings of the HEQCO study reinforce the validity of the tool as a predictor of student success and one that is relevant to the Ontario context. I have argued that orientation and transition is a critical component of student engagement as demonstrated through the review of the literature and the evolution of our understanding of the student affairs profession and student success. By utilizing the thematic framework of the CCSSE tool, I was able to organize the content discovered through an examination of the orientation and transition practices at each institution. The analysis provides further insight into the validity of the CCSSE tool and areas for further refinement based on the literature and, in particular, findings and recommendations applicable to the Ontario context including the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. Through the literature review, I examine the Canadian and American contexts to review the body of research and show how this tested thematic framework can be applied not only to student engagement but to the design and practice of orientation and transition programs as part of a broader student success strategy to improve student persistence and retention. I also examine any shortcomings or areas for further study not captured by the CCSSE thematic framework.

I examined the problem in a pragmatic approach that draws upon social constructivist methodology. My examination of the participant interviews, program observations and document analysis utilizes the thematic framework of the CCSSE instrument in an attempt to highlight
similarities and differences and promising practices that may inform future orientation and
transition program design. My examination considers the historic and political context in which
these programs were designed and then apply the current lens to potentially shed light on new
directions to make progress in the broad area of student success. As a participant in the field, I
have a broad understanding of the issues and look to identify patterns and trends within the
literature as well as through the qualitative interviews to identify patterns that may lead to a
broader understanding of the issue at hand. I identified promising practices that may help other
researchers and practitioners in the field of orientation and student success. All of this
examination was situated in the North American, Canadian, and Ontario contexts. I examined
historical trends, emerging trends, and comparative information between the three large urban
colleges to uncover similarities and differences. Through my own experience in the field, I
attempted to identify areas for further research, concepts and models that may be studied or
implemented.

As an attempt to control for bias, I utilized a research assistant to conduct the interviews.
As a practitioner in the field with experience at several Ontario institutions, the participants
interviewed may feel less inclined to share based on my experience or prior interactions with
them. As such, the research assistant encouraged interview participants to share information,
ideas and opinions freely. The selection and training of the research assistant is discussed in
Chapter 3 Methodology. Participants were given the opportunity to participate and withdraw at
any point during the study. In order to ensure a consistent approach to the interviews by the
research assistant, a standard questionnaire was developed and used to guide the interviews. The
interviews were recorded to ensure that my understanding of the interviews reflects the opinions
of the participants. I describe the interview process more fully in the methodology section of this proposal.

1.6.2 Scope and Limitations of the Research

The study is limited to three large urban colleges in Ontario. In order to limit the scope of the research, the study examined the period between 2005 and 2010 at each of the three institutions. 2005 was chosen as it coincides with the introduction of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act and the introduction of the Multi-Year Accountability Agreements (MYAA) (HEQCO, 2010). As a result, this study will not be able to comment on the extent to which these practices are in use or applicable at others institutions in Ontario or Canada. The study did not examine initiatives undertaken before 2005 and only referenced new efforts that were undertaken since 2010. The study was also based on qualitative interviews of three major stakeholders at each of the three colleges as well as a review of documents related to orientation and transition programs and was therefore limited to a small group of leaders within each of three institutions. As a result, the interviewees may not be aware of all aspects of orientation and transition practices in place at the three colleges being examined and may be biased based on their role and position within the institution. The participants may or may not have examined theories and models of student success and the role of orientation and transition within this area. The study did not examine the different experiences of small or mid-sized institutions and institutions outside of Ontario. Among Ontario’s largest 8 colleges, this study only examined three and as a result, the study was not be able to comment on the different experiences of students at different sized institutions or the other large Ontario colleges. The study may be replicated but cannot be generalized and the findings are not generalizable.
The study focused on reviewing documents to analyze the extent to which the approach taken by the three colleges in question was deliberate and strategic and whether or not orientation and transition was part of their broader student success strategies. The document analysis is presented in relation to the CCSSE thematic framework of active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction and support for the learner. This document analysis may miss some information that was not formally ingrained into institutional practice but is carried out by individual administrators, faculty or staff. The analysis may also not uncover informal practices that were not clearly documented and may not have uncovered all of the documents related to the topic of orientation and transition. This analysis compares orientation and transition practices to those of leading North American institutions and the CCSSE framework. The interviews and document analysis uncovered additional themes that do not relate to either the CCSSE framework or the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The differences between higher education systems throughout North America may have a large bearing on the success of various initiatives at different institutions. For example, the Ontario College and University systems have major differences that may affect the success of different initiatives. The personal characteristics of students also present a major variable that may affect the outcomes of various approaches. The distinct characteristics of Ontario’s colleges and universities may also impact the success of such initiatives. In addition to situating the colleges within the broader North American framework, the study examined the orientation and transition practices in relation to the Ontario and Canadian context as viewed through the literature in an effort to ensure applicability.

The case study utilized a qualitative approach to interview key actors in the development of strategy and execution of strategic goals. The views of the informants are limited to two
leaders at each institution and therefore other perspectives may be consistent but may also be divergent. The qualitative interviews were supplemented by a document analysis of the three institutions to gain an understanding of how orientation and transition practices were delivered, what the stated goals were, and whether there was alignment with stated institutional goals and objectives. Finally, the examination reviewed whether or not orientation and transition is part of a broader student success strategy.

1.7 Researcher Perspective

As the primary researcher, I have a bias towards the issue and a great deal of passion about the subject of student access and success. I have worked in student services in various roles for more than 15 years and have experience with orientation and transition programs for twenty years. In an attempt to limit the bias, I focused on comparing the interview content with documented goals, objectives, and strategies and then related them to the CCSSE framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students to determine alignment and key differences or omissions. I also employed a research assistant to further limit any perceived bias as discussed more fully in Chapter 3 Methodology.

I have a deep conviction that higher education institutions have an obligation to help students succeed if an offer of admission is made. I generally have serious concerns with the lack of attention paid to retention within the strategic enrolment management model employed by many institutions in Canada and North America. I have a personal belief that every student has the capacity to succeed provided that appropriate supports are made available by learning institutions and students access them. While institutions have employed extensive measures to market to and recruit students, I believe that an equal strategic and concerted effort towards success has not always been present. I have formed these opinions through my own experience
working with colleges and universities in Canada and seeing how the approach to orientation and transition differs from leading institutions in the United States and as contained within the literature.

The study attempts to shed light on potential avenues to enhance the deliberate and strategic approach to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy to positively affect retention. The examination offers promising directions that can be further pursued by the colleges involved in the study and other colleges that may have similar demographic profiles. The study also examined one major thematic framework to provide a consistent reference point between the interviews and the documents that were reviewed. While there are many theories and models to draw upon, I identified how the CCSSE survey tool and its themes have been tested over a long period of time, and have been replicated at hundreds of North American institutions including a number of Canadian colleges. In particular, I referenced the HEQCO study at Humber College in Toronto, Ontario which is a college of similar size and demographics to the three colleges examined in this study. Finally, I drew upon the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students throughout the study to account for Canadian specific content and Ontario college system design issues.

The study also compared key best practices in North America to suggest strategies that may be useful for Ontario colleges to explore. The study may provide a solid basis for the design of future research and may provide insight into quantitative studies that can be carried out to compare the three institutions with other Ontario and Canadian institutions. Further, the same interview questions and approach to the study could be replicated to look at small or mid-sized colleges or other North American subsets within the higher education setting to gain a further understanding of the differences and similarities of different colleges and universities and the
progress that each has made towards advancing the goal of higher retention and thus a more educated society.

1.7.1 Analysis of Findings and Study Credibility

The themes identified within the case study have been cross referenced in relation to the document analysis from each institution and were then compared to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework to determine the extent to which the interviewees’ perspectives are: a) consistent with the other individuals’ from the same institution, b) reflected within the documents of the institution, and, c) related to the CCSSE framework. The final component to the study is a comparative analysis and it was used to examine the three institutions in light of the aforementioned and identify differences and similarities. The interviews, observations and document analysis are all be organized and evaluated using the CCSSE thematic framework and also draw upon the Ontario and Canadian specific literature including the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.

The interviews focused on answering the four primary research questions to ascertain how the strategy lives within the institution, what aspects are ingrained into operations and how, and to what extent the institutions see this as a component of a broader student success strategy. The interviews were conducted with two individuals at each institution to determine the view of the senior student affairs administrator responsible for orientation and transition as identified by the President, and the line manager, faculty, coordinator or staff member responsible for coordinating or managing orientation and transition programs. The senior student affairs administrator was asked to identify a manager, faculty, coordinator or staff member engaged in the institution’s orientation and transition planning in order to gain insight into the front line perspective concerning orientation and transition practices in place between 2005 and 2010. In
addition to the qualitative interviews, a document analysis was conducted to review any
documentation about the orientation and transition practices in place. The analysis was compared
to leading practices found within the literature to help ascertain the degree to which orientation
and transition practices were ingrained in the institutions. The document analysis was also
performed to determine whether or not orientation and transition was a part of a larger student
success strategy at the three institutions.

The six interviews were supplemented by the document analysis of the three institutions.
The transcripts of the interviews were cross referenced with the document analysis and the
CCSSE thematic framework as well as key Ontario and Canadian literature to examine
similarities and differences that arise. This methodology examined the extent to which the
strategy is based on research, was engrained in institutional documents and was a part of the
broader student success strategy of the college. The selection of two participants with a specific
leadership role in the planning, design and delivery of orientation and transition is a deliberate
way to understand the formal practices in place at each college.

By examining the literature and the institutional strategies in place, this study looked for
trends that may be helpful for the institutions within the study and other institutions that may
benefit from the learning. The document analysis as well as a review of the original recorded
interviews were conducted by me as the primary researcher to examine the orientation and
transition programs in place at the college as described by the study participants and contained in
institutional documents. My individual bias and limitations to their personal knowledge was
controlled to an extent by conducting a document analysis to uncover statements about
orientation and transition and whether or not it was ingrained in broader student success
documentation. This approach allowed for a deep understanding of the leadership issues faced,
program design considerations, and was enriched by broadening the focus to include the
document analysis of the orientation and transition programs within the institution. All of the
interviews were conducted with individuals leading and involved in the planning and executing
of orientation and transition programs at the three colleges between 2005 and 2010.

Within the literature review, key concepts have been highlighted based on the body of
literature. The qualitative interviews were analyzed to look for key words and themes. The
document analysis also focuses on key words and themes to compare stated objectives with
written strategies. The trends from within the interviews as well as the documents reviewed were
compared to the practices in place at leading institutions from the literature and at the three
institutions within the study. The findings from the research will be useful for institutions
throughout Ontario in particular in order to shed light on the subject and to help institutions plan
to meet the goals set by the provincial government.

1.7.2 Overview of the Study and Limitations

The approach to this study is supported by best practices employed by leading researchers
and institutions. The research identified promising practices and the literature was examined to
see if these were factored into the strategies of the three colleges in the comparative study. The
literature review also identified key models of student success and - through the examination and
exploration of these models - I uncover promising aspects of orientation and transition that
should be in place at large urban colleges. The study examined the organizational understanding
of orientation and transition and situated this within the broader issue of student success. The
research approach allowed for in-depth discussions with the six administrators and cross
referenced the qualitative findings from the three institutions with key documents that were
reviewed. The document analysis further emphasized alignment or differences with the CCSSE thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.

The limited nature of the study will not permit generalization. By conducting qualitative interviews, the analysis was limited to the opinions of the individuals interviewed. The interviewees may not be aware of every practice in existence at the institution and within every classroom. In addition to this limitation, the study only examines three colleges and does not examine small and mid-sized colleges. These limitations suggest that more extensive research would be needed to attain a full picture of the Ontario college landscape. The findings of the study will be very valuable for the institutions in the study and others to begin to take a close look at orientation and transition practices.

1.8 Summary of Case Study and Approach

Chapter two focuses on a review of the literature from North America with a specific look at key Canadian studies. I demonstrate the importance of orientation and transition programs as part of a broader student success framework as identified throughout the body of research. Based on the importance of orientation and transition as part of any effort to positively affect student persistence and thus retention at a particular institution, the literature review examines the historical developments that frame contemporary discussion surrounding student success and retention. The literature review also documents the evolution of student development theory, the impact it has had on the development of the student affairs profession and the resulting study of student success. Within the broad field of student success, student engagement, the first year experience, student services models and orientation and transition are all situated as key components in the overall approach to student success in North America. The literature review identifies limitations to the study of orientation and transition programs as part of broader
student success initiatives and the relative success of these broad initiatives as evidenced through national educational attainment rates as documented among OECD nations in the annual report (OECD, 2012).

This case study places a particular emphasis on the Canadian landscape to examine the extent to which research has been undertaken and published, how it relates to the Ontario and North American context. The literature review also looks at key North American institutions and researchers to examine best practices as a means of further comparison. The literature review specifically examined the CCSSE survey tool and framework to demonstrate that this framework is a relevant tool for Ontario colleges. The CCSSE tool was used to evaluate the extent to which the three large urban colleges that are part of the study were using a strategic approach grounded in research that can be measured over time and has been tested to determine its validity in positively affecting student retention. While I made the case that this is a reasonable tool to use for the purpose of this study, I also highlight the limitations that this tool has in relation to the three institutions in question and in the Ontario context as there are numerous tools that could be chosen to conduct the analysis. To account for these limitations and the Ontario specific context, the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students is further examined and cross referenced.

Chapter three presents the research design and methodology that was used for this case study. This section further describes the qualitative approach to the study. The qualitative approach has been cross-referenced using the thematic framework of the CCSSE survey instrument to supplement the opinions expressed in an effort to ground the analysis in research and review any differences and similarities. The CCSSE thematic framework was used to organize findings and identify areas that relate to this framework as well as any findings that do not fit within it. Both of these tools were then cross referenced with institutional documents, the
literature and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The site selection represents an important aspect of this section as 3 adjacent large, Ontario colleges were chosen representing over 50% of Ontario’s population and more than 20% of the total college first year enrolment (Government of Ontario, 2013). While the findings of the study represent a significant sample, the findings are not generalizable. This chapter outlines key components of the research to assist other scholars to understand the research design and approach and to ensure that there is sufficient information to replicate the study. Potential replication of this case study approach is important as it relates well to the overarching concern that there is a lack of Canadian research on this important topic.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study from the interviews, the document analysis and groups these findings according to the CCSSE thematic framework as well as the differences that were found to account for the Canadian and Ontario context through the examination of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. This section of the study endeavours to outline the trends that emerge and identifies major themes that emerge through the interviews at each of the three institutions. All of these findings were examined in relation to the literature review and specifically the CCSSE framework as well as the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The themes and trends form a part of the subsequent conclusions drawn from the findings and may lead to further research that may be needed. Finally, chapter five focuses on the themes that arise from the research, interviews, surveys and document analysis and identifies conclusions. The conclusions draw upon the CCSSE thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students as well as other pertinent themes identified through the literature review. The conclusion section also presents questions and directions for
the development or enhancement of orientation and transition programs and models that are applicable for further research and study.
2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The central subject of this comparative case study was the orientation and transition practices in place at three large urban Ontario colleges and how those practices relate to the student success strategy at the colleges in this study between 2005 and 2010. Universities were examined to the extent that they have contributed to and inform broad concepts and theories central to the discourse on the postsecondary experience in the historical context. The descriptive historical constructs that inform the practice of orientation and transition were deemed as integral to this study or in other words, how we arrived at the design of orientation and transition programs.

Specifically, the early student development theories and the evolution of this area of study and how it informed the evolution of the practice of orientation and transition from orientation to the first year experience to a broader understanding of student engagement was central to this literature review. In particular, this historical exploration identified the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as one of the most widely excepted tools to measure student engagement among four year liberal arts universities. Other university programs, theories and studies while interesting and relevant were not viewed as central to this study. The focus of this study is on orientation and transition practices in Ontario colleges and therefore, university practices although interesting are focused on: 1) a different population and demographic profile, 2) a different institutional focus and mandate and 3) different policies, structure and processes.

The scope of this case study and the literature does not examine the assessment of the outcomes of new student Orientation in Canadian universities and colleges. Instead, this study focused on practice and strategy rather than on the assessment of outcomes. This was intentional from the onset of this study. This is an area that a number of researchers including Blair (2014)
have explored and is integral to the body of research in this field of study. I chose to have a
narrow focus for this qualitative study in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the practice
of orientation and transition and how it is linked to broader student success strategies rather than
student success outcomes. Similarly, the study and literature review did not focus on student
 persistence and retention specifically. Student persistence and retention is relevant to the focus of
the study but would broaden the focus of the study significantly.

2.1 Student Development Theory

The first year experience is a critical component of the transition to the college or
university environment for students. It sets the tone for what students can expect at the
institution, demonstrates the institution’s approach and commitment to students, and is a
significant factor in student success. This case study examines the institution’s approach to
student development and chronicles the evolution of some of the key student development
theories that have roots in psychology. These theories have had a major impact on the founding
of the student affairs and services profession and the subsequent study of student engagement
and success – including the practice of orientation and transition. Early student development
theories had a major impact on the profession and led to research that focused on student
engagement and college impact theories and models. Early orientation and transition programs
can be traced back to student development theory and the professional influence of counsellors.
This influence can be seen by examining the institution’s focus on retention as part of student
success grounded in psychology.

Student development theory was introduced as a field of study in the 1950s and 1960s as
a subset of the field of psychology. These fields remain intrinsically linked. Key concepts in
student development theory often find their roots in psychology. Findings related to this area of
study continue to be uncovered through ongoing research. As Evans, Forney and Guido-Di-Brito note: “Given the slow pace of change in higher education, it is not surprising that it took over three centuries for practitioners, theorists, and scholars to begin examination of the developmental needs of diverse students” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 3). Collectively, there are numerous theories about student development. It should be noted, however, that the ties binding these theories are minimal making it difficult to create a holistic understanding of the theoretical student development landscape. They have been developed over a period of more than four decades and there is little work that ties the various theories together to gain a full understanding of the entire student development landscape.

The study of student success emerged out of student development theories and generally focused on the pre-entry characteristics of students and the impact of the college environment on student success. The study of student success draws upon both psychology as well as sociology using a methodology referred to as the psycho-social body of research. In this case study, I will summarize some of the key theories and models in both of these fields of study to demonstrate the significance of both and the significant impact that they have had on the collective understanding of student behaviour and institutional student retention.

The body of student retention literature that exists covering the Ontario College system is quite limited. That being said, there are some interesting differences that reflect the unique characteristics of Ontario’s Colleges as a system dedicated largely to postsecondary credentialing, career preparation and vocational training. The lack of comprehensive and longitudinal research should not be viewed as a limitation but rather as an opportunity for further research into the field and a chance to uncover more depth about areas showing promising results. This literature review will provide an overview of the evolution of student development
theory. Additionally, it will present the ways in which this evolution has practically affected orientation, transition, and student engagement and success as a whole in the 21st Century.

Through this understanding, I look at how some orientation and transition programs have been designed with student development theory as foundational knowledge and a major factor contributing to the foundation of the Student Affairs profession.

2.1.1 The Foundations of Student Development Theory

Supporting students in one form or another has its roots throughout the history of the academy in North America. In Harvard in 1636, for example, the institution provided support to students in a highly paternalistic manner and the support for students was rooted in the clergy and Christian tradition (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). By 1909, Frank Parsons, an early pioneer in student success, identified that “there was a need to make a match between personal characteristics and vocational interests” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 6). It was not until the 1920s with the evolution of the university into a more secular institution, however, that they began to hire staff to directly support students. In the 1920s, the Guidance movement established the need for staff dedicated to serving students as student personnel specializing in human development (Upcraft & Moore, 1990). This evolution reflects the changing nature of the world in general and the world of work in particular: Modern career and personal counselling also has its roots in the early 1900’s with little observed change to the practice of counselling since that time.

The early 1900s also saw the rise of the disciplines of sociology and psychology and the study of human development (Schuh, Jones, Harper & Associates, 2011). These disciplines would serve as the foundation for future and current research into student development, student engagement and student success. Research and theories from Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and B.F.
Skinner became prominent in the early Twentieth Century and began to reframe the thinking around human development from being rooted in a religious moral character to a more secular focus (Upcraft & Moore, 1990). Three areas of study are included in this study and can be described as cognitive structural, typology, and psychosocial. A summary of these theories has been provided to demonstrate the breadth of research that influenced the student affairs profession and the design and implementation of services to support students.

The Student Personnel movement began in the early 20th Century. The publication *The Student Personnel Point of View* where it stated higher education’s commitment to: “the preservation, transmission and enrichment of the important elements of culture... [produced in the forms] of scholarship, research, creative imagination, and human experience” (American Council on Education, 1937, p. 67). During this period, there was a great deal of activity among various associations committed to gaining an understanding of student development. This period was followed by more formal research and the introduction of a number of key theories related to student development. Furthermore, it also saw the development of numerous organizations supporting the new field of student affairs personnel. Organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (1918), the American College Personnel Association (1924), the National Orientation Directors Association (1976) and the National Academic Advising Association (1977) were formed starting in the early 1900s. In Canada, similar organizations were formed later; the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services was formed in 1971, for example (Keeling, 2006).

Following the First and Second World Wars, colleges and universities began to open their doors to a greater proportion of society. The post-war years saw a major shift in postsecondary education from a system of the social elite towards one of those of the broader public (Trow,
Technology was changing at a rapid rate during the mid-18th Century and the industrialization of Canada and the United States was creating a greater need for an educated workforce. Entire systems of education were reformed and new branches of education were introduced to fulfill this need. This was the case with Ontario and under Education Minister, and later Premier William Davis, the College of Applied Arts and Technology system was established in Ontario in 1967 (Davis, 1965).

2.1.2 Cognitive Structural Theories

Prominent cognitive theorists contributed to the field of study through important works on cognitive-structural theory. Piaget (1952) introduced the concept of hereditary and environmental influences in intellectual development as a key factor for cognitive development. Early work was premised on a set of assumptions that individual development to adapt to an environment occurred in sequential order. This work and family of cognitive structural theories was expanded by other theorists that focused on human and student development. Perry (1968) established the theory of intellectual development; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) contributed important research on the development of self, voice and mind; King and Kitchener (1976, 1994) focused on reflective judgment; Baxter Magolda (1992) contributed research on knowing and reasoning; Kohlberg (1976) studied moral development; Gilligan (1981) researched women’s as well as adult gender development and Fowler (2000) examined faith development. While the theories sometimes held to different premises, it was clearly an important time where theorists were developing an understanding of the various stages of human and student development. Whether in stages, sequential or prompted by life events, each theory studies human behaviour in an attempt to better understand it.
2.1.3 Psychosocial Theories


The focus of these theories and studies is the individual and professional staff such as counsellors will often draw upon these theories when supporting the individual students they are supporting. The student is a group unified largely by their status as learners. Psychology and psychosocial identity theories clearly demonstrate that the modern student body is far less homogenous than what was previously thought. In order for student affairs professionals to appropriately engage
with this vast array of students, they must first account for this complexity in program design and research.

2.1.4 Typology Theories

The third family of research that I reference is built upon the foundational theories of Roy Heath’s (1964) individual type and Jung’s (1971) psychological types. Myers-Briggs (1980) also added important research in this area. Kolb (1976) examined personal learning styles while Holland (1985) looked at vocational choices. King and Baxter Magolda (2005) studied intercultural maturity and Howard Gardner (1983, 1993) examined multiple intelligences. This family of research is drawn upon for both the counselling profession and other students studying learning including many educators.

The student affairs profession – and particularly the counselling professionals at colleges and universities – draw upon the various theories and research summarized in the preceding section of this literature review when dealing with students and relate to specific aspects of student development. I have captured a brief summary of these theories to demonstrate the breadth of research and the significant influence that they have had on the professionals working at colleges and universities. The themes of isolation, involvement, departure, and transition are all studied by practitioners in the field and all play a prominent role within the field of orientation and factor into every aspect of program design and delivery.

The findings also raise an interesting question about the experiences that an individual brings to an environment and, therefore, the extent to which any theory can be generalized for a broader student body. College impact theories and models as a field of study is gaining momentum and a growing number of studies focus on mixed methodology or use qualitative inquiry to provide greater context to the field. This type of approach also allows researchers to
capture the often complex interrelationship between various aspects of student identity and the impact of environment including peers, faculty, and staff. The understanding of the individual has become more complex as populations have become less homogenous and therefore multiple theories and ways of looking at the individual are often needed to create a greater appreciation. In general, studies that look at the entire student population and attempt to generalize need to account for the broad differences among the incredibly diverse range and stage of learners at any given institution.

With a wide array of theories and research dedicated to human - and later, student – development, it is not surprising that the evolution of this field of study led to the study of student persistence, departure, and retention as a major area of inquiry in the 1970s. With a deepening understanding of the “whole student” and a broader understanding of some of the specific characteristics of sub-groups gaining popularity among educators and researchers alike, administrators and researchers sought to understand the reasons why students leave the postsecondary environment. Within the academy, the area of inquiry related to student persistence and departure is relatively new. Given the increasingly complex makeup of the student body, further research is needed to truly master the art of retaining students and supporting their persistence through to graduation.

Student development theory emerged as a means of gaining a new understanding of college and university students as they develop and led to theories of student departure, student involvement and identify, and, ultimately, the study of student persistence and retention. Success means different things to different people but finding a pathway for a student to study while going through a critical phase of development is a powerful way for society to transform lives.
2.2 College Impact Models

Nevitt Sanford (1962) contributed a major breakthrough for student development by introducing two major concepts in student development: 1) cycles of differentiation and integration, and 2) support and challenge. As noted by *The American College*, Sanford “was one of the first to ponder how students learn, grow, and develop during the college years; offer some cogent hypotheses about the kinds of collegiate environments that promote first-year student success; and examine why and how students stay in college or leave” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 10). These two concepts are often cited as the beginning of student development theory and have meaningful applications to today’s research. Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito state:

> We believe that the concepts of challenge and support provide an overall framework to guide institutions not only in helping first-year students make a successful transition to college and persist into sophomore year, but helping them achieve success in developing intellectual competence, developing interpersonal relationships, developing identity, deciding on career, maintaining personal health and wellness, considering developing civic responsibility. When we challenge them with the support they need to maximize their potential, we have an excellent basis for helping them achieve both academic and personal success. (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 11)

The concept of support and challenge has widespread implications for the study of orientation and transition as a component of student success strategies and remains as relevant today as in 1962. Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito’s statement also provides a concise framework that can be used to guide the development of any orientation and transition or student success strategy. For example, a balanced amount of challenge needs to present itself to gain and maintain a new student’s interest: Students are at a stage in their development where they may not want a parental figure yet the complex processes and systems as well as the more rigorous academic demands requires the right level of support. If either of these two elements is out of balance
students are at a greater risk of early departure. The primary aim of orientation and transition programs is to ensure that students are engaged during their early days at an institution as a precursor to developing meaningful connections to faculty, staff, and other students. Following Sanford’s early work on student development theory, a series of respected scholars further examined this field of study and explored various aspects of student development leading to the study of student departure, persistence and retention. This new family of research is often described as college impact theories and models. The most prominent school of thought that has merged for decades of research into the student persistence, retention and student success involves the study of pre-entry characteristics as well as institutional climate and the impact that the college environment has on the student.

2.2.1 Tinto: Student Departure, Social and Academic Integration

Tinto (1975) contributed a ground breaking piece of work to the body of research with the introduction of his Student Departure Theory. In his study, Tinto “delineated the various effects of the variables and began to describe the interrelationship resulting from the direct, indirect and total effects of each factor” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 30). Tinto theorized that there were a number of variables that had an effect on a student’s decision to stay in the postsecondary environment or leave early. Much of today’s research concerning student persistence and retention is built upon Tinto’s theory or builds upon this foundational research about the impact of the college environment on the outcomes of students.

Tinto’s early work was followed up by years of study on the institution and the student’s behaviour as well as the interrelationship between the two. Tinto (1993, 1997) further explored the integration of the student within the college environment from both an academic and social perspective. In his research, Tinto identified that there are distinct variables affecting a student’s
decision to stay or leave early. Among these are personal variables for the student as well as institutional factors. Tinto focuses on challenges and ability for students to adapt new environments and the resulting withdrawal from school during or after the first year or poor performance at lower than expected academic levels” (Tinto, 1997) Tinto’s contribution to the field of study is substantial: Student persistence and retention research has focused largely on exploring the variables that Tinto identified as well as the unique differences that the different types of postsecondary institutions exhibit and examines institutional commitment as a key factor needed to understand student persistence. As the student variables evolve, colleges and universities have adapted.

2.2.2 Astin: Involvement and Input-environment-output Astin (1977) further contributed important research shedding light onto student engagement through his *Involvement Theory*. In his later work, Astin describes inputs-environment-outcomes (I-E-O) and stresses the importance of the incoming characteristics of the student on their ultimate success. Student Involvement theory posits that student success is a function of who students were before they entered college and what happened to them after they enrolled (Astin, 1977). This work continues to be the subject of considerable research today and subsequent research has built upon his extensive work. It has become clear to many researchers that a variety of tactics must be employed simultaneously in order to ensure student success at an institution. Greater integration and involvement increases the likelihood of maintaining a student and supporting their studies. Student engagement in various and effective forms affects the impact of the college environment on student success. The variables making up the inputs are often seen as significant predictors of student success: student motivation, attitude, and social characteristics all play major roles in how a student transitions to a new learning environment.
This is an area that will be explored further within this study.

2.2.3 Evolution of College Impact Theories and Models

Both Tinto and Astin factor in data from various sources in an attempt to understand the attributes of students when they enter college as well as the impact the college environment has upon the student. Both examine extensive data sets from longitudinal studies whose findings have been validated by subsequent researchers. According to Finnie, “these two models both posit that persistence decisions are affected by both pre-entry characteristics and post-entry experiences, but differ in what they include in the latter and their interpretation of some of the related effects” (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, Underrepresented Groups in Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Evidence form the Youth in Transtion Survey, 2011, p. 124). The importance of these theories cannot be underestimated. To put the retention issue into perspective consider the following statement: “Approximately 45 percent of students enrolled in two-year colleges depart during their first year, and approximately one out of every fourth student departs from a four year college or university (according to the American College Testing Program, 2001)” (Braxton, Hirschy, & and McClendon, 2004, p. 1). Students bring characteristics with them to a postsecondary environment and experience the new environment based on their interactions with staff, faculty, and other students (Tinto, 1993).

The orientation and transition process has been heavily influenced by both student development theory and also the aforementioned student persistence research. Orientation and transition programs are often based on assisting a new student make meaningful connections at the institution, with faculty, staff, and peers. Well-developed programs also use incoming freshman surveys to enhance their ability to understand, connect with, and support new students as they make the adjustment and transition to the new college or university environment.
Orientation programs factor in age and stage, residential and commuter experiences, academic preparation, and social integration as well as an overall welcome to the institution.

Outsiders may see orientation as an event, but professionals working within the field are quick to point out that orientation and transition is rather a process. As Chickering and Schlossberg note: “Entering college involves letting go of the way you were and creating a new identity. If you are coming from high school you may feel as if you are in limbo – no longer a high school student, but not fully a college student; no longer a child, but not yet an adult; no longer dependent on parents, but clearly not independent of them” (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002, p. 5). This view of student development is influential in program design, builds upon entering characteristics of students and typically informs efforts to welcome new students to the college environment. Well-designed orientation programs are comprised of a number of stages which combined are all focused on ensuring the successful transition of as many students as possible. Orientation and transition programs should account for the student life cycle at various stages from conversion to confirmation and admission to the start of classes and into the first semester, first year and beyond.

Orientation and transition programs draw upon student development theory and build upon Astin and Tinto’s work regarding involvement and institutional commitment. The influence of these theories becomes evident when you examine the themes that orientation and transition programs attempt to address. Understanding the professionals working within the institution further underscores the important influence the student affairs profession has had on the structuring of services and the design of activities and programs to support students. Counselling in particular draws upon student development theory and the field of psychology and needs to be factored into any research that examines the impact of the college environment. Some of the
other student affairs professions, and particularly senior administrators in this area, likely approach design and delivery of services with a broader perspective and understanding that includes the sociology of the environment and the impact of people within the environment including peers, faculty and staff.

2.2.4 Pascarella and Terenzini

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) continue to explore Tinto and Astin’s theories and further expand the field of study with a longitudinal approach to their research. They state: “negative interactions and experiences tend to reduce integration, to distance the individual from the academic and social communities of the institution, promoting the individual’s marginality and ultimately, withdrawal” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 53). Some high school students or mature students re-entering school after some delay may have a whole set of experiences that they are drawing upon whether positive or negative that affect their perception about the college environment. In fact, identity development theories likely have a major bearing on individual perceptions of the new college environment. Some students may have had negative secondary school experiences and might evoke that experience as they encounter and evaluate their new environment. Bad experiences can quickly reignite feelings of isolation and disappointment thus prematurely affecting students’ perception of their new educational environment before they really experience all that it has to offer. Tinto’s research reinforces the role that student engagement plays in determining the success of students and the importance of strong faculty, staff and peer interactions during the orientation and transition process.

Themes of social isolation, involvement, peer support and institutional commitment are explored by Astin (1984, 1993), Tinto (1993, 1997) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) among others. The one major caution is that not all institutions are equal: Ontario colleges, for example,
place a greater emphasis on career preparation while many of the colleges and universities that are typically the subject of research focuses on a liberal arts education at the undergraduate level. The specific Ontario context is examined further and suggests a few important differences for colleges to consider.

**2.3 Student Engagement and the First Year Experience**

College impact models opened the door for an in depth look at student engagement and the student experience. Upcraft and Gardner (1989) examined the freshman experience and later Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot (2005) focused on the first year experience as a critical element of student engagement. Gardner identified some of the reasons that institutions have changed. He states: “the decline in traditional aged students, increased competition among colleges and universities, poor quality of applicants, federal mandates for recruiting underrepresented groups, changing demographics and a commitment to improve quality” were factors contributing to the changing nature of colleges and universities (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 29).

Colleges and universities no longer have homogenous student bodies. There is a breadth of student experiences within the student body and responding to the various aspects of student life is becoming more complex and therefore, requires a more personalized approach.

As was made clear by Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot, while theories of persistence overall vary in the details, they all hold the same central premise:

…if institutions are to challenge and support first-year students in their academic success, they must focus on both the characteristics and experiences of their students prior to college, as well as their experiences both inside and outside the classroom once they are enrolled and how these variables interrelate. (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 31) This basic premise is grounded in the theory that Sanford introduced in 1962. Challenging while also supporting students academically remains the central ethos of student persistence research and exhibits the clear influence that Stanford’s research had on the field. Challenge relates to how difficult a program of study is for the student, while support refers to the elements that are in place to assist the student.
The extent to which a student experiences challenge continues to be a major factor contributing to student success. Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot state: “There is substantial evidence that the most powerful predictor of persistence into the sophomore year is the first-year student’s prior academic achievement, including high school grades” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 33). In other words, how well the student is prepared for college or university continues to play a key role in determining whether the student persists. Students that are less prepared are more likely to withdraw while students that are better prepared tend to continue on through to graduation (Colleges Ontario, 2011). This can be accounted for in the design of orientation and transition programs. Many programs have study skill workshops, communications and math exercises, introduction to college life seminars and remediation built into their programs. The creation of orientation and transition programs have always been the heavily influenced by counselling professionals. In turn, these counsellors are often heavily influenced by their education in psychology – and student development theory in particular. Orientation and transition programs have further evolved to account for college impact models and a more collective approach to the design of programs and services that broadens participation in the orientation process to other professionals within the institution. This is particularly true of U.S. institutions where these elements of orientation and transition are common practice whereas in Canada, many institutions still treat orientation as more of an event than a process leading to more successful student transition.

Both what a student brings with them to an institution and what the campus is capable of offering to support the student are key elements of an effective retention strategy. Post-secondary educational institutions have a responsibility to react to the needs of students to effectively adapt and integrate them into a culture of learning. Tinto states: “Effective retention programs are
committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members” (Tinto, Principles of Effective Retention, 1993).

Other variables are identified by Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot:

First-year grade point average, academic major field, enrolment status: full or part-time, quality of student effort, interactions with faculty, interpersonal interactions, participation in extra-curricular activities, work, student satisfaction, alcohol abuse, participation in clubs and student groups, campus climate, financial aid, participation in intercollegiate athletics, intentional institutional interventions, the classroom, first-year seminars, orientation, living arrangements, academic advising, service-learning, supplemental instruction, developmental education, other student support services, and intervention combination. (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005)

Collectively, these variables need to be addressed in order to make a meaningful impact on retention. Too often it is the case that efforts are not coordinated, do not have appropriate measurement and evaluation, or are carried out in isolation by various groups on campus.

While the field of psychology has historically had a dominant role in the design of orientation and transition programs, new influences are now beginning to shape the character of these programs. The field has broadened to include other professionals in the planning and design of programs that account for the college impact and institutional commitment to students. Student development is an almost universally lauded theory and approach. However, Parker (1974) cautioned that it was not without challenges. Specifically, he warned that by being vague and lacking academic rigor, the work of student affairs professionals could be reduced to meaningless catchphrases (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). One such criticism can be attributed to the professional influence of counselling and the resistance to share personal data for privacy reasons that has plagued some institutions limiting the ability to study the impact of interventions. The focus on the individual’s transition as opposed to a focus on the college environment and the impact that it has on the student can prevent the collection of meaningful
data sets that can shed light onto student behaviour. Historically, one of the major criticisms of orientation and transition programs has been the inability to link specific interventions with measurable outcomes as well as a correlated impact on retention. Defenders note that there is no “magic bullet” and that a comprehensive approach is needed with very few institutions reaching that advanced state. There is a significant push throughout North America to capture more data regarding campus interventions and student behaviour tied to outreach. The evaluation and assessment of campus support programs will continue to gain momentum. Some U.S. universities reach very high levels of retention through a coordinated and comprehensive approach and understanding of the various facets of student development as well as a well-articulated institutional commitment to student success. Coordinated and comprehensive approaches become increasingly critical in the Ontario college environment that tackles the need to support underprepared learners.

“Retention efforts may sometimes be directed toward addressing the non-academic life of the student. Family problems, health concerns, and financial limitations all have important impacts on student retention. However, with the creative use of institutional resources, these challenges to retention might be addressed” (Keeling, 2006, p. 71). This line of reasoning suggests that the institutional resources can be focused on student development and that focusing on the individual rather than the institution may be the key to greater individual success and therefore overall increases in retention. The impact of the college environment cannot be underestimated and attention is needed within planning and design to account for the individual characteristics of students and how they relate and adapt to this new environment. A deep understanding of the individual characteristics of the student is needed as a first critical step to demonstrate institutional commitment to them. This institutional commitment in turn affects
organizational structures, resources, activities, and programs that collectively make up the environment that the student experiences. This experience will have a significant impact on student persistence and student success as measured by retention.

2.3.1 Orientation and Transition as a Professional Practice

The early Twentieth Century saw the development of the social sciences and numerous cognitive theories and theorists. Some of these theories focused on human development and this in turn led to the development of specific theories related to student development. During this same period, the practice of orientation and transition was becoming more commonplace in North American institutions. In 1972, Tomorrow’s Higher Education Project established that: “the student affairs profession’s commitment to student development – the theories of human development applied to postsecondary education setting – as a guiding theory, and the continued attempt to ensure that the development of the whole student was an institutional priority” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 6). Numerous professional associations were formed and collectively the focus on student development was firmly entrenched in the American educational system. The Ontario post-secondary education landscape changed dramatically in the late 1960s; in this period, the college system was established in the province as were even more universities. The American approach to Student Affairs was adopted and a number of prominent American faculty members were recruited to Ontario colleges and universities to help establish the profession in Canada – particularly the counselling component of student affairs.

In addition to the research that was being undertaken at many institutions, informal gatherings of student affairs professionals were becoming commonplace. In 1968, the Hazel foundation “encouraged colleges and universities to assume the responsibility for the human development of their students” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 5). Guidance
counselling for students was also becoming commonplace. This was in response to a widening range of career and educational options as highlighted in the ‘Student Personnel Point of View’ (American Council on Education, 1937).

Research into the various student development theories was underway in the mid-1960s and the counselling function was now well established as a major component of the student affairs profession. Within counselling, new areas of focus were being formed to assist the diverse student body that was entering into the academy as a result of the expansion of postsecondary education into broader society. The informal gatherings of student affairs professionals would soon make way for new formalized groups and professional associations. One such group dedicated solely to the practice and study of orientation and transition, the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA), was formed in 1976 (NODA, 2010).

Formally chartered in 1976, The National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) was started to “create a community of practice that defines and enriches the fields of orientation, transition, and retention” (National Orientation Directors Association, 2011). This association brought together students, professional staff, and student affairs administrators to share best practices within the field of orientation and transition. In addition, graduate level students play an important role in the organization contributing to the overall understanding of the theory and practice of orientation. This association continues to play an important role in shaping the understanding of orientation and transition and its significance within student success models. Mullendore and Banahan state:

Orientation is about new beginnings for first-year students, their families, and the institution. It can be the defining moment in the transition to college for the student (and family) – a time in which basic habits are formed that influence students’ academic success and personal growth – and marks the beginning of the new educational experience. (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005, p. 391)
Orientation and transition programs allow the student to begin to experience the new campus environment, meet new friends and begin to make professional networks with faculty and other students. “Orientation can be defined as a collaborative institutional effort to enhance student success by assisting students and their families in the transition to the new college environment” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 393). This reinforced early studies that found that many students made their decision to stay or leave college or university within the first several weeks of the first semester. It recognized that the university or college environment was much different than the high school one and for mature learners re-entering the education system it was dramatically different.

Orientation and transition picked up on some of the major student development theories of human and student development, challenge, and support (Sanford, 1962), social isolation (Tinto, 1975), involvement (Astin, 1984), and academic integration (Tinto, 1993). These influences can be seen throughout the design of orientation and transition programs and within the research that NODA sponsors or initiates. Tinto asserts that the feeling of isolation amongst new students is a major hurdle for academic success. A student’s ability or inability to develop deep connections with their institution has deep ramifications on their success as students: Where the students who integrated with their environments were more likely to persist, those students that experienced loneliness and a sense of isolation were similarly predisposed to withdrawal. (Tinto, 1993) The early days within a new learning environment is a critical time for students to either adapt to or reject a particular campus environment.

The decision to leave college or university is heavily influenced by the early days of the transition to the new environment. This is the major reason why so many institutions invested so heavily in the orientation and transition process and programs. Behind the practice of orientation
and transition is the idea that if students are acclimated to a new environment through a well-supported and organized program, the effects of social isolation can be mitigated and that retention can be improved. Orientation programs generally aim to welcome new students, provide information about norms and expectations, and introduce new students to one another as well as senior students, faculty, and staff.

With this in mind, orientation and transition programs use many of the student development theories to inform the design of orientation programs. NODA for example, follows the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education 2006 as a guide for orientation programs. Their mission is:

- Facilitating the transition of new students into the institution,
- Preparing students for the institution’s educational opportunities and student responsibilities, and
- Initiating the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of the institution (NODA, 2010, p. 5).

You can see references to Tinto, Astin, Chickering and others within these standards. To facilitate the development of its members, NODA holds annual regional and national conferences to share best practices and present research findings and emerging practices for the campus as a whole and the sub-populations on campus such as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered communities that mirror prominent identity development theories. Another key aspect of NODA is to promote the use of standardized surveys in the institutional framework to promote benchmarking across institutions.

Several tools are used such as the First-Year Initiative (FYI) of Educational Benchmarking, the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and the National
Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for four-year colleges and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) for two-year community college in addition to custom institutional surveys. NODA also publishes the Journal of College Orientation and Transition as well as the Orientation Planning Manual (NODA, 2010). Both of these publications encourage members to research and share findings with their peers. The publications are peer reviewed by an editorial board and endeavour to add to the knowledge of orientation and transition best practices as evidenced by research.

While amount of participation required for orientation programs at various campuses has varied from suggested to mandatory, residential to commuter, academic to social, each program focuses on some of the key areas of research within student development theory such as connectedness, integration, social isolation, identity development, key messaging and institutional welcome and commitment. NODA maintains that each orientation and transition program should “emphasize the importance of anticipatory socialization – a process described as making the strange familiar for newcomers and helping students become acclimated to the expectations and demands of their new environment” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 322). NODA also describes an ethic of care and an ethic of membership in its planning manual. These principles convey that the institution cares about the student and that the student is a member and not a customer of the institution (NODA, 2010). “The ethics of care and membership also signify that the college or university provides resources for the intellectual, social, interpersonal, physical, and spiritual well-being of each student. Themes of connecting and belonging should permeate the orientation program…” (NODA, 2010, p. 7). The existence and overall attendance of NODA conferences exhibits the fact that there is a growing belief in the importance of orientation and transition amongst student success professionals.
While it is certainly true that NODA commands a large and growing membership, a relatively small percentage of those in attendance represent Canadian institutions. Some of the largest Canadian universities as well as some of the Canadian leaders in student engagement do, however, attend. At the same time, few Canadian colleges attend and those that do attend or hold personal memberships have only been doing so sporadically for the past five years or so. Similar to their peers in the United States, Canadian student success professionals have created several organizations dedicated to student services. However, there is no Canadian organization dedicated solely to the practice of orientation and transition similar to NODA. Within the Colleges Ontario structure, this area of focus continues to be underdeveloped and inconsistent.

This lack of unification amongst orientation professionals in Canada is a major reason why Canadian orientation programs are less defined and advanced, tend to have missing elements, and have such a high degree of variation between each campus. In the U.S., there is normally an Orientation Director or Coordinator, a graduate assistant, a student orientation staff and an office within student or academic affairs to lead campus-wide orientation and transition programs. This is commonplace in large and small institutions within the U.S. In Ontario by contrast, only some institutions have a staff member dedicated to orientation, few are members of NODA and even fewer host graduate assistants that focus on orientation. The credential for American student affairs personnel is normally a Master’s degree in the specific field of education or student affairs while in Ontario this is only now becoming more commonplace and the majority of student services staff do not require a specific credential to work in the field. Colleges Ontario has a vast web of associations and networks for professional staff but does not have a group for student life or orientation practitioners specifically. The positions described above are also uncommon in Ontario colleges and only some Canadian universities have similar
positions in a full-time capacity. Rather, in many cases, this role is a subset of a larger role within the institution.

The narrow focus on orientation and transition is both resource-intensive and encompassing of entire institutions. The approach adopted by many U.S. schools can be described as follows:

Some of our key constituencies are faculty members, Student Affairs administrators, Academic Support Services such as admissions and testing staff, and building service managers. In the programs with which we work, no fewer than 300 people are involved on each of our 35 annual orientation dates. (NODA, 2010, p. 9)

This demonstrates an enormous institutional commitment to one aspect of the student experience, albeit a critical one. This narrow focus may be one reason why, in the past ten years, a renewed focus has expanded to include the first year experience.

Another reason for the expanded focus beyond orientation programs delivered in the first weeks of class may come from a lack of conclusive results. Despite the practice and implementation of orientation and transition programs throughout the U.S. and parts of Canada for nearly a hundred years, researchers have challenges isolating its effect on retention. In many cases, data concerning attendance at orientation and transition programs is very limited. This narrow focus on orientation and transition, the lack of concrete research linking orientation to retention, and the resource intensity of the orientation and transition movement, while very important, may help to explain the broadening of the focus to include the entire First Year Experience. Similarly, the importance of college impact models and theories lend credibility to the focus on the First Year Experience. Within the First Year Experience, orientation and transition programs must play a prominent role if this focus is going to be successful at positively impacting student success. While the focus of orientation and transition programs has shifted towards the entire first year experience, many practitioners are turning their attention to the
simple question – what comes next? It is this important question that leads to a more comprehensive, sustained, and strategic approach by the institution to plan the students’ entire first year experience in a holistic manner thereby improving student success and not just the orientation and transition experience.

2.3.2 The First Year Experience

As more research on student development, student departure, student persistence, and student engagement became available throughout the 1970, 1980 and 1990s, some student affairs professionals saw the need to expand the orientation, transition, and retention focus to account for the whole first year experience. In 1981, the National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was formed with a mission “to collect and disseminate information about the first college year and other significant student transitions” (National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2011). This development reflected the growing interest in the role of the institution in student persistence amongst student affairs professionals.

Further differentiating NODA and the National Resource Centre is their disparate focuses: while NODA is concentrated on practice, the National Resource Centre holds research as its primary focus. The National Resource Centre also has faculty playing a more active and central role while NODA is made up of more Student Affairs professionals and graduate students that engage faculty at the campus. The two organizations both play an important role today. In my view, once an institution masters the orientation and transition programs on campus, it is a natural next step to focus on the entire first year experience. Many of the Student Affairs professionals are members of both organizations and the broadened First Year Experience focus with the depth of understanding gained through NODA ensures that there is a greater
appreciation of the significance of the transition to a new postsecondary environment and how successful transitions can support students becoming acclimated to campus. Collectively, through the late Twentieth Century, the student affairs profession was making strides towards a better understanding of the evolving needs of students and the dynamics of the campus environment but is still experiencing major challenges to positively affect retention of students.

Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot (2005) has written extensively about the first year experience and Kuh (2005) focuses on key aspects of student engagement as well as other researchers in these two areas.

In 2002, the Association of American Colleges and Universities released a report entitled Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College. The report “called for improvements in the quality of student learning and challenged higher education to provide a practical liberal education that would prepare students for life, work, and civic participation in an increasingly complex world. (Keeling, 2006, p. 1)

Upon its release, the report by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) noted that: “the quality of educational experience and outcomes advocated in Greater Expectations would require the broad participation, contributions, and commitment of all campus educators – notably including student affairs professionals – and that the integration of learning must embrace out-of-classroom experiences as well as all aspects of the formal academic curriculum” (Keeling, 2006, p. 1).

The Greater Expectations report generated a period of intense reflection amongst the various associations dedicated to the different facets of the student affairs professions who came together to develop Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience in 2002 – principally crafted by NASPA and the ACPA. “Learning Reconsidered has put academic learning and student development processes together in a format that requires all the resources of the academy to function together in an integrated manner on behalf of students” (Keeling, 2006,
While this concept seems logical, and many outsiders would wonder why such a simple statement needs to be made, insiders quickly realize the power of this concept. The academy has traditionally been largely made up of independent researchers that lecture and provide service to the institution and community in exchange for freedom to continue research into an area of inquiry. That is, in many institutions, teaching is secondary at best and penance at worst. This has resulted in a system characterized by silos of activity rather than cooperation and coordination among the various stakeholders. This paper, therefore, suggests that learning not only happens in the lecture hall or classroom but in the hallways, cafeterias, gymnasiums, residence halls, and student centres. If one makes the leap to this assertion, it calls for a dramatically more complex and coordinated approach to supporting students. It broadens the focus to the entire student experience as holistic learners and suggests that students not only need to prepare for class but also for the academic or institutional environment. The early work of Tinto, Astin, and others is resurfaced within this new focus on the entire student experience and the central importance of college impact models and theories compared to the more narrow view of student and identity development theories.

While the call for a better educational experience is grounded in and around the student, it should be observed that this report came at a time when institutional competition and enrollment management was becoming main stream in the U.S. and penetrating the Canadian perspective as well. As Gardner notes: “…reasons for change in institutional interaction with students include: decline in traditional aged students, increased competition among colleges and universities, poor quality of applicants, federal mandates for recruiting underrepresented groups, changing demographics and a commitment to improve quality” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 29). For many institutions, improving quality of the educational experience was necessary to
remain competitive and recruit the required number of students to continue to manage and expand the institution. Whether for business reasons or for the wellbeing of students, the focus on the first year experience was welcomed –particularly for Student Affairs professionals that typically advocate such a collaborative approach. As Kellogg stated in 1999: “Given our current understanding of learning, collaboration between faculty and student affairs educators is not simply an intelligent option; it is a core requirement of desired student learning outcomes” (Keeling, 2006, p. 7). Student Affairs professionals’ roles in support of academic success as well as their training generally ensures that these individuals are well positioned to encourage and work towards collaboration within the institution. Therefore, the expanded focus on the first year experience represents a deeper understanding that academic preparedness, attributes of entering students, the campus environment, student engagement and student effort all play an important role in collectively defining the student experience and, in turn, contributes to whether or not a student persists.

The institution’s approach to these aforementioned factors is critical to the success of both the institution and the students that it admits. The body of research throughout the 1980s and 1990s as well as the increasing focus on the retention of students likely contributed to this expanded focus. Gardner (2005) examines the significance of the freshman experience and led the way for the focus on the first year experience. As Uppcraft, Gardner and Barefoot note:

Creating this kind of campus environment is not an easy task, because it involves a whole array of interrelated and integrated efforts on the part of all the various constituents of the institution: the leadership, the faculty, student affairs professionals, administrative staff, and, perhaps most important, first year students themselves. (Uppcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 121)

Barefoot also provides clear evidence of a paradigm shift in the way campuses were understood by institutions. She notes that the American Council on Education survey revealed a
dramatic increase in the interest in the first year experience: where only a third of institutions were taking steps to improve the first year experience in 1987, more than 80% of institutions were doing so by 1995 (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 47). This change is taking place at many campuses across North America: Senior administrators are becoming more aware than ever that the entire campus experience is important and that isolating components may miss critical aspects of the student experience or may only affect some students. “It is more important than ever before to understand and deliver the essential first-year experience for students. This experience would not be a specific template or a listing of quick fixes but a set of broad constructs that could be used as a yard stick against which to measure current or intended practices” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 63). Several institutions are rising to the challenge and re-envisioning the campus experience. Still a broader movement towards fully understanding the first year experience will be needed to truly foster student persistence and therefore, improve retention.

In an effort to improve student satisfaction, many Ontario colleges began to look more closely at the entire student experience. Many institutions responded to Key Performance Indicator (KPI) surveys that reflected this new focus on the student experience. KPI surveys were introduced as a way to measure student satisfaction by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) in 1998. While there are some flaws with the survey tool, it was clearly a driver in ensuring that institutions paid more attention to the perceptions of its students and the student experience. The surveys made it clear that attention needed to be paid to students’ perception of services, facilities, and the broader learning experience. More importantly, there are several questions that encourage institutions to consider the relationships that students have with faculty and staff. The Ontario government added an additional tool in 2005 called the Multi-
year Accountability Agreement (MYAA) in an effort to increase reporting and tracking of vital information meant to facilitate greater retention and student success in Ontario colleges and universities. The Ontario government’s attempt to focus college efforts around strategies that address the entire student experience is consistent with much of the research surrounding college impact models. While the Ontario data may have challenges, the data instruments help to focus the institution’s efforts to improve the student experience. The literature demonstrates that a focus on student engagement and the student experience is related to improved student success. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) further examine what factors are present in institutions that have better than average student success results based on institution type. Kuh examines which types of relationships are needed between students and faculty in order to support student success. He notes in particular that campuses that emphasize academic challenging curriculum as well as active, collaborative, and diverse learning strategies are rewarded with a greater degree of student retention and success (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). The new global economy that shapes the working world of Western society predicates the need for an education focused on collaboration, problem solving, and group work. Thus, the factors emphasized by Kuh are necessary not only to ensure the success of students in the postsecondary environment, but also in their later careers. The homogenous college or university settings of the 1950s would not adequately prepare students for the diverse demands of the modern workplace. Beautiful campuses, good facilities, and strong faculty are only part of the contemporary campus: The quality of relationships, time outside of class, activities, and a diverse range of services for all types of learners are all required to ensure a holistic student experience. This is a further reason why the student experience needed to expand to encompass more elements of student life. In many cases, students would not experience all aspects of campus life through orientation and
transition programs. In fact, the range of services offered on campuses today makes it increasingly difficult to cover in condensed orientation programs. Some services are designed to support co-curricular or extra-curricular life or are aimed at helping students as they encounter challenges later within the semester. The diverse classroom and campus environment demands greater integration and, at the same time, poses greater challenges for effective connectedness given the broad range of social issues and social identity that today’s students encounter and form.

While this understanding of the first year experience is expanding and more institutions are adopting a more comprehensive approach to the student experience, there is still a need for a better understanding of the approaches needed to improve retention and acclimatize students to the campus environment. Individual institutional efforts need to expand to multi-institutional and system-based approaches to make any kind of meaningful breakthrough. Furthermore, much in the way of longitudinal and multi-institutional research is also still required (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 63). An understanding of the essential features of an effective first year experience will only be developed with a commitment amongst education professionals to both evaluate the impact that their efforts have on student retention and to share those findings within their community of peers. While it is vital that student success be understood as a holistic process, education professionals should exercise caution to ensure that the impact of individual activities, programs, or services is measurable in order to identify best practices in student success. Further isolating for individual differences based on institutional characteristics is also important. Replicating studies at various institutions, sharing survey instruments, and testing theories at various types of institutions is still necessary. Some institutions – particularly those in Canada and Ontario – do not participate in or conduct enough research at the institution; fewer
still use well known longitudinal survey tools for benchmarking and comparison to other institutions with similar characteristics. For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is only used by a limited number of Canadian universities and its sister tool, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), is used by even fewer colleges. The adoption of a common framework, common tools, and the use of benchmarking should be considered as a means to enhance the overall understanding of what institutional practices are most effective at each type of campus.

2.3.3 Student Engagement and the Campus Environment

As previously discussed, a holistic approach is necessary in order to achieve greater levels of student persistence. One critical element of this equation is student engagement through which students can be encouraged to “buy in” to their experience and participate in environments which encourage persistence. Tinto (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), Kuh (2005), and in Canada, Dietsche (2005) and McMurray (2009) are among the many researchers that have explored the factors influencing student engagement. This focus paved the way for studies that examined the ways in which an institution engages with a student and the effort that a student puts into their own engagement within the campus environment. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is used in many American colleges and universities as a longitudinal research tool to examine student behaviour on campus and to measure the extent to which the institution is using known best practices to create a campus environment conducive to learning in a supportive setting that fosters involvement by the student within the institution. The NSSE tool is longitudinal, is used by hundreds of universities and has been researched extensively by fouryear liberal arts universities in Canada and the United States.
Many Canadian universities have begun to use the tool in an effort to benchmark their campus against other leading institutions. The sister tool, the Community College Survey for Student Engagement (CCSSE) has only been used by a few Canadian colleges including Nova Scotia Community College and Humber College. Yet both of these tools have extensive benchmarking data and numerous studies in Canada and the U.S. have tested their validity including a 2010HEQCO study in Ontario (Mandarino & Mattern, 2010). The CCSSE is one tool that, if adopted, could provide Ontario’s colleges with much needed benchmarking as well as a framework for the design of student success programs. The tool is particularly relevant to broad student engagement efforts but it also has a supplemental survey that is used specifically to measure orientation and transition efforts. The efficacy of the CCSSE tool would be increased if CCSSE is used in conjunction with the findings and recommendations from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students and is explored in section 2.4 of the literature review.

Student engagement plays an important role in supporting students and encouraging persistence and retention. First year experience programs are used extensively in the United States and are becoming more common and the approach more deliberate within Ontario’s colleges and universities. In the United States, there are several associations dedicated solely to this purpose including the National Orientation Directors Association and the Policy Centre on the First Year of College. The orientation and transition process is a critical component of first year experience programs and, in turn, the overall approach and commitment to deliberate student engagement. Orientation and transition are aimed at ensuring that students first become acclimated to the new campus environment and subsequently thrive in it. In Canada, institutions can learn from the U.S. and other international examples to foster a more conducive environment for student success and address some of the system design issues that are more relevant in
Ontario.

Orientation is the first opportunity for a student to be exposed to the institutional culture and its expectations. Ontario’s colleges have an opportunity to significantly increase the level of student engagement and therefore, students’ connectedness to the institution. Colleges have traditionally been viewed as “commuter” institutions where students come to class and leave. Yet, much of the North American research expresses the importance of the existence of a “campus community” for student persistence. Seifert, Pascarella, and Blaich (2010) for example conducted a major study that reinforced that the main elements identified within the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) does in fact have a positive correlation with student persistence (Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010). NSSE has been widely studied with similar results reported in numerous studies that looked at its efficacy. Similarly, the HEQCO study has comparable results for colleges (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010). In other words, the environment, campus supports, student-faculty and student-peer interactions, and institutional commitment all matter. A 2010 survey conducted at one Ontario college identified that the majority of students wanted to get more involved and that those students that were already involved were more likely to be satisfied with their college experience (George Brown College, 2010). This research is also supported by employers: A recent Colleges Ontario report shared the thoughts of one such employer: They felt that the social aspect of college life was as important as the hard skills taught in the classroom and that “a college program should be “one-third individual course work, one-third group work, and one-third extracurricular” (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 46). The employer recognized the importance of extracurricular involvement and student engagement in developing the whole student in order to prepare the student for the world of work. Interpersonal relationships, team interaction, and public speaking can often be
strengthened through these activities. Designing a curriculum with specific outcomes that are aligned with the academic goals of a program can have a positive impact for the student and contribute to student persistence.

While the type of student engagement may be different for college students than for those attending a liberal arts institution, a greater emphasis on engaging the student in Ontario’s colleges will likely have a similarly positive impact on student persistence. Attention to the specific design of student engagement activities is essential. For example, Dietsche suggests that career-relevant activities would be more suitable for Ontario’s colleges than some extracurricular activities (Dietsche, 2005). In particular, activities that reinforce career clarity and relate directly to the vocational outcomes of career programs will likely be the most effective ways to engage students in Ontario and abroad. Likewise, where students have indicated that they are uncertain of what program to choose, efforts should be focused on helping students to explore career and program options based on the Dietsche findings.

Tinto reinforces the need for student interaction stressing “frequent and rewarding contact between faculty, staff and students in a variety of settings both inside and outside the formal confines of the classroom [supports student retention]” (Tinto, Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition, 1993, p. 148). In the context of Ontario, contact with faculty should be directly related to the chosen career and expose students to career relevant information and experiences. Further research is needed to identify the best types of activities suited for Ontario’s college students and align with the college goal of vocational preparation and skills development. Nonetheless, helping students make a more meaningful connection to the institution can only serve to increase student persistence and better prepare students for the world of work.
2.4 The Canadian and Ontario Context

Canada and Ontario are leaders in providing access to postsecondary education. The 2010 OECD data reveals that half of Canadians aged 25-64 have a post-secondary education. Even more impressive is Ontario’s level of educational attainment which sits at 62% (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 19). Such levels of educational attainment are necessary in Ontario, Miner identifies that 70% of all of Ontario’s jobs will require some form of postsecondary education by 2010 (Miner, 2010). With the Ontario government’s stated objective of increasing postsecondary participation rates to 70%, Ontario will need to retain more students and ensure that the climate is right for students to persist. Drea notes that Ontario’s lower average grades contribute to the province’s 43% attrition rate (Drea, 2004). If Ontario is able to reach the 70% goal, there is a gap of between 8% for participation and 27% for attrition depending on the calculation used and the study referenced. In order to meet these demands, Ontario’s colleges will need to play a vital role in both recruiting more students by providing greater access to college and ensuring more students persist through to graduation.

Many Ontarians who do not pursue post-secondary education have done so because they face barriers and challenges to accessing and succeeding in college or university. To increase the province’s education levels, some, if not all, of the gains will have to come from these underrepresented groups. This requires institutions to support students in overcoming the challenges that would otherwise prevent them from completing postsecondary education. (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 8)

Increasingly, colleges will need to focus in on providing services and supports to students at-risk of not graduating as well as the average student in need of enhanced support and engagement. In order to make meaningful progress, Ontario’s colleges need to adopt best practices and establish a comprehensive framework to support students by building campus environments that are conducive to the learning needs of the diverse student body. This framework exists in North America and colleges need to be deliberate in their approach to
student engagement, student retention, and student success. Within this field of study, prominent Ontario scholars have contributed important research identifying key aspects elements for student success in Ontario. Ontario research supports a focus on student success and emphasizes career clarity specifically as a key element affecting student persistence in the college system. Dietsche (2005) shows that student attributes, student engagement, and career clarity are critical elements in the Ontario context. Dietsche’s work with the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students (2007) as well as years of research throughout his career provide important Canadian specific information to the field of study. Dietsche’s student outcome groups (1990, 1995) classified students into four groups as follows:

• Academically successful persisters
• Academically successful leavers
• Failed persisters
• Failed leavers

This is an important way to look at students to further understand the behavior of different groups in relation to student departure. Dietsche provides Ontario and Canadian specific literature which is essential to fully understand the experiences of Ontario college students. Dietsche also cautions that the four year liberal arts experience may not be the best comparator for Ontario’s two year career focused colleges. Dietsche’s work as principal investigator with the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students (2007) therefore, provides additional insight into the specific characteristics of Ontario and Canadian students and the findings of the study could be used in conjunction with the CCSSE thematic framework to isolate for any differences in system design. Replicating the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students would provide important Canadian longitudinal data that is greatly needed.
Finnie (2010) provides further evidence of the critical importance of career clarity as well as financial literacy for student success. Finnie (2010) also demonstrates important information that shows that student persistence over time is often higher based on institutional transfer and student re-entry over time. In Canada, McMurray (2009) contributes work to support the role of student engagement in Canada, Mandarino and Mattern (2010) provide evidence that correlates student engagement to student success and validates the use of the CCSSE survey instrument in both Canada and more specifically in Ontario. Finally, Mandarino and Mattern (2010) HEQCO provides evidence of the importance of early alert for student success. In Canada, research supports the North American focus on student engagement and in Ontario, research highlights the significance of career clarity, financial literacy and early alert as critical factors to consider.

With a growing number of underprepared students, the role of Ontario’s college is becoming increasingly more important to help students with career preparation or with upgrading prior to entering further studies at the university level:

Colleges have a strong role to play in this equation, ensuring that students are not only attracted to post-secondary education, but also retained until graduation. However, Ontario colleges play an even more vital role in that they tend to attract students who do not usually pursue post-secondary education due to real or perceived barriers and challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education. These students often come from underrepresented groups and, due to their unique circumstances, face a number of risks to completing their degree, unless they receive additional support through services and programs. (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 3)

Ontario’s colleges are the best suited to respond to the needs of the diverse applicant pool and can deliver a more personalized approach. Colleges Ontario notes: “expanding post-secondary education in Ontario is an important priority, and the cost of supporting an increasingly at-risk population should be recognized in funding structures. Otherwise, the quality of academic instruction may suffer or the goal of expanding post-secondary educational attainment may not
be realized, thereby jeopardizing Ontario’s economic future” (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 7).

Ontario’s colleges have always had an access mandate and have made a significant contribution to Ontario’s success as a leader in Canada. Colleges Ontario notes:

> The mandate of colleges is to be institutions of access. As such, colleges are seen to be much more inclusive and open to the profile of students at risk. Colleges have also increasingly sought to increase enrolment among underrepresented populations in order to increase the educational attainment of the population. (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 71)

Ontario colleges are in a relatively good position to offer programming to facilitate access and promote student success. However, more still must be done in order to reach the goal of 70% student graduation. This literature review has shed light onto the evolution of student development theory and the impact that this has had on the student affairs profession. To examine the specific shortcomings of the student success efforts on Ontario campuses, an examination of prominent models of service delivery is required. The following section of the literature review will thus examine three approaches to service delivery.

### 2.5 Evolving Models of Service Delivery

In order to understand how student services and, more specifically, student affairs needs to evolve, it is critical to understand some of the underlying principles that have formed the profession and much of the practices that are in place to support student success. In the early days of the student success profession, student personnel workers were understood to be “caretakers who looked after the welfare needs of students” (Schuh, Jones, Harper, & Associates, 2011, p. 67). In essence, student personnel staff was to act as surrogate parents who encouraged particular behaviours and values thought appropriate for a college educated individual. This model is now referred to as *In Loco Parentis* (Schuh, Jones, Harper, & Associates, 2011, p. 67). The role of the personnel worker differed from that of the dean in that they were not a punitive
body but instead was focused on the guidance and mentorship of students under their tutelage. Over time with the broadening access to higher education, this concept faded and was replaced with the idea of personnel dedicated to the management of student development (Schuh, Jones, Harper, & Associates, 2011, p. 68). The growing number of diverse students made this approach more challenging. Additionally, young adults were becoming more independent from parents compared to previous generations. The concept of In Loco Parentis was replaced with the concept of the Laissez Faire approach.

The Laissez Faire approach to student services and support evolved out of In Loco Parentis model. Under this model, institutions developed a wide range of services aimed at the various aspects of student life that posed challenges for students. Institutions treated students like adults and provided guidance but did not interfere with the student during their period of development. It was viewed that while some students would complete their studies, others would take a different path and perhaps leave early. This approach became the norm for student services and its various components such as counselling, financial assistance, career services, workshops, peer services and other services. Each of these services were typically designed based on this laissez faire approach. In fact, today the notion that every student would access a service would pose real challenges to servicing the large numbers of students with limited staff and resource pressures of today’s economy. Services are typically designed with the assumption that only a portion of the student body will access them.

This change in the profession to the laissez faire approach coincided with the advent of student development theory and has evolved in such a way those student services and affairs professionals normally only interact with a percentage of the student body. Extensive evidence of this can be found in various data sets including the Ontario Key Performance Indicator (KPI)
data. Today, while student affairs professionals tend to have a better understanding of some of the behaviours that students exhibit, the complexity of student issues has intensified. Despite this trend, I have observed that at most institutions the percentage of students served remains relatively constant while the number of students has increased. Today, the student affairs profession is evolving again with a renewed focus on early assessment, early alert and preadmissions advising as well as a new approach to meaningful intervention. These emerging concepts are explored further later in the literature review in this study.

2.5.1 The Laissez Faire Student Services Approach

There is a collective understanding amongst student affairs professionals and scholars that students in the greatest need of assistance are the least likely to attempt to access their services. However, there has been little movement in any broad or meaningful way to move from a laissez faire approach to student services to an early alert and intrusive model of advising and student support. This change has been adopted by some institutions but it is not widely in practice. When considering a change from the laissez faire approach to a proactive early and intrusive one, many administrators worry about the staffing impact of this change. Regardless, the laissez faire approach to student services has proven to be fraught with shortcomings. It is clear that, in order to increase the levels of student retention, post-secondary institutions must act and adopt a proactive early intervention model.

I examine and identify fundamental flaws with the laissez faire approach, by reviewing some promising practices and suggesting some key strategies to enhance student services to better support the goal of student success. For the purpose of this discussion, I focus on three challenges as follows: 1) lack of advising to support the student to obtain career clarity, 2) lack of motivation and academic skills and 3) lack of connection to the program or college (student
engagement). The common element to all three of these issues is that only some institutions use incoming student assessment as a tool to support students. It is fairly common practice to obtain some sort of student entrance data either as a survey or an aptitude test. Yet, in many institutions, this data is not proactively tied to serving and supporting the individual student. Tinto states: “what happens to students after they enroll frequently has a more powerful impact on whether they stay and achieve their goals or leave” (Tinto, Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attirition, 1993). The laissez faire approach is firmly rooted within institutional planning and delivery of services and the institution makes the assumption that students have made a well-researched choice for their program of choice. Institutions tend to invest heavily in marketing, recruitment, admissions, and registration and are usually underfunded to provide post-admission advising. The period between application to college and the first day of class is a critical time for effective student engagement through the use of orientation and transition programs. In some cases, institutions use entrance surveys to collect additional information about students. This is a critical time and in some cases students even provide very honest entrance information through various forms of surveys and testing that raise questions about preparedness such as low comprehension or math skills. While many institutions collect data from large numbers of students through a student entrance survey, in many cases, this data is not acted upon to provide support to students even though they provide rich information about their preparedness and confidence about college. Even fewer colleges and universities attach the assessment data from an individual student to some sort of planning or advisement exercise. The period prior to the start of classes and the first weeks of class are essential elements affecting overall student success. Despite this observation, many orientation programs do not utilize this period to achieve greater institutional student success and are instead simply designed to
welcome students at the beginning of the first term and proceed directly to class rather than addressing remediation and skills gap as well as a lack of career clarity.

The *Laissez Faire* approach to supporting students presents significant shortcomings in its ability to quantify and measure the impact of specific student interventions and practices. The next section explores promising practices that move beyond this approach by identifying when students are unsure and advising students prior to the start of classes as an essential component of any emerging service delivery model that seeks to improve student persistence and as a result, retention and student success. Closely related to this is the integration of student data and systems to ensure that once the institution obtains the data that it can be acted upon in a proactive manner to support the student.

The second challenge surrounds motivation and academic competency. These two areas are often identified within the same assessment and testing tools noted above. This is also an important component of college impact models: Students often give very clear indication of poor motivation or uncertainty (usually concerning career clarity) within assessment tools and a few key questions can easily discern this. Academic competency is generally even easier to uncover through testing or through entering grades. These two areas almost certainly result in challenges and often are the reasons for early departure. What is most alarming is that again, under the current *laissez faire* approach to student services, the information is often not acted upon or is acted upon beyond the start of the semester when students begin to encounter problems, some of which are may prove insurmountable.

Finally, the current *laissez faire* approach to student services fundamentally lacks the ability to effectively engage with students. Students that are unclear about their academic choice, experience difficulties, or lack confidence and motivation will likely exhibit low student
engagement in and outside of class. Intentional approaches to student engagement are most often left to the student although there is significant evidence to suggest that student engagement both in and outside the class helps to provide the connectedness that a student needs to persist. In all three cases, the services are made available and are often accessed by motivated, diligent students that find their way to the services and access the support that is needed. There very well may be ample academic services available for students in need. However, if it is left solely to the student to access them, greater levels of attrition will surely be the result. Rather, the institution must endeavor to reach out to students in need (Noel - Levitz, 1997). This simple statement is powerful and in my view is the critical component that is missing in student services today.

The *laissez faire* model of student affairs needs to be replaced with a new proactive model – in some ways adopting some of the tenets of *In loco parentis* model without the directive, parental, and authoritarian aspects of that system. The proactive approach to student services needs to draw upon student development theory through the use of institutional surveys and assessments that contribute to early alert and pave the way for early intervention. This approach is supported by student engagement efforts that attempt to address incoming student attributes but moves the focus of such activity from the first weeks of class to the period before classes start. This approach demonstrates institutional commitment to understand the individual student and act to support them. Having identified what I believe to be some of the biggest challenges related to the concepts identified in the literature, I now want to reflect on some promising practices particularly in the Ontario college system. Understanding that the government has a stated objective to reach 70% attainment, research into the specific approaches that will be affective in Ontario is critically important.
2.6 Promising Findings and Practices for Student Success in Ontario

Recent research has placed a greater emphasis on early alert and early intervention. This research reinforces that student achievement is a major factor in predicting student success. The characteristics of applicants entering the academy have a correlation to their later level of success as students. Colleges have witnessed a strong correlation between math and English marks and student retention. Colleges Ontario notes: “While 54% students with low reading ability at age 15 did not pursue any post-secondary education, 75% of students with high reading skills had completed some post-secondary education by age 25” (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 22). While some Ontario colleges assess students as they enter the college and many test students, not all colleges use this data to identify students at-risk and fewer colleges use the data to make meaningful interventions with students that may impact their future success before it is too late. Intentional student success planning is also an area of weakness for Ontario colleges and is related to early alert efforts. Students spend little time selecting a program of study and even less time planning out their studies (Colleges Ontario, 2011). It is essential to understand the entering characteristics of students in order to effectively provide needed support. Once student characteristics are understood for all sub-populations, specific interventions can be designed and employed with individual or groups of students.

Among the factors that predict success is career clarity and academic preparedness. The attributes that a student enters college with continue to be a major predictor of student persistence. Dietsche’s ground breaking study of Ontario colleges looked at the specific attributes of Ontario college students and their correlation to student persistence. Dietsche emphasized career clarity in his research as one of the most significant factors in affecting degree attainment in Ontario’s colleges (Dietsche, 2005). Additionally, he noted the need to extract data
and look at sub-sets of the student population to gain a thorough understanding of student persistence (Dietsche, 2011). Colleges Ontario supports Dietsche’s findings and notes that: “Promoting college to students at an earlier age would also help deal with the lack of career clarity that leads many students to leave college prematurely” (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 47). Early intervention and greater attention to the decision making process for students will support greater career clarity. This would suggest that the orientation and transition process also needs to account for the high school career exploration process.

Finnie et al (2010) has similar findings to Dietsche’s surrounding the importance of career clarity (Finnie, Childs & Hanquing, 2010). In a presentation to Colleges Ontario, he indicates that career clarity and uncertainty about program choice along with financing issues are major factors contributing to early departure and student persistence in Ontario’s colleges. (Finnie, 2010) Finnie makes an important contribution by adding quantitative evidence to the dialogue about student persistence with an emphasis on studying persistence patterns over time. He also tackles the question of retention and contributed important information from a systemwide perspective that indicates that persistence and retention are higher when adjusted for institutional transfer and multi-year completion of college. In his research he states: “In short, just over a quarter of all those who start a college program in Ontario leave that program without graduating or switching to another program” (Finnie, Childs & Hanquing, 2010, p. 15). Finnie’s research looks not only at the institution but at the student’s behaviour once they have left the institution. He identifies that over time, student persistence increases although institutional retention may be lower than student persistence. In 2010, Finnie identified some of the key reasons that students felt the need to depart early. That students “did not like the program” was the most common (41.1%), “change program or school” was the second (25%), and “not enough
money” was cited by (9.7%) of those leaving postsecondary education (Finnie, Childs & Hanquing, 2010, p. 15). This research reinforces the notion that effective career planning leading to career clarity is needed to enhance student persistence and thus retention.

The research by both Dietsche and Finnie indicate that Ontario’s colleges need to explore these issues further. In particular, the findings from both researchers would support a greater investment in pre-admissions advising, career and program planning and financial literacy among applicants entering the postsecondary environment. Investing in the student decision to attend postsecondary and helping the applicant plan and prepare are two major factors identified by both researchers that will likely have a major impact on student persistence.

Colleges’ career and vocational focus set them apart from universities within the Ontario education system. Where the university’s liberal arts approach is aimed at developing a broad base of knowledge and personal growth, colleges in Ontario are predominantly focused on preparing students for the world of work. This would indicate that generic student engagement models will need to be adapted to meet the specific need of Ontario’s college students. A focus on advising to ensure substantial career clarity is likely the single greatest enhancement that Ontario could implement and is supported by much of the current research by Dietsche and Finnie among others.

A greater emphasis needs to be placed on helping students select an appropriate program of study and assisting them to understand the demand of programs as well as the key competencies needed to be successful. Where a student is lacking in some areas of preparation, colleges need to design interventions that support students with upgrading to provide the necessary conditions for student success. Ontario institutions need to place a greater emphasis on pre-admissions advising, ensuring that students have a strong understanding of the field that they
have chosen and providing opportunities to change programs without major complications if
student persistence is to be improved.

Another important finding is highlighted in the recent Colleges Ontario (2010) report
prepared by Deloitte. In the report, they identify: “Basing funding on enrolment levels one to two
months into the semester does not take into account the costs of outreach, pre-applicant and
preenrolment advising, and orientation services that take place before the enrolment count date”
(Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 43). The study provides the main reason why many colleges and
universities in Ontario are not allocating more resources to address the issues identified by
Dietsche and Finnie. These activities are unfunded and resourcing for these activities either come
from the general purpose operating grants or from student fees. Government funding support for
these areas would allow Ontario’s colleges an opportunity to assist applicants with program
choice and help ensure that students that are underprepared get appropriate advice and support.
Better coordination between high school and colleges and universities is also supported by the
research. Investment into pre-admissions advising could have a major impact on retention and
thus improve graduation rates. Greater emphasis on inputs would likely have a corresponding
effect on outcomes as suggested by Astin’s theory. Often, students are not identified until
partially through the first semester and by the time an intervention can be made, the student has
often already made a decision to stay or leave. Additionally, many programs are designed in such
a way that the student does not have any options once they have made it through the first part of
the semester. Staggered program start dates and common first year programs may be solutions
that need to be explored further.

Student success plans could serve as the platform to assess student readiness for college,
measure career clarity, conduct ongoing monitoring of student progress and when a student is
faltering, serve as the source for meaningful interventions. Black points out that if all the signs of attrition are addressed with the same solutions, there is a significant chance for students to “fall through the cracks.” Rather, an assessment which identifies students at risk and addresses them on a case-by-case basis is a system which ensures significantly fewer students in need are left without aid and support (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2001, p. 175). The *Laissez-faire* approach to student services – that is, waiting for a student to reach out to student services – will not be sufficient given the emerging profile of today’s student in Ontario. A proactive approach to intrusive advising and a targeted approach to meet the needs of the various sub-groups of students will serve as a more customized and individualized approach to support student success. While this customization is required, it should be noted that at most large colleges the number of students within each category is typically large enough to warrant investment. Additionally, colleges will need to examine the traditional use of one to one advising and counseling given that over 30% of all students entering colleges are at-risk (Colleges Ontario, 2011) In absence of new funding or a new approach to student services, large numbers of students will continue to go unserved and thus have a negative impact on overall student success and retention. In order to meet the needs of the diverse student body, some forms of small group intervention will be needed while specialized support on a one to one basis will continue to play an important role for many students. The use of small group sessions may also play an important role in providing students with a network of peer support and help students understand that they are not “in it alone”. Additionally, emerging technology for early alert and automated intervention as well as enhanced communication can play a crucial role in helping the entire student population and not just the small percentage that reach out to student services staff. These individual components will not likely have the desired effect on
retention unless they are coupled with a comprehensive, system-wide approach and institutional commitment to deliberate student engagement.

2.6.1 Effectiveness of Student Services

In order to tackle a puzzle as challenging as student retention, institutions will need to adopt comprehensive strategies: There is no magic bullet. One-off solutions, individual activities, or service enhancements will not drive retention; rather, a more coordinated and holistic approach will be needed. This is a challenging paradigm as a comprehensive and overarching approach to student engagement is most often recommended; however, it is the most resource intensive of the available options. Individual programs or interventions on their own may not be sufficient; rather a coordinated approach with multiple student touch points is generally viewed as necessary. In my view a framework for student engagement is a needed first step.

In a recent major study to examine the correlates between best practices espoused within the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and impacts on retention, the authors conclude that all aspects of the survey have a positive correlation (Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010). Those elements include the following practices on campus:

- Level of Academic Challenge (11 item scale, time spent prep for class, amount of reading & writing & institutional expectations)
- Active & collaborative Learning (7 item scale on class participation, degree of collaborative work in/outside of class with other students, amount of tutoring & number of community based projects)
- Student – faculty interaction (6 items: interaction with faculty & advisors, discussion of ideas with faculty, prompt feedback, on research work with faculty)
- Enriching Educational Experiences (12 items: interaction with different races or backgrounds, activities – internships, community services, study abroad & cocurricular)
- Supportive campus environment (6 items: student feel supported to succeed by campus supports – academically & socially, assist with coping on non-academic matters & promotion of supportive relations among students, peers, faculty & administrative staff/office). (Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010)

Adopting a framework such as that noted above or alternatively the Community College
Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is the necessary starting point for Ontario colleges. Institutions would immediately have rich benchmarks by which to contrast the programs and services currently in place at each institution. Such a tool could draw upon the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students to further refine the tool and account for any differences in the design of Ontario’s education system including its vocational focus. This would serve to provide institutions the ability to evaluate the efficacy of their student retention practices and to identify and employ best practices from other Ontario colleges. Once the institution is prepared and has a functioning framework, they must isolate institutional variables and closely look at the individual student and provide support on a case-by-case basis.

Another such framework to consider is the idea of the *Learning College*. In the learning college, the League of Innovation identifies that students, faculty, and staff should partner for the benefit and well-being of the student. Students that spend additional time intentionally planning their campus experience are more likely to feel integrated within the campus environment leading to a greater chance of student connectivity and ultimately student success (O'Banion, 1997). There are a number of Ontario colleges that are exploring student success plans as a method to improve student persistence and retention. Some of the common elements found in these plans include: career clarification, program of study, co and extra-curricular activities, general support services, modified workload and specialized support services as well as a financing plan. This notion is shared by the findings of *Learning Reconsidered 2* where it states:

> One of the most salient messages is that we can, and should, consider the whole campus a learning community… mapping of learning across campus and emphasizing its multicentric, highly distributed character. Efforts to locate learning in every part of campus and in every aspect of students’ experiences. (Keeling, 2006, p. 76)

Attention to planning for the individual student can provide a framework to better prepare students to navigate the campus and access the services and supports needed to succeed.
Either framework ensures that Ontario’s colleges act more like an integrated system and thus reap the benefits of coordination, benchmarking, and the use of shared best practices while at the same time fostering a culture of research to evaluate their collective efforts. Within either of the above frameworks, the institution needs to account for the following significant variables: socioeconomic status, gender, age, race/ethnicity, parents and family (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot also note: “selectivity, institutional type (two or four year degree), size, control: private or public, gender composition and racial composition” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p. 146) are also important factors. All of these areas examine the individual characteristics that make up the whole student and therefore are significant variables that need to be accounted for and worked into any overarching framework for the Ontario college system.

With this individual view of the student in mind, the most critical form of student engagement is an effective, extensive, and proactive advising approach within an environment conducive to academic inquiry and learning. Getting down to the unique student within a standard framework is the only way to control for individual differences and address the complexity of each student’s unique history. Small group and peer advising can be used to offset the costs of one-to-one advising and to ensure that every student receives needed support and to ensure that it is economically viable for the institution. Each advising session should be supplemented by a personal plan for each student that addresses the individual supports and services that the student will need as well as serving the purpose of enhancing career clarity through guided planning which is one of the most significant factors affecting early departure. This approach draws upon student development theory as well as college impact models to foster more intentionally designed student engagement that account for incoming student attributes.
The institutional variables and commitment to students is also significant in fostering a campus environment that supports student persistence and retention. In summing up retention efforts, Tinto notes that commitment to students, institutional mission, student commitment, commitment to education for all, and the development of supportive communities are all principles of effective retention (Tinto, Principles of Effective Retention, 1993). Thus, a system-based approach to post-secondary education that uses a broadly accepted framework and values research and provides benchmarking and longitudinal data will serve to benefit the Ontario college system as a whole. This coupled with an advising approach that is proactive, utilizes assessment and testing data, and supports students based on their unique needs is the best opportunity to address the retention puzzle through fostering greater student persistence.

2.7 Conceptual Approach to Research Questions

Ontario’s colleges lack a consistent, well-articulated and strategic approach to student success. Overall, there are a wide range of student success practices in place at Ontario colleges ranging from marginal efforts to extensive programs and strategies aimed at improving student persistence. A greater degree of consistency needs to be employed throughout the college system to see any change in overall retention rates. Many institutions do not have clearly articulated retention goals nor do they have anyone dedicated to retention or charged with the responsibility for retention efforts (Noel - Levitz, 1997). By contrast, every institution has staff dedicated to marketing, recruitment and admissions, a discrepancy that must be addressed to achieve the goal of a 70% post-secondary educated population set forth by the Government of Ontario.

From an educational system perspective, each institution in Ontario develops its own programs and often their best practices are not shared. Additionally, there is a lack of associations dedicated to Canadian professionals within the field of student success and the
number of researchers in this field of study is relatively small especially when compared to their peers in the United States. Colleges Ontario identifies that there is a need for a comprehensive framework “to facilitate the identification, implementation, and sharing of best practices [amongst] Ontario’s colleges [who] may consider developing common, system-wide strategies to supporting students at-risk” (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 44). Frameworks such as those identified within this literature review could be considered and adopted by use by Ontario’s colleges in order to address the challenge of student retention. Some of the colleges in Ontario have already started this journey using many of the theories identified within this literature review.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) tool is of particular interest for Ontario Colleges. CCSSE has been tested, validated and is longitudinal in nature with a robust data set from North American two year colleges (CCSSE, 2010). CCSSE is based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) tool which is widely used by four year liberal arts colleges and was founded on theories of student involvement (Astin, 1985) student effort (Pace, 1984) and student integration (Tinto, 1987). "Numerous research studies conducted over the past four decades into these and other theoretical perspectives have provided substantial evidence of the association between student engagement with positive educational outcomes in the American four year college sector, including academic performance, persistence, retention and intellectual growth" (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). The NSSE and CCSSE tools were developed based on the Model of Effective Education Practices (MEEP). MEEP establishes five benchmarks to help practitioners and institutions to identify areas of institutional strength and weakness with regard to student engagement.

MEEP consists of five latent factors or constructs:
1. Active and Collaborative Learning;
2. Student Effort;
3. Academic Challenge;
4. Student-Faculty Interaction; and 5. Support for Learners. These factors were derived from 38 Community College Student Report (CCSR) survey items and analyzed for model fit through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The study examined a large sample of over 274,000 two-year college students over 3 survey periods in 2003 to 2005. Marti (2009) demonstrated that the five factor solution exhibited reasonable model fit based on the total sample and good fit for the various sub-groups studied (male, female, part-time and fulltime). (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010)

Marti helped to establish the fit of the Model of Effective Educational Practices (MEEP) and suggests that the CCSSE tool is applicable to two year colleges (Marti, 2009). Despite the relationships identified in the CCSSE studies, there are differences between U.S. and Canadian community colleges, which raise the important question about the validity of CCSSE in the Canadian context.

Based on data collected through CCSSE from American two-year college students, studies conducted by McClenney and Marti (2006) and Marti (2009) have provided evidence of these associations in the two-year college sector as well. CCSSE’s survey instrument, The Community College Student Report (CCSR), provides information on student engagement, a key indicator of learning and, therefore, of the quality of community colleges (CCSSE, 2010). The survey, administered to community college students, asks questions that assess institutional practices and student behaviors that are correlated highly with student learning and student retention (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010).

As highlighted in the McClenney and Marti (2006) validation study, a majority of community college students in the U.S. participate in college programs on a part-time basis and take longer to complete than most Ontario college students (McClenney and Marti, 2006). By contrast, the vast majority of Ontario and Canadian community college students participate in one-year certificate or two and three-year diploma programs on a full-time basis. For example, Nova Scotia Community College, which participated in CCSSE in 2008, has a part-time
enrolment of 9 per cent, while part-time enrolment at Humber constitutes 6 per cent (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010). The United States and Ontario also have important differences with respect to program design. Ontario offers advanced three-year diplomas and some four-year degrees while U.S. colleges tend to be focused on one or two-year of studies. Ontario has also used a cohort model extensively where students progress as a group while many two-year U.S. colleges have course based enrolment similar to most universities. The impact of the differences is unknown but could produce variations in results.

The HEQCO study by Mandarino and Mattern examines these issues to determine whether the results can be applied to an Ontario college. In Canada, the tool has been used by three Canadian colleges including Douglas College, Nova Scotia Community College and Humber College (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010). In the United States, CCSSE has been used by over 700 two year colleges since 2001 with a strong U.S. track record and several studies demonstrating its reliability and validity (McClenney & Marti, 2006; Marti, 2009). The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) first published a study in Canada in 2010 by Mandarino and Mattern that tests the validity of the tool with respect to the Ontario setting (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010).

The CCSSE tool has been widely studied using various methodologies and isolating the 5 thematic factors. Each study shows that some or all have positive correlations of varying strengths. These studies have been replicated to provide further evidence of their validity and in the HEQCO study, they have been studied first to verify that the tool is applicable in the Ontario context and then to ensure that there is a positive correlation (Mandarino and Mattern, 2010). The results indicate that the tool is applicable and has similar correlations at one large urban Ontario college. This college has similar characteristics to the three colleges in this comparative
case study. While, the information has not been tested at these colleges, it is reasonable to use the thematic framework as a method for organizing interview qualitative data and to analyze themes uncovered in the document analysis. Using the CCSSE thematic framework is a way to examine key similarities and differences and to identify gaps. Further research would be needed to determine if the thematic framework is a good method for analyzing orientation and transition practices or if other tools or an adapted version of the tool is more applicable. The document analysis also draws heavily on the Pan Canadian Study on Student Engagement to examine the comparative case study in a Canadian context as well and to compare the 2 tools to help provide further insight into the specific research needed to provide a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the most promising and effective orientation and transition practices for Ontario and Canadian colleges.

Adopting a known, tested, validated, multi-institution, and longitudinal tool such as the CCSSE instrument is the best available option to ensure that student engagement efforts positively affect student success. While the CCSSE instrument may need to be adjusted to account for some of the emerging research in Canada and Ontario including the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students, it is currently the best available option designed to measure and evaluate campus efforts of student engagement – including orientation and transition.

In the Colleges Ontario study referenced above, the authors point to both the provincial and individual return on investment and the financial case for improving access and student success to meet Ontario’s goals for prosperity. “Colleges spend just over one-tenth of funding allocations from government to attract, retain, and promote the success of students at-risk. This finding confirms reports from colleges that supporting students at-risk is increasingly a part of the core business and mission of colleges, and requires a considerable investment of their
funding” (Colleges Ontario, 2011, p. 6). Regardless of the return on investment, Tinto helps to humanize retention efforts: “The point of retention efforts is not merely that individuals be kept in college. Education, the social and intellectual development of individuals, rather than just their continued presence on campus should be the goal of retention efforts” (Tinto, Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attirition, 1993, p. 145). Ultimately, the health of society relies on the health of its people. Investing in the education of Ontarians benefits everyone involved. This investment can be protected only by facilitating the success of as many students as possible.

Addressing student departure and retention is critical for the success of education systems as a whole. As much as the education of citizens is important to the economy and wellbeing of Ontario as a whole, it is even more important to individual students. The personal consequences for individual students is huge ranging from feelings of inadequacy, a sense of personal loss, and a loss of earning potential. The individual may also be less likely to make a meaningful contribution to society as a whole and their development may be affected as adults. The loss to the college or university and society as a whole is equal in magnitude: College and universities invest heavily in marketing, recruitment, registration and orientation programs; this investment is lost on students that depart early. Similarly, the lost grant and tuition fee revenue is significant. In Ontario, one lost college student equates to approximately $10,000 in lost tuition and grant revenue not to mention the inefficiencies of resulting smaller class sizes. For government, it equates to a less educated workforce, a less productive economy, as well as additional costs to the social welfare system. Student retention efforts clearly have a significant impact not only on the profitability and overall success of colleges in Ontario: Rather, increasing the retention of students is important to the province economically, socially, and culturally.
3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research problem, questions and methodological considerations

The purpose of this comparative case study was to examine the extent to which three large urban Ontario colleges use orientation and transition programs as part of a deliberate student success strategy between 2005 and 2010. I examined the approach to new student orientation and transition at each of the three institutions and study the extent to which each institution was using known best practices in the field of orientation and transition to positively impact student retention and to capture a holistic retrospective account. Creswell states: “qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176). According to Gay, Mills and Airasian the case study allows for the examination of the characteristics of a particular entity, phenomenon, or person. Additionally, the case study allows for the in-depth investigation of one unit e.g., individual, group, institution, organization, program or document (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). I chose the case study methodology for this study as it allowed for detailed examination of the individual responses that the six key informants provided as well as the institutional perspective that emerged when the document and interview analysis was conducted. The examination also explored whether the efforts surrounding orientation and transition are part of a larger student success strategy as well as the extent that these practices are deliberate and ingrained in institutional strategic planning.

3.1.1 Research Questions

There are four primary research questions that are explored in this case study as follows:
1. What orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?

2. To what extent are these three large urban colleges using comprehensive and deliberate approaches to orientation and transition?

3. To what extent are these three colleges using orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?

4. To what extent do these practices relate to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

3.1.2 Methodological Considerations

This paper employs the case study methodology. Such a methodology allows for an in-depth review of relevant primary documents as well as interviews of key informants. Creswell states: “…case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context)” (Creswell, 2009 p. 73). Creswell notes that the case study is a form of qualitative research that allows for the investigation of a ‘bounded system (case)’ or ‘multiple bounded systems (cases)’ to look at relevant information from various sources (Creswell, 2009). I used this methodology as it allowed me to examine three similar cases from the three college sites selected for this study. Creswell states: “In a collective case study (or multiple case study), the one issue or concern is again selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue. The researcher might select for study several programs from several research sites or multiple programs from a single site” (Creswell, 2009 p.74). The study employed a qualitative format with standard interview questions for two participants at each of three institutions being studied. “Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. Their interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history,
contexts, and prior understandings” (Creswell, 2009, p.176). Given the experience that I have
had within the Ontario college system, and the experiences of the key informants, the qualitative
format of this study is particularly useful to understand the full context.

The two informants were key players responsible for student success strategy and the
design, planning, organization, and implementation of orientation and transition programs at their
respective colleges. The interview questions were designed to elicit the perception of the role
orientation and transition programs play by those that design and implement these programs.
This approach allows for different perspectives from different informants within the institution.
The first participant was the senior student affairs administrator at each of the three colleges.
These individuals hold a positional leadership role as well as a role in developing institutional
strategies for ensuring student success. The second participant was a front line manager or
faculty coordinator that had a more direct role with the planning and implementation of
orientation activities, programs, processes, and policies at an operational level.

The student body of the three colleges in question represents a significant proportion of
Ontario college students. However, while these three colleges represent a considerable
proportion of the college student population of Ontario, the study is not generalizable. At the
same time, it revealed important alternative directions of study or promising practices that may
be applied to other colleges of similar size and demographic profile. Additionally, findings from
this study may inform the design of future orientation and transition programs and broader
student success strategies.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is a widely used
survey tool to study student engagement on college campuses. It has been thoroughly tested and
its ability to identify the factors affecting the relationship between student retention and student
engagement has been validated (CCSSE, 2010). This research employs the CCSSE tool to group data into a thematic framework, identify relevant patterns in data, and to identify similarities and differences between the colleges in question. CCSSE uses the following five themes: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, and student-faculty interaction. This tool does not directly measure the impact of orientation and transition programs but does measure student engagement. “The CCSE validation research shows that CCSSE is measuring institutional practices and student behaviours that matter – and therefore, that the CCSSE survey instrument is a valuable proxy for student success” (CCSSE, 2010, p. 16). The CCSSE tool is the only tool of its kind: where other tools may exist to analyze orientation and transition programs, only the CCSSE is longitudinal, multi-institutional, community college specific and proven valid in Ontario colleges. While the CCSSE tool is not explicitly designed for analyzing orientation and transition programs, it does serve to frame the case study within a defined set of themes that have been widely studied and applied to hundreds of colleges – including some Canadian colleges that share characteristics similar to the three large urban colleges included in this study. This tool therefore is used to organize information and analyze data for differences and similarities between institutions. Further, this study may serve to uncover any key themes missing from the CCSSE thematic framework that may provide important insights into the study of orientation and transition practices in colleges in Ontario and Canada.

The study also draws upon the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students as well as other promising research that is directly applicable to the Ontario context. In particular, the implications and recommendations drawn from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students have been compared to the findings of this case study to examine similarities and
differences. The Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students was conducted in 2005 and included the vast majority of Ontario colleges and all three of the colleges included in this study.

Finally, the document analysis and the participant interviews were cross referenced with one another to analyze findings and to answer the overarching primary research questions. The cross referencing was an important element of the study as it examined self-reported information from the six participant interviews with readily available public documents that were retrieved using a standard retrieval protocol for consistency. All of the findings were coded, sorted and a detailed audit trail was kept. The study uncovers important similarities between the three sites related to both the CCSSE thematic framework as well as the findings from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The case study also uncovered important differences using this methodology and the findings are reported in the Presentation of Findings and Conclusion sections of this study.

3.2 Research Perspective

The information obtained from the interviews and document analysis was examined in a social constructivist manner to critically look at the historical context that the activities were carried out within. I also referenced the literature in relation to the sites selected as part of this case study. The information derived from this study was used to establish and construct potential patterns and themes for future research design. The information coming from this study could also likely support an advocacy agenda for future improvements to orientation and transition practices and may contribute to the development of student success strategies.

I also approach the study as a student affairs practitioner that has had extensive experience working with students in the campus setting and have had the opportunity to serve in various roles related to orientation and transition programs. My understanding of orientation and
transition developed through my role as a student leader, focused on the social aspects of orientation. As a practitioner in the field, I also bring a perspective informed by the design, planning, implementation, and monitoring of orientation and transition programs.

Through this case study approach, I examined the linkages between the qualitative interviews, the thoughts and ideas espoused in the institutional documents and compare them first against the CCSSE thematic framework and then in relation to key themes that have emerged from recent research in the Canadian and Ontario college environment including the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The intent of this approach is to uncover similar and disparate best practices amongst Ontario’s large urban colleges that may help to inform the future design, planning, and monitoring of orientation and transition programs as well as broader student success strategies.

3.3 Research context

This study explores the role that orientation and transition programs play in the broader student success strategies employed by Ontario colleges. Orientation and transition programs are a critical component of the first year experience, which is itself an essential element of broader student engagement efforts. The role of student success initiatives cannot be underestimated as colleges aim to increase retention in an effort to meet the Government of Ontario’s stated objective of reaching 70% participation in postsecondary institutions (Rae, 2005). In fact, most reports on future trends of the economy predict that most new jobs will require skilled labour which necessitate some form of postsecondary education (Miner, 2010). The way that orientation and transition programs are approached by Ontario colleges has a measurable impact on their overall student retention. Though elemental to a broader student success strategy, they are nevertheless of vital importance in the mission to raise student retention.
Studies that focus on individual data or that do not look at the complex interrelationships between theories, strategies, individual actors, and institutional missions may overlook key aspects of the puzzle. Early research focused on human development and student development theory evolved out of this early work. Within the study of student development, there are several prominent bodies of research and theories examined in the literature review of this study. All of these disparate theories have served to shape the character of the student affairs profession, its services, and related organizations. Additionally, the complex interrelationship of these fields of study and professions led to even more complex theories that study incoming student attributes as well as the effect of the college environment on the individual or groups of individuals to understand the “college impact.” This area of study is the most prominent and will be examined most closely in an attempt to understand if in fact the three colleges that form the basis for this case study are practicing known strategies from the literature including key emerging research that appears to be very promising for future effort to improve student success and that have a direct bearing on orientation and transition programs.

3.4 Site selection

The sample of this comparative case study will be three of the twenty-four Ontario colleges. Among the twenty-four, eight would be described as large urban colleges by Colleges Ontario. The three colleges selected are all located within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). Together, the campuses cover six adjacent cities within Ontario representing a significant proportion of Ontario’s population as well as the province’s college students. Furthermore, all three colleges share similar demographic profiles and first year enrolments greater than 6,600 students with total student populations of greater than 12,500 full-time students (OCAS, 2013). Each institution has a comprehensive range of programming and has an
ethnically and culturally diverse student body. The study describes the demographic characteristics of each site selected and identifies key differences and similarities between the institutions. The case study was conducted during the winter of 2014 and drew upon interviews and institutional documents focusing on the period between 2005 and 2010.

Based on 2012 census data, Ontario’s total population was 13,505,900 of which 49.3% were male and 50.7% were female. The total population of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area was 7,117,600 or 52.7% of Ontario’s population representing close to 35% of Canada’s total population (Government of Ontario, Spring 2013). For the purpose of this study the 2012 census data includes population information from: Toronto, Durham, Halton, Peel, York, Hamilton, and Brant. The three colleges studied serve each of these communities and have the following first year enrolments:

**Table 1.0 Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts & Technology First Year Enrolments 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enrolment</th>
<th>% of GTHA</th>
<th>% of Ontario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>9,100</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College B</td>
<td>6,685</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College C</td>
<td>7,946</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>23,731</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total GTHA</td>
<td>49,068</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Ontario</td>
<td>118,597</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Government of Ontario, 2013) (OCAS, 2013)

The three sites selected and identified as College A, B and C collectively represent a significant proportion of Ontario’s students. Collectively, they represent 20.0% of the total first year college enrolment in Ontario and 48.4% of the total number of students enrolled at the 6 Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) colleges (Government of Ontario, Spring 2013).
This is a substantive sample and while not generalizable, it represents a large segment of the overall student population of Ontario. The orientation and transition practices at these three colleges therefore have the potential to reach a large proportion of Ontario’s college students and may provide valuable insight into practices that may work at other Ontario colleges. In summary, the three colleges:

1. Are geographically adjacent to each other covering a large part of the GTHA
2. Represent half of the large urban colleges in the GTHA
3. Serve approximately 50% of Ontario’s total population
4. Have first year student intake representing 20% of Ontario’s total college student population
5. Have orientation and transition practices in place

3.5 Research interview participants

Two interviews were conducted at each of the colleges involved in this study: both a senior administrator and an employee responsible for orientation and transition programs were interviewed in order to develop a clear understanding of the programs in place. The selection of participants was handled in the same manner at each institution ensuring that the institution, and not the researcher, was responsible for participant selection. The senior administrators who were interviewed were first identified by the presidents of the colleges. The President was asked to verify the administrator as there may be more than one senior administrator that shares responsibility for different aspects of orientation and transition within each institution. Once identified, the senior administrator was asked to identify the line manager or faculty/staff directly involved with the planning, coordination, and management of orientation and transition activities.
at the institution. The President of each college was contacted to ensure that administrative consent was obtained to have each of the three colleges participate in the case study.

3.5.1 Senior student affairs administrator

Once verified by the college presidents, the senior student affairs administrator at each institution was contacted to participate in the study. Each of these individuals was assured that their participation was voluntary and that no judgment or evaluation would result from the study. The senior student affairs administrator was given the option to identify a suitable designate in the event that they were unable or unwilling to participate. They were then asked to identify an appropriate front line manager or faculty coordinator as well as an alternate in the event that the first choice was unavailable or unwilling to participate. The candidates for the interviews were all familiar with the college orientation and transition processes, practices, and activities and were directly involved with their design, planning, implementation, and evaluation. There were two participants at each college for a total sample size of six individuals that lead the institutional approach to orientation and transition. No personal information was collected and coding was used to ensure confidentiality of the participants.

At one of the three sites, a manager-employee relationship existed between me as the primary researcher and one of the interviewees and therefore a research assistant was called upon to conduct the interview. Further, I used a research assistant at all sites and for all participant interviews for the sake of consistency and to avoid the perception of undue influence. This influence was further mitigated by first securing approval from the President and in several places making it clear that participation was optional and that participants were able to withdraw at any time during the study. That the research assistant was independent and without employment relationship with any of the institutions helped to further mitigate any potential
influence on the interviewees. Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to starting the interview process.

3.5.2 Front line manager or faculty coordinator

The second interview was selected to provide a different perspective on orientation and transition. Specifically, the senior student affairs administrator normally has a larger role in the development of strategies and evaluation whereas the front line manager or faculty coordinator member has an operational role in orientation and transition programs. Collectively, the two interviews were designed to capture both the strategic aspects and the practical applications of the program in place.

Finally, the information collected from the interviews was compared with documents outlining the role of orientation programs in place at each of the three colleges. The small sample will have certain limitations as orientation and transition may be planned by several individuals at the institutions and there may be varying degrees that the program is implemented within each institution. The institution was therefore provided the opportunity to clarify any information obtained through the interview process through a review of findings prior to the content of the interviews being included in the final study.

3.6 Data collection

All materials distributed to interviewees noted that this case study was being conducted through the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. All recruitment and interviews were conducted in English. All participants work in an English speaking environment and, as such, it is expected that all participants are fluent in the English language. Thus, there was no need for translation of recruitment materials.
In order to gain information about the three colleges in the study, interviews were conducted with two participants from each of the three institutions in the study. Once the interviewees were identified, they were invited by an email letter to participate in the interview and to provide any institutional documents they thought relevant to the study. Furthermore, the letter asked for the participant to sign an informed consent form prior to their participation in the study. In order to ensure that the institutions were afforded the same opportunity to provide comparable literature, a letter was provided outlining the type of documentation that may be applicable to the research project (Appendices B & C).

The interviews were conducted by a research assistant to ensure that I limited any unintentional biasing. The full interview was recorded and transcribed by the research assistant for transmission to the primary researcher with participant consent. The interviews were based on a series of questions that were asked to all participants in a standard format to ensure consistency with the comparator colleges. The interviews were transcribed and the primary researcher listened to the entire recorded interview in addition to the transcribed text to gain a thorough understanding of the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees. The transcribed records were sent to the interviewees to be validated for accuracy and to ensure that the interviewee’s statements were taken in the correct context. This review also provided the interviewees with a chance to provide comments to clarify their prior statements.

In addition to the six recorded interviews, the institutions were asked to provide any relevant documents that revealed strategies in place at the institutions. The college websites were also reviewed to retrieve the orientation and transition strategies in place at each college that are publicly accessible. The websites were searched using keywords and themes identified in the literature review. Student success strategies were reviewed to determine the extent to which
orientation and transition plays a role in the broader student success strategy of the institution. Published material about orientation and transition for the institution and the orientation and transition program was also reviewed and analyzed.

The creation of notes is considered best practice in field research and these typically collect two separate types of information: 1) descriptive information about the environment and setting of the activity and 2) reflective information based on the primary researchers observations, experiences, and thematic framework that the research will be compared to (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). The observation notes created were included in the archival notes of the study and were part of the audit trail to support the validity and reliability of the study. In order to ensure greater reliability, I worked with a colleague to cross reference the sorting of key themes and employed a thorough coding system to sort the information collected from the document analysis and participant interviews. Charts were used to tabulate frequency of themes that emerged from the participant interviews. Charts were also created to tabulate the frequency that themes were related to the CCSSE thematic framework and, recommendations and findings from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students as well as any similarities or differences.

3.6.1 Document analysis

The document analysis was conducted by retrieving pertinent data from the web sites of the three participating colleges. Specifically, the case study examined orientation and transition practices as well as broader student success strategies between the period of 2005 to 2010. The document analysis used a consistent document retrieval protocol using Google advanced search. The search specified format, timelines and terms. ‘Orientation and transition’ and ‘student success’ were the terms used. This type of standardized protocol was used to ensure a consistent
approach and to discover what documents are readily available if the public conducted a similar search. There are limitations with this approach as it will not uncover all documents related to these terms. Some documents may have been removed since 2010 and some documents may have been in alternative formats. The document analysis is therefore one additional tool used to cross reference information from the interviews with a sampling of readily available documents rather than a comprehensive analysis of 100% of pertinent information.

The analysis of all interviews and documents that were retrieved was applied against the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework to identify similarities and differences to themes identified within each interview. This survey tool was used because it is longitudinal, has been tested and validated to demonstrate a correlation to positively affect increased student retention, and has been widely used in North American by hundreds of two-year community colleges including some Canadian colleges and one Ontario college with a similar profile to the three colleges included in this case study. Key Canadian and Ontario specific themes as identified within the literature were also used to examine similarities and differences that may be missed within the CCSSE thematic framework due to differences with system design in Ontario and some U.S. jurisdictions. The recommendations and conclusions from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students were also used to compare findings to those from this case study to uncover similarities and differences. The documents were coded to protect identity of the three colleges and were simply referred to as College A, B or C.

3.6.2 Interviews

The subjects from each institution were invited to participate once administrative consent was obtained from the college President. Each informant’s participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. The interviews were conducted by a
research assistant at the three participant sites. The interviews were conducted at the informant’s office or other suitable location and ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length. The interview questions were sent by email in advance of the interview. These practices were employed to ensure that the informants were free to share perspectives and opinions without fear of judgment or evaluation.

In order to further ensure that the interviews were fully confidential, the interviews were conducted by a research assistant that signed a confidentiality agreement, had no prior relationship with any of the participants, and had no employment relationship with any of the sites included within the study. The interviews were recorded once consent was obtained and transcribed by the research assistant and coded to further protect the identity of the participants. All digital recordings of the interviews were destroyed. The transcribed notes have been kept on file as part of the study audit trail and will be destroyed two years after the completion of the study as outlined in the methodology. The transcribed notes were reviewed with the participants in summary format to ensure their accuracy and that there were no unintended statements or misrepresentations. The participants were also provided with the opportunity to review the detailed transcription. Further, any clarifying comments were also recorded to ensure that the appropriate context was reflected and understood.

The interview script is provided in Appendix D and was designed to reveal information pertaining to:

i. Orientation and transition practices in place between 2005 – 2010

ii. Any data describing the results of the orientation processes and practices

iii. Any information pertaining to policies and procedures related to orientation and transition
iv. Information concerning timing and the overall process

v. Information pertaining to theories that inform the design of the orientation and transition practices

vi. Information linking orientation and transition practices’ inclusion in student success strategies

vii. Interviewee’s perceptions and opinions about the orientation and transition program and success factors or areas requiring further attention

The participants were informed about the nature of the study and given assurances that their participation was voluntary and confidential. The information obtained through the interview was not in any way used to judge or evaluate the participants and any potential harm they may have incurred was mitigated by the design of the interviews. All information was retained at a secure location throughout the duration of the study. The study is concerned with public strategies and information retrievable from public records and therefore presents little if any risk for any participants. Participants were further protected by their review of the interviews and by being provided the opportunity to add clarifying or contextual comments. There is no identifiable information about any of the participants included in the study. Taped conversations were assigned identity codes and the research assistant maintained strict confidentiality. All participants are anonymous in the research writing and publication.

Each of the three institutions in Ontario has been referred to simply as College A, B and C. The study is clear that Ontario is the location of the study and the three colleges are three of the large eight urban colleges in Ontario. The two participants at each college have not been identified and all interview comments were not attributed or referenced in any way that disclosed the person’s role in the institution nor did the interview contain specific comments that would be
clearly attributable to them. Comments have been kept general and paraphrased to avoid any
identifiable information wherever necessary. The research assistant coded the interviews by
randomly assigning a number between one and six and the specific identities of the participants
have not been disclosed in this case study for greater confidentiality. In order to maintain the
confidentiality of each participant they were given a case number and all documents were
numbered accordingly in the participant’s file along with any notes taken and the audio recording
from the interview prior to erasing it. Where the participant named specific institutions or
persons in the interview, these were given a factitious title or name in the final transcription of
the data and not mentioned by name or title in the dissertation or in any publication. The results
of the study were made available to the participants of the study upon request. Further assurances
were made that any subsequent publications, reports, or presentations will maintain all
information as anonymous and confidential as referenced in the Informed Consent Form
(Appendix B and C). Only the researcher assistant, research supervisor and I reviewed the
transcripts but personal identifying information was not included. The audio recordings were
only reviewed by the researcher and the research assistant and transcribed and coded to provide
additional confidentiality prior to turning the transcripts over to the primary researcher.

All notes, documents, recordings, and transcripts were encrypted and kept in a secured
and locked compartment within the primary office of the primary investigator. Any information
obtained by the research assistant was turned over to the primary investigator within five
business days following the conclusion of the participant interviews and subsequent debrief.
While in the possession of the research assistant, the protocol listed above was followed to secure
notes, data, documents, recordings, and transcripts. The recordings were erased by the research
assistant once the transcripts were transcribed and turned over to the primary researcher. All data, records, notes, transcripts, and recordings will be kept for two years pending approval of the dissertation by the University of Toronto. After a two year period has passed, the documents, notes, and transcripts will be erased from any electronic sources and any physical copies will be destroyed. All recordings were erased to ensure that there is no method to retrieve such information.

Confidentiality, while not necessary, enabled participants to share information, perspectives, and opinions more freely. The participants’ identity was secured and confidentially was established to ensure the greatest degree of open communication and participation possible. There was very little if any risk associated with this research. The participants signed an informed consent form and were verbally asked to confirm that they have read and understood informed consent prior to being interviewed. The participants were further asked to provide information that is public and widely available via institutional archives and electronic retrieval. They were given access to a summary of the interview and were given an opportunity to clarify any misinterpretation of comments or provide clarifying contextual statements. Furthermore, they were given the option to withdraw at any time up to and including the review following the interview. Any comment that could potentially identify a specific individual was excluded from the study or paraphrased to ensure that it is not identifiable. The data is not sensitive and the participants are highly educated professionals that can make rational and informed decisions about participating. There is no more risk involved than in everyday interactions.

3.7 Data analysis

Great care and attention was given to ensure that the participants’ perspective was accurately captured and reflected in the interviews. This was further tested by ensuring that the
interview participant had the opportunity to verify transcribed notes and offer any clarifying statements to ensure that the context for any comments had been accurately communicated. The study ensures that there is a clear audit trail for all documentation and that data is cross referenced between the two interviewees and the document analysis and that the qualitative framework that establishes validity was followed. The study followed Wolcott’s suggestion to “talk a little, listen a lot; record observations accurately; begin writing early; let readers ‘see’ for themselves; report fully; be candid; seek feedback; and write accurately” (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006 p. 410). This guidance was central to the interview protocol to help inform the research process. Each document was coded and both the documents and participant interviews were thoroughly examined to sort into themes in three important ways.

Firstly, the documents and interviews were examined to uncover any themes that emerged from the study. Next, the documents and interviews were compared to the CCSSE thematic framework to answer the primary research questions of the study. Finally, the documents and interviews were cross referenced with the conclusions and recommendations of the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students to organize information found through the document and interview analysis. The coded documents and participant interviews were examined to look for trends and were coded to show how many times themes or findings were consistent or different. Where a theme did not relate to either the CCSSE thematic framework or the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students, the researcher sorted the findings into themes above and beyond those identified by the two frameworks.

3.7.1 Themes that emerged from the study

The first analysis considered if there were further themes that were identified through the document and interview analysis that were different from either the CCSSE thematic framework
or the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. These themes were created using colour coded cards for each observation that the researcher had developed after reviewing each section of the document and interview analysis. The observations were then grouped into similar themes and organized into a theme that best described the participant’s meaning and observations from the document analysis. To ensure that the coding was reasonable and accurately captured the substance from the document and interview analysis, both the researcher and research assistant sorted the observations and identified the themes that are presented. This final analysis resulted in additional themes that are shared in Chapter 4 Presentation of Findings section of this study. The final analysis then considered if there were any further themes that were identified through the document and interview analysis that were different from either the CCSSE thematic framework or the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. These themes were created using colour coded cards for each observation that I had developed after reviewing each section of the document and the interview analysis. The observations were then grouped into similar themes and organized into a theme that best described the participant’s meaning and observations from the document analysis. To ensure that the coding was reasonable and accurately captured the substance from the document and interview analysis, both the researcher assistant and I sorted the observations and identified the themes that are presented. This analysis resulted in additional themes that are shared in Chapter 4 Presentation of Findings section of this study.

3.7.2 CCSSE Thematic framework

In order to ensure reliability of the qualitative data, the questionnaire was focused on ensuring trustworthiness and understanding (Gay, Mills and Airasian, 2006). To establish credibility, the study is grounded in the CCSSE thematic framework as a tested model and longitudinal study of three-year community colleges (Marti, 2006; McClenney & Marti, 2009).
The content of both the document analysis and the participant interviews was cross referenced with the CCSSE thematic framework to establish the degree to which the CCSSE themes were related to the documents examined and the interviews. Additionally, the selection of the three sites ensures that the three large urban Ontario colleges have meaningful similarities. Any differences uncovered have been clearly documented and referenced in the study. Each of the documents and the participant interviews with the twelve questions from the questionnaire was examined and coded. Table 2.0 shows the total sample of each of the six participant interviews, twelve questions and each of the five CCSSE themes. Each theme could potentially be represented within the six interviews up to a maximum of 12 times for a total sample of N = 72.

The analysis focuses on how relevant the CCSSE thematic framework was related to both the document analysis and interview analysis.

**Table: 2.0 Frequency of CCSSE Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews Questions</th>
<th>Q 1</th>
<th>Q 2</th>
<th>Q 3</th>
<th>Q 4</th>
<th>Q 5</th>
<th>Q 6</th>
<th>Q 7</th>
<th>Q 8</th>
<th>Q 9</th>
<th>Q 10</th>
<th>Q 11</th>
<th>Q 12</th>
<th>N= 72</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active &amp; collaborative learning</td>
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<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>N= 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student effort</td>
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<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>N= 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic challenge</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
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<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>N= 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student – faculty interaction</td>
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<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
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<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>N= 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for learners</td>
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<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>n=6</td>
<td>N= 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSSE frequency of themes: total</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
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<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td>N= 30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.7.3 Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students

The conclusions and implications from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students was also used as a further lens to analyze the data in order to add more Canadian context when examining the results of both the interviews and the document analysis and to draw conclusions about the efficacy of the CCSSE thematic framework given some of the unique system design issues for Ontario Colleges. The conclusions and recommendations from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students had the following six themes identified:

1. Meeting the diverse needs of college/institute students
2. Skills development needs of college and institute students
3. Career information and guidance
4. Student engagement
5. Difficulties during the first term
6. Holistic student success model

(Dietsche, 2007)

This additional lens provides another opportunity to examine the interviews and documents to uncover similarities or differences. It also provides a Canadian view that has shed important light onto the efficacy of the CCSSE survey as a tool to apply against the orientation and transition programs of large urban Ontario colleges. It should be noted that all three of the colleges included in this case study were also participants of the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students. Following the first analysis to uncover how frequently the CCSSE thematic framework applied to the participant interview, a second analysis was performed using each of the twelve questions and the six participant’s response to each question to determine how frequently the responses related to the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The
interviews were coded to consider how frequently the findings from the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students were similar to the findings of this case study. Table 3.0 shows the total sample of each of the six participant interviews, twelve questions and each of the six themes drawn from the implications and recommendations from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. Each theme could potentially be represented within the six interviews up to a maximum of 12 times for a total sample of N = 72. The analysis focused on how relevant the themes drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students were in relation to both the document analysis and interview analysis.

Table: 3.0 Frequency of Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting the diverse needs of students</td>
<td>n=6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills development needs of students</td>
<td>n=6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career information &amp; guidance</td>
<td>n=6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>n=6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties during the first term</td>
<td>n=6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic student success model</td>
<td>n=6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This approach to the document and interview analysis ensured that the primary research questions could be answered, particularly whether the CCSSE thematic framework could be used as a tool to inform strategy concerning the approach to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. Additionally, in order to determine if the approach to orientation and transition at the three sites utilizes comprehensive and deliberate approaches to
student orientation and transition the themes from the literature including the Pan Canadian
Study of First Year College Students is used to help further organize information, account for
Canadian specific and other themes identified in the literature.

3.8 Limitations

One of the key weaknesses with this type of qualitative research is the limited nature of
the opinion expressed. In large urban colleges, there may be various participants involved in
developing and implementing strategies related to orientation and transition programs. The
individuals interviewed may not be aware of all institutional practices in place and may not have
been an expert in the subject as many Canadian institutions assign orientation and transition to a
senior administrator as part of their larger portfolio. All six participants were directly or
indirectly involved between 2005 and 2010. The retrospective nature of the case study is a
limitation as the interview analysis does not fully account for the most recent practices in place in
each of the three colleges after 2010. While the case study does not take into a full analysis of
developments since 2010, the standard questionnaire did ask participants what new activities or
practices have been put in place since 2010. In order to help limit the impact of this, the initial
letter to the President identified the type of information that would be examined as part of the
study. In addition, once the individual was identified, the interview questions were provided in
advance so that any required information could be obtained in advance of the scheduled
interview. The written transcripts were also shared in order to validate the interview and to offer
a chance to correct any information that may be out of context or incomplete.

Another limitation of this case study concerns the document analysis that was conducted.
This document analysis used a standard protocol to retrieve readily available public documents.
The study employed a standard electronic search with specific variables included and therefore
may not uncover all institutional documents concerning orientation and transition related to student success. The document analysis was for the period between 2005 and 2010. Documents may have been removed from the public web sites and would therefore be excluded from this document analysis. To help mitigate against this, the interview participants were asked to provide specific documents related to orientation and transition and student success to supplement the document retrieval process. This document analysis should be viewed as a reasonable sample of publicly retrievable documents rather than a complete review and analysis of all institutional documents.

With respect to terminology and themes, consideration was given to ensure that there is consistency in the interpretation of the meaning of key terms. To limit differences, definitions of key terms were provided in advance when the interview questions were submitted to the interviewees. The other main limitation of this qualitative study is the number of participants. Based on the small sample size, this study seeks to gain a thorough understanding of the three selected sites and a deep understanding from the key leaders rather than seeking consensus from all stakeholders involved. The study is therefore not generalizable and further research is required to examine quantitative evidence or to examine whether the findings of this case study are applicable to other large urban colleges as well as small and mid-sized colleges in Ontario. The specific characteristics of the colleges in the study also limit the ability of the findings to be applied to other colleges that have different characteristics including – but not limited to – student population and educational setting.

3.9 Summary of Methodology

This case study employed a qualitative and comparative approach to analyze three separate institutions and their respective approaches to orientation and transition programs
retrospectively between 2005 and 2010. The study employed a document analysis to examine seven document types to determine the frequency that each document had information concerning the orientation and transition practices related to a broader student success strategy at each of the three colleges that participated in the study. The study included six participant interviews from the three colleges to further examine the perceptions and opinions of two key leaders responsible for orientation and transition at each of the institutions who were directly or indirectly involved between 2005 and 2010. The interviews were examined to understand themes that emerge. The interviews were then analyzed using two tools to examine how frequently the interview responses related to: 1) the CCSSE thematic framework and 2) the implications and conclusions drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The results from the document and interview analysis were compared to identify similarities and differences and the observations were presented and conclusions drawn from the analysis.

The design of this case study with three institutions in Ontario may provide valuable information about program and activity design that may inform future research or strategy development. The participants may discover activities and ideas that could support, enhance, or modify existing practices in place. The study may inform practices related to retention and student success in college settings that could improve student performance. Orientation and transition programs are a vital component of a broader student success strategy. By establishing best practices and ensuring that their role in student success is understood, orientation and transition programs can have a meaningful impact on student retention in Ontario colleges. Such an improvement serves to benefit students, colleges, the Ontario Government, and society as a whole.
4.0 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The presentation of findings details the information that was obtained from the documentary analysis as well as the interviews of six participants from the three sites included in this case study. The documentary analysis is based on information pertaining to orientation and transition as it relates to a broader student success strategy. The six participant interviews are based on a standard set of twelve questions that focus on the senior student affairs administrator’s perspective at each of the three colleges as well as a front line manager, faculty or staff at each of the three colleges. The documents and the interviews are reviewed and analyzed using two tools: 1) the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and 2) the recommendations and implications from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The analysis is focused on understanding to what extent orientation and transition practices from the three college participants in this case study relate to the Community Colleges Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework. Additionally, the case study examines whether the findings are similar to or different than the recommendations and policy implications identified in findings from the 2007 Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The findings from the documentary analysis and the interview analysis are correlated to discover similarities and differences and are reviewed in relation to the literature as part of the analysis. Finally, all of the findings were examined from the North American, Canadian and Ontario context and additional themes observed in this study are presented.

4.1 Documentary Analysis

In order to ensure a consistent approach to the documentary analysis, a standard protocol was used to retrieve documents electronically. An electronic search was conducted using the
Google advanced search tool. The customized search allowed for a narrow search by specifying fields relevant to the study. The fields included language, region, last update, site or domain name, terms appearing and file type. Using this approach has certain limitations as it does not guarantee that every applicable document was retrieved. The search was limited to documents available to the public and readily searchable. The search examined the period between 2005 and 2010 and, as such, documents may have been subsequently removed from the three college websites. Additionally, the documents were reviewed by the research assistant and I independently to determine applicability to the case study. The findings were then compared to determine a final list of relevant documents that were analyzed. Applying a standard search protocol provided a consistent approach that was applied against each of the three colleges within the study. The intent of the electronic search was to obtain documents that form a part of the analysis for this comparative case study. The documentary analysis should be viewed as a reasonable sampling of key college information rather than a complete analysis of every document that is available on the subject of orientation and transition and student success.

The document retrieval supplements the qualitative interviews in an effort to correlate perceptions of the participants and public documents to establish linkages to the orientation and transition practices in place at each of the three colleges in relation to broader student success strategies. The search produced 46 key documents that could potentially form part of this documentary analysis. Of the 46 documents retrieved, 15 were not relevant while the remaining 31 documents had content that was related to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. Each of the documents met the standard search criteria and contained references to either, orientation and transition or student success. The 46 documents were then reviewed first by the research assistant and then I independently reviewed them to determine if
the document was in fact relevant to the study. Following the independent reviews the research assistant and I compared notes to determine which documents to include in the detailed document analysis. Of the 15 documents that were not relevant, the documents were examined and did not have content applicable to student orientation and transition or student success. In general, most of the documents either: a) referenced orientation and transition that was not related to students or b) referenced the terminology student success but did not have any further information that could be analyzed. The 31 relevant documents were categorized into 7 subcategories as follows:

1. Annual plans or reports

2. Minutes or notes from governing bodies

3. Policy documents

4. Related program documents

5. Multi-year accountability reports

6. Orientation documents

7. Student success documents

The following table summarizes the results of the search at each of the three colleges and organizes the 31 documents with content related to orientation and transition into 7 subcategories as outlined in Table 4.0 Document Analysis Type and Number by College.
When reviewing the 31 relevant documents that formed part of this analysis, the four overarching research questions of the case study were examined.

1. What student orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?

2. To what extent are three large urban colleges utilizing comprehensive and deliberate approaches to student orientation and transition?

3. To what extent are these three colleges using student orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?
4. To what extent do these practices relate to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

The document analysis was designed to describe the findings, analyze the information and develop themes that emerged from the research (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). The findings are presented in three formats as follows:

1. A summary of observations from each of the seven document categories identified in Table 4.0 for each of the three colleges in this study
2. The observations are presented in section 4.1.8 Document Analysis Summary
3. The findings are then summarized in section 4.1.9 Document Analysis Results and Research Questions as they align to the primary research questions of this study

The documents included within the analysis were examined to determine how each of the three colleges described orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy and in what context information was captured. The relevant documents were reviewed to find evidence from public records from college governance, strategies, policies and practices related to orientation and transition and that contained references linking them to documented student success strategies between the period of 2005 and 2010. The documentary analysis was also used to assess how information is expressed in different documents and how information is presented or reported upon within the documents. The case study research also related the document analysis to information discovered through the interviews in the latter part of this chapter.

**4.1.0 Observations by Document Category and College**
4.1.1 Annual plans or reports

Each college normally produces an annual report and typically produces an annual plan that drives the business development needs of the organization. The annual report is a self-reported tool that highlights key activities and, strategies or programs that the organization wants to draw attention to. It is an important tool that provides observers with information pertaining to some aspect of the operation. The annual plan or reports from the three colleges were examined for references to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy between 2005 and 2010. All three of the colleges had between two and four references within the documents that were retrieved electronically out of the potential 5 years that were reviewed. The following represents the findings from each of the three colleges.

4.1.1(a) College A

Between 2005 and 2010, College A referenced orientation and transition in relation to student success in two of the five years examined. The Annual Reports for College A referenced transition specifically and linked it to efforts surrounding student success. The college highlighted a successful start as an essential aspect of supporting student success. The college noted that it had piloted activities and strategies related to student success for students at-risk of early leaving. Within the reports, the College identified future goals for student success. The reports identified a student success plan and made the linkages between orientation and transition and student success.

4.1.1(b) College B

College B made reference to orientation and transition as part of student success in four out of five of the years examined. The College included references to orientation and transition and specifically linked the efforts to student success strategies. The College identified goals and
reported on progress in relation to retention and student success. With respect to orientation and transition the College identified a focus on welcoming new students to the college.

4.1.1(c) College C

During the period between 2005 and 2010, College C included references to orientation and transition and student success in annual reports or plans related to activity at the College, three times. The references highlighted sub-populations within the approach to orientation and student success. The College set out a plan to build a student success plan or strategy and linked orientation and transition within this context.

In summary, all three colleges had between two and four references in annual reports or plans concerning orientation and transition and all three link these efforts to student success. All three identified goals but varied on the degree to which the goals were specific. None of the three had explicit goals that can be measured or reported upon in these reports. The three colleges vary on the use of strategies or plans and none reference a comprehensive strategy. For the purpose of this study, a comprehensive strategy is viewed as having a number of widely understood elements including: understanding the end goal, managing change, making evidence based decisions, developing a clear plan with steps, actions and goals, organizational alignment, continuous improvement, communications plans and measurable goals and outcomes. In general, the three colleges referenced pilots or activities versus a comprehensive strategy. In particular, none of the three colleges had clearly articulated and measurable goals and outcomes documented. Only one of the three referenced a sub-population and targeted efforts for these populations related to orientation and transition. Among the three colleges, two identified orientation and transition by 2007 while one of the colleges identified these issues in 2009.
Among the nine annual plans or reports retrieved as part of the documentary analysis, none of the nine contained references to the literature or research related to this field of study.

4.1.2 Minutes or Notes from Governing Bodies

Each college produces minutes or notes from the proceedings of key college governing bodies. These minutes or notes serve as a public record of proceedings and provide evidence of discussions that governing bodies engage in. The discussions with Boards of Governors tend to be limited to key strategic discussions and in some cases key operational information that Governors need to know in order to discharge their duties related to good governance, due diligence and risk mitigation. The documentary analysis concerning this grouping of documents followed the same retrieval protocol and therefore, provides a sampling of readily available public documents rather than a comprehensive analysis of all of the proceedings of governing bodies. Between 2005 and 2010, governing bodies would normally meet between 8 and 12 times annually at each of the three colleges. Over the five year period, this represents a potential of between 40 and 60 meetings of the governing bodies at the three colleges. Within this subcategory, only two out of the three colleges had minutes or notes from the proceedings of governing bodies related to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. Among the two colleges, one college had three documents and the other had one document that contained references to orientation and transition and/or student success.

4.1.2(a) College A

College A did not have any documents that were retrieved using the standard protocol employed by this case study pertaining to minutes or notes of governing bodies. While the standard retrieval did not produce any documents, it is possible that documents were produced in other formats, were removed since 2010 or were not shared on the public website.
4.1.2(b) College B

The second college had three documents related to minutes or notes from governing bodies that referenced either, orientation and transition specifically, or student success more broadly. This college made reference to both and linked orientation and transition to a student success plan. In three separate documents representing two different years, the college reported on activities related to orientation and transition and linked the reports to student success. The reports went further and established goals for retention as part of the student success plan. Furthermore, the governors engaged in a discussion related to the student success plan and the targets that were included in the reports. Two of the reports were within one year, demonstrating follow up and attention to the matter by the governors.

4.1.2(c) College C

The third college referenced orientation and transition related to student success in one set of minutes for the governing council between 2005 and 2010. There was a brief mention of orientation and transition activities in one report. There were no documents uncovered using the standard protocol that demonstrated that the governors of the college focused discussion on orientation and transition related to student success.

This information raises an interesting question for further investigation in order to fully understand the extent to which governing bodies have spent time considering issues pertaining to orientation and transition or student success as a key institutional strategy. This documentary analysis did not uncover substantial evidence of thorough discussions as captured through publicly retrievable minutes or notes of governing bodies between 2005 and 2010. It should be noted that although the document analysis did not uncover substantial references, additional
information may be contained in minutes that are not public, were not posted to the website or have been removed since 2010.

4.1.3 Policy Documents

Another important aspect of any institution is the policy framework that it operates within. This case study examined policy documents by using the same retrieval protocol in order to examine the types of policies that each of the three colleges have concerning orientation and transition as it related to student success. Policies serve to codify key aspects of operations and serve to guide business decisions. Policies are normally public and reinforce key strategies and information that an organization deems important. Some organizations also use procedures and these may or may not be public and as such, absence of a policy does not mean that an organization does not value a topic, theme or area of the business. Policies do however set out rules that stakeholders including staff need to follow.

4.1.3(a) College A

College A did not have any policy documents that were retrieved using the standard retrieval protocol used by this study pertaining to orientation and transition related to student success.

4.1.3(b) College B

The second college had one policy that related to student withdrawal and referenced student success. It is interesting to note that this policy made substantial references to the themes captured within the literature and this case study including student success, persistence, retention and redirection. It further clarified staffing roles with respect to the withdrawal process and referenced several roles with different positional leadership within the college related to student
success or academic administration. The document retrieval did not uncover any other policy
documents related to orientation and transition or student success.

4.1.3(c) College C

College C did not have any policy documents that were retrieved using the standard protocol used within this study.

The three colleges examined as part of this study did not have a substantial policy framework related to orientation and student success as part of a broader student success strategy. This observation will be examined further in section 4.1.8 Document Analysis Summary and Chapter 5 Analysis and Conclusions.

4.1.4 Related Program Documents

For the purposes of this case study, related programs refers to a program that was not specifically related to: 1) orientation and transition or 2) student success but is generally accepted to be a part of student success initiatives within a college or university and is typically captured within the literature concerning the broad study of student success. Additionally, in order for the program to be captured within this document analysis, specific reference to orientation and transition was included within the document being analyzed. Only one of the three colleges participating in the case study had a related program based on the criteria noted above. This could indicate that related programs were captured in other formats, were not posted to the website or were removed since 2010. Additionally, further exploration would be needed to discover whether there were other related programs that did not reference orientation and transition but were applicable. In the case of the latter, it could indicate that the colleges did not clearly make the linkages between orientation and transition for the public and does not necessarily mean that there were no related programs.
4.1.4(a) College A

College A did not have any related programs that were uncovered using the standard retrieval protocol for this study. This does not indicate, however, that there were no related programs. Further investigation would be needed to examine other documents that were not retrieved as part of this case study and may uncover additional related programs.

4.1.4(b) College B

The second college in the case study had one related program. The program focused on peer mentors and explicitly made the linkage between peer mentors and the orientation and transition program related to student success. The program was reported to an agency of the Ontario government and made references to academics, student success, staffing and monitoring as well as supporting tools related to the program.

4.1.4(c) College C

College C did not have any documents concerning related programs uncovered using this protocol. Further research into related programs may provide additional insights.

4.1.5 Multi-year Accountability Agreement (MYAA) Reports

In 2005, the Government of Ontario created the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) through the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act, 2005. Designed as an arm’s length agency of the government, HEQCO serves to evaluate the postsecondary sector and recommend improvements to the Minister (HEQCO, 2014). As part of this new agency the Government of Ontario also introduced the Multi-year Accountability Agreement (MYAA) in 2005 with the first reporting cycle starting in 2006-07. The MYAA sets out institutional goals and commitments and reports on progress against objectives. The process
was designed to evolve over time in order to improve quality. This system wide approach is aimed at improving results and demonstrating improvements.

All 24 Ontario Colleges are required to participate and therefore the three colleges that participated in this case study have data available for the periods between 2006 and 2010 and continued to collect data to the present day. Upon reviewing the four years of self-reported data within the MYAA and extracting the data into a table to conduct an analysis, glaring omissions are uncovered that render the data unreliable. The MYAA provides no standard definitions to determine calculations and ensure that quality data is collected and reported. Within the MYAA documents that were retrieved from the three college’s websites, there is missing data and discrepancies within each college and when comparing to one another. Within the self-reported retention rates, no definition exists and clear guidelines are not included. The result is a drastic range in self-reported retention rates ranging from 65 percent to 97 percent. When looking at graduation rates which tend to have a more stringent reporting framework there is less variation with a range of between 58 percent and 73 percent and in the later years there is even less variability between the three colleges. When looking at the self-reported data, it is clear that there are discrepancies as the calculations do not appear to relate to graduation rates. In one case, the college reports very high retention rates and a considerably lower graduation rate. When comparing this to one of the other colleges, the graduation rates are nearly identical yet the retention rates are dramatically different. Further research into the MYAA data is required in order to make any meaningful comparison concerning both retention and graduation rates. At best, the data can be used to measure institutional progress against internal benchmarks but given the high degree of variability, even this data may not be reliable. When factoring in demographic data from the MYAA to account for access agendas including Aboriginal learners, students with
disabilities, Francophone students, international students, mature and first generation students, the data continues to be flawed. Colleges self-report the data and there are gaps within some of the reporting years, there is little or no consistently reported data and there is a great deal of variation among the three colleges and in some cases within one college between different years. The MYAA reports also contain qualitative information that is self-reported by all colleges including the three colleges participating in this case study.

4.1.5(a) College A

College A self-reported information concerning orientation and transition related to student success in four out of four MYAA reports. The reports contained information about student success strategies, academic programs related to student success including math and communications and specific references to orientation and transition programs offered at the college for new students. While this college reported these activities, it should be noted that the college acknowledged that the programs were designed for only a portion of the study body. In later years, the college reported participation in research studies but did not reference specific literature or research within the report.

4.1.5(b) College B

The second college made specific reference to orientation and transition related to student success in one of the reporting periods. The college highlighted the demographic profile of its students and identified challenges with respect to student success based on the demographic profile of its students. The college referenced research efforts but does not make specific reference to the literature or any specific research from within the field of study.

4.1.5(c) College C
College C made references to orientation and transition in one of the reporting periods for specific sub-sets of the student population. The college made references to themes that appear in the literature but does not name any specific research or literature. In the following year, the college identified and referenced a student success pilot as part of an overall plan to improve retention and student success.

4.1.6 Orientation and Transition Documents

This case study is primarily focused on deliberate orientation and transition practices as part of broader student success strategies and as such, this section is particularly relevant. The documents in this area were examined to see if specific orientation and transition documents are publicly retrievable and how the documents related to the literature and research in this field of study. Were the practices grounded in research? What models or theories were being reflected in practice? What results were captured and have they been documented publicly? Two of the three colleges had specific documents concerning orientation and transition while one of the colleges made reference to orientation and transition activities within the annual report.

4.1.6(a) College A

College A had two documents of the 31 retrieved that captured specific information about orientation and transition. The two documents were related to the admissions package in 2010 and a specific and comprehensive document for international students. Within the documents, both made specific reference to orientation and transition and were linked directly to student success. Both stressed the importance of transitioning into the learning environment and provided extensive information about services and supports for students. The audience for both of these documents was students and the documents were also applicable to parents or family.
The admissions document specifically addressed orientation and transition and linked a number of services to the orientation process. The two documents were only available using the retrieval protocol for 2010. The materials did not reference the literature or research in this field of study. It is important to note that the document did quote other research pertaining to administrative data found in the college’s Key Performance Indicators and independent evaluative internal research.

4.1.6(b) College B

The second college had one document retrieved using the standard protocol that was specifically related to orientation and transition programs related to student success. The document was aimed at college faculty and staff and sets out goals pertaining to orientation and transition for 2007-08. The document was short rather than comprehensive and can be seen as a tactical plan. While the document did not directly reference the literature or research, it did clearly make the link to some of the key themes found within. The document highlighted motivation and confidence and tied it to the start of the semester.

4.1.6(c) College C

College C did not have any documents that were retrieved that specifically addressed orientation and transition using the standard retrieval protocol. While the college did not have any specific document, it did reference an orientation and transition plan within the annual report in 2010.

4.1.7 Student Success Documents

Within the college or university setting, student success is one, if not the primary, desired outcome that an institution strives for. Student success is well documented within the literature and extensive studies have been carried out in North America, Canada and Ontario.
Within the institution, the vision, mission and strategic plan normally drives the institutional behaviour and focus. This case study examines the strategies used to achieve student success in a number of ways. The document analysis looks at annual reports, the minutes and notes of governing bodies, policy documents and materials that relate specifically to orientation and transition and finally, multi-year accountability agreements and related reporting. Among all of these documents, those that specifically focus on strategies or plans to address student success are critical to fully understand the extent to which comprehensive and deliberate approaches are being employed and if orientation and transition is a component of such strategies. Among the three colleges in this case study, only one of the three had a publicly retrievable document related to a student success plan. One additional college made reference to the development of a student success plan in the annual plan of 2010. While this does not mean that the three colleges do not have student success plans or strategies, it does show that in relation to other key annual reports and accountability agreements, a student success strategy or plan is only specifically captured in 1 of 31 of the documents retrieved as part of this case study.

4.1.7(a) College A

College A did not have a document that was publicly retrievable using the standard protocol employed by this case study. It should be noted that during the interview process College A did provide a student success plan. The document is analyzed as part of section 4.3.

4.1.7(b) College B

The second college was the only college that had a publicly retrievable student success document that contained information about a plan or a strategy. The document was a short one pager that set out a number of actions related to student success and specifically referenced orientation and transition during one of the years between 2005 and 2010. The document was
clearly informed by the literature and appeared to account for Canadian specific content applicable to the Ontario context.

4.1.7(c) College C

College C did not have any publicly retrievable documents pertaining to student success uncovered using this standard protocol. While no documents were retrieved electronically, the college did reference the development of a student success plan within the annual report and some aspects of orientation and transition applicable to sub-sets of the student population. It should be noted that the references to the orientation and transition and the student success plan were more prevalent in 2009 to 2010. In particular, the college undertook an exercise to define student success with a broad stakeholder group at the institution during this period.

4.1.8 Document Analysis Summary

In summary, and as shown in Table 4.0, minutes or notes constituted only four out of the 31 relevant documents retrieved out of the 46 potential documents. Annual reports accounted for nine of 31 documents, while multi-year accountability agreements contained 12 of the 31 documents. This would appear to indicate that colleges were more likely to report orientation and transition related to student success as an element of a larger report rather than as a topic of Board discussion as evidenced by minutes of governing bodies. Within the minutes, there were no references to the literature or research concerning this field of study. This poses interesting questions concerning the strategic topics for Board discussion during the period between 2005 and 2010. It would appear to indicate that orientation and transition practices as part of a broader student success strategy was not central to Board discussions during this period. Each college would typically meet between 8 and 12 times annually representing a potential of 40 to 60 sets of minutes over the 5 year period of this study at each of the three colleges. In total, there were only
4 references captured in the minutes that were retrieved using the protocol that were related to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. This document analysis also shows that compared to annual reports and multi-year accountability agreements, the minutes contained less information concerning orientation and transition and student success.

Of the 31 documents that were analyzed based on the standard retrieval protocol used for this case study, only one college referenced a related program that linked orientation and transition to student success. Based on this case study there was considerably less information about related programs than reports, plans, agreements and minutes concerning orientation and transition related to student success. It should be noted that the documentary analysis for this section did not uncover any references to the literature or research.

When looking at the three colleges in this study, only one of the 31 documents retrieved was related to policy concerning student success and none were specifically related to orientation and transition. This is an area for further investigation as additional policy information may be available in different formats, may have been removed since 2010 or may be captured in procedures. In general, policies related to the central questions of this study were not readily available based on a public search of the website using the protocol employed in this study. Policy was significantly less represented in only one of the 31 relevant documents compared to reports, plans, minutes, agreements, program documents or strategies. While the policy clearly shows some implicit consideration for themes from the literature and the research, there was no explicit reference to it.

When comparing the three colleges, one of the three made extensive references to both orientation and transition as well as student success consistently throughout the MYAA documents. Two of the three colleges have more information in the latter two years than the first
two years between 2005 and 2010. All three colleges present information in different formats and clearly calculate data in different ways. Within the MYAA documents from the three colleges it is clear that the definitions were not provided and therefore, the data is not reliable and the validity of the data cannot be tested and may not be reliable for comparison purposes.

Of the 31 documents retrieved, only three were specific orientation and transition documents. Two of the three documents were meant for students while one of the three was directed at faculty and staff. One of the colleges did not have a specific document but did reference orientation and transition in an annual report. While this is not conclusive, it does indicate that orientation and transition tactics and strategies are not readily accessible using a standard electronic document search. The documents that were uncovered were not comprehensive and did not have clear linkages to student success plans or strategies. Goals were limited to one of the three colleges and the goals were not specific or measurable and can be viewed more as a framework. Additional research into this area would be important to fully understand the extent to which tactics, activities, programs and strategies exist and how clearly they reference the literature and body of research in this field. It should be noted that while these documents were not publicly retrievable, they may have been more focused as internal documents for administrators and staff. It is unclear how readily available these documents would be to staff and whether communication concerning orientation and transition is greater than it would appear by strictly looking at this documentary analysis. Among the documents retrieved, none specifically referenced the literature or research in this field of study.

Through the document analysis, the 31 relevant documents of the 46 retrieved using the standard protocol were examined. Two of the relevant plans retrieved were student success documents as referenced in section 4.1.7. The two student success documents were internal and
made more extensive references to strategy for stakeholders and appeared to be geared towards the senior management of the colleges. The documents reviewed were weak on formal outcomes and strategies for assessment and evaluation. Greater linkages were made to the literature in these documents. During the period between 2005 and 2010, the documents could be described as exploratory/pilot or plans as opposed to complete strategies at two of the three colleges. One of the three colleges did not have a publicly retrievable document. College A did provide a student success plan during the interviews and therefore, the analysis is included in section 4.2.7 where information from the document and interview analysis was cross referenced and similarities and differences were explored. It should be noted that the other two colleges also provided student success documents during the interviews and those two documents were the same documents that were publicly retrieved and included in this document analysis.

4.1.9 Document Analysis Results and Research Questions

The final section of the document analysis summary examines the observations in relation to the four primary research questions of the study:

1. What student orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?

2. To what extent are three large urban colleges utilizing comprehensive and deliberate approaches to student orientation and transition?

3. To what extent are these three colleges using student orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?

4. To what extent do these practices relate to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

4.1.9 (i) Orientation and transition practices
The document analysis revealed that all three colleges had orientation and transition practices in place between 2005 and 2010. In general, the publicly retrievable documents did not have extensive information about the orientation and transition practices in place at each of the three colleges but did reference the activities and programs. The greatest number of references to orientation and transition practices was contained within the Multi-year Accountability Agreement reports from each college followed by annual plans or reports. College A also had specific publicly retrievable orientation and transition documents related to international students as well as a comprehensive admissions package that included information about orientation and transition. College B had a document that was geared towards faculty and staff and outlined the goals of the student success plan including orientation and transition. College C did not have any specific orientation and transition documents. The document analysis uncovered clear evidence that there were orientation and transition practices at each of the three colleges in place.

4.1.9 (ii) Comprehensive and deliberate approaches

When examining all 31 relevant documents retrieved using the standard retrieval protocol, there was considerable evidence that orientation and transition practices at each of the three colleges were deliberate and intentionally planned. Over the period between 2005 and 2010, there was increasing evidence in the latter years of the study that orientation and transition approaches were becoming more intentionally planned and more comprehensive moving from an orientation day to an orientation process. The documents were less conclusive with respect to the degree to which the orientation and transition practices were comprehensive.

For the purpose of the study, I examined the documents to find evidence that the problem was clearly defined and understood, the goals were clearly articulated, the programs and activities were college-wide rather than confined to a small portion of the student body, goals
were specific and measurable and there was evidence of a communication plan to key stakeholders. In order to be considered comprehensive, I was looking for evidence of the aforementioned elements. The document analysis revealed that all three colleges had tactical and strategic elements in place but could be described as more exploratory or pilot rather than comprehensive. This question is explored further in the interview analysis sections 4.2 and 4.3.

4.1.9 (iii) Orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy

All three colleges had clear evidence that linked orientation and transition to student success. In most cases, each of the 31 relevant documents made explicit references to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. The document analysis provides strong evidence that each of the three colleges consider orientation and transition to be a critical element of student success consistent with the literature.

4.1.9 (iv) CCCSE and Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students

The document analysis did not provide conclusive evidence that the CCSSE thematic framework would be a good model fit for orientation and transition programs as part of a broader student success strategy as the specific themes could not be distilled from the documents reviewed. The documents were typically brief in nature and provided a short description about orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy rather than a detailed account of the practices in place. Similarly, the document analysis did not provide conclusive evidence that the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students could be used to inform that design of orientation and transition programs. This question was explored further in the interview analysis.
4.2 Participant Interviews

This case study uses a qualitative research design in order to gain an understanding of the practitioner’s perspective and the context that the participant brings to the study. Gay, Mills and Airasian state: “Qualitative research questions encompass a range of topics, but most focus on participants’ understanding of meanings and social life in a particular context” (Gay, Mills and Airasian, 2006, p. 61). There were six participants from three college sites that participated in the case study. Three of the participants were senior student affairs administrators while three of the participants were either front line managers or faculty coordinators. All six of the participants that were contacted to engage in the study agreed representing 100% participation. Among the six participants, five were directly involved in orientation and transition design and delivery for the college during the period between 2005 and 2010. One of the six participants was indirectly involved during the period between 2005 and 2010 and was very knowledgeable about the period in question. Additionally, this participant is now directly responsible for the orientation and transition programs at the college. The high degree of involvement by the six participants ensures that the interview responses are relevant and credible.

It should be noted that this can result in differing view-points based on positional leadership within the organization and roles and responsibilities. When the interviews were analyzed, any differences based on these factors were presented in the findings. The interviews were conducted in person with the participants and the notes were reviewed with the participants. Participation was strictly voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all six interviewees. All six participants agreed to have the information included and all six provided answers to the
12 standard questions. It should be noted that 11 of the standard interview questions were retrospective and represented the period between 2005 and 2010 while the final question asked the participants to share what new practices were put in place after 2010.

Random coding was used to ensure confidentiality of the participants and identities are not disclosed. Where the content of a quote would divulge the identity of a participant, the information has been summarized or paraphrased in order that it cannot be directly associated with any of the case study participants.

The first analysis of the interview responses was conducted by me as the primary researcher to examine the frequency that ideas were expressed by the six participants. Each key idea that was expressed by each of the six participants was manually captured on a coloured card. The researcher noted whether the response was from College A, B or C and indicated whether the response was from interviewee #1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6. Once all of the key ideas were captured and coded in this manner, I sorted the cards to identify common ideas or concepts that were being expressed in the interviews. To ensure consistency, I reviewed the themes that were identified with the research assistant to validate and cross reference the themes that emerged as identified by me as the primary researcher. Once all of the themes were identified, tables were created and the results tabulated to determine the frequency that each concept was identified by each of the six participants.

The second analysis that I conducted was focused on capturing the frequency that participant responses to the interview questions were related to the CCSSE thematic framework. For this analysis, I created tables to tabulate the frequency that the participant’s ideas were similar or applicable to the five CCSSE themes. Following this analysis, I repeated the process a second time using the six themes drawn from the implications and recommendations from the
Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students to account for Canadian and Ontario specific content and research. The case study also examined similarities and differences with respect to the recommendations and conclusions of the Pan-Canadian Study of First Year College Students and this case study to account for system design issues of Ontario’s colleges. The Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students (2005) is a Canadian research project conducted by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) by the principal investigator Dr. Peter Dietsche. The entry survey was conducted at 102 Canadian colleges with 28,992 responses (Dietsche, 2007). Within Ontario, two-thirds of all colleges participated and each of the three colleges included in this case study participated as well as the college noted in the HEQCO study cited in this study. Of the 102 sites that participated in an August – September survey, 92 participated in the November – December survey with 17,642 student responses (Dietsche, 2007). The study represents a significant sample of Canadian first year college students. The findings of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students are specifically relevant and provide rich data related to the Ontario and Canadian experience and context.

4.2.1 Framework for Interview Analysis

The interview analysis focuses on the 12 standard questions posed to the six participants as a retrospective analysis of the period between 2005 and 2010. The observations and responses from the interviews were analyzed related to three different lenses as follows:

1. Themes that emerged as identified by the primary researcher when examining the interview results
2. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement thematic framework
3. Similarities and difference related to the conclusions and implications section of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students
The first section of the interview analysis deals with the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview responses and were further informed by the observations from the document analysis. These additional themes were different from both the CCSSE thematic framework and the conclusions and implications drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.

The CCSSE thematic framework was used as one tool to organize the information from the six participants to determine whether the responses were related to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. The qualitative responses were sorted, coded and tabulated to examine whether the CCSSE themes were related to or present within the interview responses for each of the 12 questions. The analysis focused on the frequency that each theme could be reported based on the responses made by the six participants to the 12 questions. The findings were then analyzed to determine how frequently the CCSSE tool related to the approach to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy within the three colleges included in this case study. There are five themes within the CCSSE tool as follows:

1. Active and collaborative learning
2. Student effort
3. Academic challenge
4. Student – faculty interaction
5. Support for learners

(CCSE, 2010)

The final tool that was used to sort the findings from the participant interviews was the themes contained within the conclusions and implications drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of
First Year College Students. The interviews were analyzed to examine how often each of the following themes was mentioned:

1. Meeting the diverse needs of students
2. Skills development needs of students
3. Career information and guidance
4. Student engagement
5. Difficulties during the first term
6. Holistic student success model

(Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students, 2007)

The analysis of the interview results focuses first on the CCSSE thematic framework and then used themes from the conclusions and implications from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students as an additional tool to organize information and examine the frequency of themes found within the six participant interviews.

4.2.2 Presentation of responses to interview questions

The results of the interview analysis are presented below for each of the three frameworks: 1) themes observed in the interview analysis as noted above; 2) the CCSSE thematic framework, and, 3) conclusions and implications from the Pan Canadian Survey of First Year College Students. I reviewed the transcripts from each of the six study participants to each of the twelve questions. It should be noted that one concept that arose from the observations can fall into all three frameworks if applicable. The responses were tabulated and captured in a table with percentages calculated to determine the frequency of the responses in relation to each of the three types of analysis.

The first review focused on the themes that emerged from the participant interviews that were not related to either the CCSSE thematic framework or the Pan Canadian Study of First
Year College Students. I sorted each response based on the content and assigned a colour for each category of themes. I identified themes that emerged and grouped the responses accordingly based on ideas or concepts that the participants mentioned during the interviews. The process of identification of themes was also informed by the observations from the document analysis. The themes that emerged are presented in Table 5.0 and indicate the frequency that each theme was mentioned during the six participant interviews. The second review focused on the CCSSE thematic framework. I coded each section of the interview response by assigning a colour to each response that was related to one of the five CCSSE themes. The results were tabulated to determine the frequency that the six participant responses were related to each of the five CCSSE themes and are presented in Table 6.0. The final review focused on the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students and repeated the same process specified above and are presented in Table 7.0. Each section of the participant responses was reviewed and was assigned a colour when the response was related to one of the six themes from the conclusions and implications section of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.

4.2.3 Themes Identified from Interview Results

In order to sort the information collected from the interview analysis and informed by the document analysis, key concepts were captured on cards and coded in relation to the interview responses and observations from the document analysis. Once the cards were coded, they were sorted by both the research assistant and I, I then cross referenced to identify themes that emerged. The themes that emerged were different than those from either the CCSSE thematic framework or the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The following additional themes and sub-themes were identified:

1. Strategy and intentional planning
This section presents the findings from the interview questions by the six participants. Table 5.0 shows the frequency with which the content of the interview responses was applicable to the additional themes and sub-themes that I identified. The themes were also informed by the observations from the document analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Findings</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
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<th>Q7</th>
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<th>Q9</th>
<th>Q10</th>
<th>Q11</th>
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<th>Total Q’s</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy and intentional planning</td>
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<td>Policy framework</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>7%</td>
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</table>

Table 5.0 Interview Themes
Table 5.0 represents additional themes that I identified through observations from both the document and interview analysis. The values presented in Table 5.0 indicate how frequently the six participants responses were related to the 11 additional themes captured in the columns. Table 5.0 presents how often each participant mentioned the theme and the two right hand columns indicate the total that each additional theme was mentioned for all twelve questions out of a maximum 72 (6 participants x 12 questions). The two bottom rows show how often the 11 additional themes were mentioned by the six participants for each individual question out of a maximum total of 66 (11 themes x 6 participants) and the percentage of the totals. The following is a summary of the findings based on the 11 themes that emerged.

4.2.3 (i) Strategy and intentional planning

Strategy and intentional planning was the most prevalent theme that merged from the six interviewee responses to the 12 standard interview questions with 57 out of a potential 72 or 79%
of responses related to this theme. The participants had a range of responses that highlighted the
evolution of orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. Overall,
participant responses indicated that the focus on orientation and transition was more strategic
each year from 2005 to 2010 and beyond. In particular, participants shared that the approach to
orientation and transition was evolving from a single event to a process. One participant stated:
“From 2005 to 2010 and beyond, we’ve been trying very hard to go from what is a
comprehensive events based programming to more of a process over time. Orientation is not an
event it’s a process. We’ve been moving in that direction.” (Interviewee # 4, College C). The
comments showed a clear evolution and participants shared perspectives about a number of pilot
activities that were tested during this period. The focus also shifted from a welcome and social
event to a holistic approach to support new students aligned with student success. Interview
questions 10 and 11 focused on orientation and transition as part of a broader student success
strategy and whether efforts were formal or informal. Interview questions 10 and 11 each had 5
out of 6 responses related to strategy and intentional planning. One participant shared how pilot
activities shaped the approach as follows: “It’s about understanding what the conditions for
student success are and what are the risks and issues that stand in the way of student success?”
(Interviewee # 4, College C). The interview participants identified that there has been
considerable focus placed on the design and delivery of orientation and transition programs
between 2005 and 2010 and beyond. One of the participants stated:
So I can say definitely our orientation program 10 years ago is nothing like what we’re
doing now. And I would say 10 years from now is going to be nothing like it is now.
We’ll be seeing a whole bunch of more online stuff. We’ll be seeing a lot more tailored activity… a lot more transition stuff that will happen throughout the year because we know we need to be doing that. (Interviewee #1, College C)

Similar responses were captured for all six participants. This supports the overall observation that orientation and transition practices have been evolving over time with a more strategic focus increasingly linked to student success strategies. One participant notes: “The difference between then and now is we have a plan and it is more formalized. It’s more tied to the college’s strategic plan. These two plans are pivotal and much more embedded in terms of the whole strategy of the organization” (Interviewee #6, College B).

Several of the interview questions provided strong evidence that the theme of strategy and intentional planning was relevant to this study. In particular, interview questions seven and eight that focused on measurement of outcomes and internal research were related to strategy and intentional planning by six out of six participants. Participants shared that surveys were the most common form of measurement and shared that measurement and defining outcomes was often lacking. One participant stated: “Up to now (2014) much of the measurement has been through surveys. What we’re working on doing right now is measuring the impact that interventions have on those that attended them. Is that making a difference in their long-term retention?” (Interviewee #3, College B). Another participant reflected on measurement of orientation and transition efforts as follows: “The intention may be correct but the actual execution may not be as good and therefore, one wonders about the data that may come of it and if in fact it is even effectively being collected for evaluation purposes” (Interview #2, College A). The participants shared that measurement was becoming an increasing focus over time. One participant described
the evaluation of orientation and transition programs by stating: “They went from things like project outcomes to much more broad-based learning outcomes” (Interviewee # 4, College C). The participants shared that the initial focus was on measurement of the project rather than measurement of student learning, retention and student success. Another participant had a similar perspective stating: “Learning outcomes are not documented and it is interpreted differently by different areas” (Interviewee #5, College A). Overall, several of the comments reinforced that strategy and intentional planning was becoming a growing focus of all three of the colleges in this study.

Interview questions 1, 2, 5 and 6 focused on activities, processes, materials and delivery of orientation and transition programs and each had 5 out of 6 responses related to the theme of strategy and intentional planning. Participants shared that measurement was often aimed at student perception or satisfaction. One participant stated: “We did surveys at the orientation itself and students attending were asked to complete a survey about their own perception of how highly engaged they were. In September a post orientation survey was also done” (Interview #2, College A). The participants’ comments indicated that earlier orientation and transition programs were focused more on the social aspects. One participant stated: “The student Association would do more of the pub nights and the bands outside and they contribute the food and the social part” (Interviewee #6, College B). This reinforces the progress from an event based program to a more strategic focus on student success. During the period between 2005 and 2010, there is evidence that orientation and transition was becoming strategically linked to student success planning. One participant shared: “The student success program got identified and it had 3 areas of focus: Ongoing orientation, academic competence, and early alert” (Interviewee #5, College A). Another participant added: “We put a big effort in student retention strategy particularly,
between 2008 and 2011, and so then it was really round operationalizing these initiatives and making them just part of operations part of processes” (Interviewee # 4, College C). Similar progress can be observed at all three colleges in this study.

Interview questions 4 and 9 focused on the information that is shared or collected and theories or models that inform the design of orientation and transition. Each interview question had 3 out of 6 related responses to strategy and intentional planning. One participant stated: “It had evolved into what was a full day event college wide where we spent time on both the campus information and campus adjustment” (Interviewee # 4, College C). During the period of the study, an evolution can be observed from a social event to an event that focused on information sharing to a more robust process as previously stated. Another participant reinforces this progress by stating: “Very different approach than what had historically been in place” (Interview #2, College A). It should be noted that all six participants were clearly well informed about the literature related to orientation and transition as part of broader student success strategy. When asked about models or theories, 3 of the participants made comments specifically related to Tinto or Kuh but overall, theories and models were implicit in responses rather than explicit. This is supported by the fact that none of the colleges had chosen a specific model that was driving the design and delivery of the orientation and transition programs.

Interview question 12 focused on emerging activities related to orientation and transition since 2010 and had 4 out of 6 related to participant responses concerning strategy and intentional planning. Overall, participants noted that there was an increasing focus on the entire first year experience with orientation and transition embedded. This is consistent with the literature review and is informed by prominent researchers. One participant stated: “In 2010, we piloted an extended orientation, and sort of extended first year transition pilot. It was really part of a
retention study that we were involved with” (Interviewee #4, College C). The focus on the first year experience emerged out of the student engagement research that is so prevalent among most college impact models. Another participant noted: “Since 2010, I think that there’s been a wider acceptance in the academic area of the importance of the engagement and connection piece for students. I think that faculty are realizing that it’s important” (Interviewee #3, College B). This demonstrates a greater focus on the importance of student engagement and it is observed at all three colleges in this study. When specific new areas of focus beyond 2010 were examined, career clarity and health and wellness emerged as important areas of concentration. One participant stated: “We’re revising the approach. We’re focused on career clarity, interpersonal relationships, health, wellness and academic strategies” (Interviewee #6, College B). Another participant shared a similar focus and stated: “We’ve inserted a bigger ‘wellness’ element and I think that’s the biggest difference since 2010 – the recognition that wellness is such an important part of the learning – the anxiety, the issues of depression…” (Interviewee #5, College A). The other that emerged was online learning and is included separately under a sub-category of consistency of experience: online learning and communities.

Interview question 3 was designed to elicit responses concerning the policies and procedures that were in place at each the three colleges. The following is a summary of some of the findings related to the sub-theme concerning an institutional policy framework:

a. Policy framework

Under the main theme of strategy and intentional planning, the interview responses were examined to look for evidence that a policy framework related to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy was present at each of the three colleges. Under question 1 there was only 1 reference to a lack of policy framework while there were 4
references to this theme under question 3 that focused on policies and procedures that govern orientation and transition practices. In total, of the potential 72 responses there were only five references or 7% related to a policy framework for orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. One participant stated: “Well from a policy standpoint obviously we don’t really have a hard and fast policy. For example we don’t have a mandatory orientation” (Interviewee #1, College C). Another participant from the same college added: “Policy and procedure… I would say that certainly for us it’s an overarching guiding principle of collaboration rather than policy” (Interviewee #4, College C). Similarly, another participant from a different college stated: “Policies and procedures… I don’t think there was policy around it that was actually written… so you had the centralized oversight for support, for expertise, and a bunch of decentralized orientations that were operating” (Interview #2, College A). Policy and procedures were less prevalent in interview responses than other themes that emerged. In general, both the document analysis and interviews were cross referenced and identify that a policy framework for orientation and transition related to student success is one of the weakest touch points for the three colleges that participated in this study.

4.2.3 (ii) Assessment and evaluation

Assessment and evaluation emerged as a prevalent theme as identified by the responses by the six participants to the twelve interview questions. Out of a potential 72 responses, 34 were related to assessment and evaluation or 47%. This was the third most prevalent theme behind strategy and intentional planning, and, information and communication. It should be noted that the participants generally responded that assessment and evaluation was lacking or that this posed challenges for them. Questions 4 and 8 revealed that 5 out of 6 responses were related to
assessment and evaluation; while question 7 that focused specifically on measuring outcomes had 6 out of 6 responses related to assessment and evaluation. In questions 6 and 7 the participant responses indicated that this was clearly a weakness at all three institutions. Some outcomes were documented, others were vague, broad or general and few reported that they were formally documented. Several interview participants referenced that this was an area that required attention. Surveys were referenced most commonly and some participants referenced challenges with measurement particularly as outcomes were not consistent or clear. In question 8, the participants referenced challenges or problems with assessment and evaluation or the methodology used to establish outcomes and measure results. Surveying and focus groups were the only methods referenced during the participant interviews.

4.2.3 (iii) Reference to the literature

Out of a potential 72 mentions by the six participants to the twelve questions, only 15 referenced the literature. The noticeable difference was observed based on the answers to interview question 9 that was designed to solicit information about theories or models that inform the design of orientation and transition programs at the three colleges in this study. The responses to question 9 that focused on theories and models had 6 out of 6 responses making some reference to the literature under this question. The most common references were to Tinto or Kuh as well as Pascarella and Terrenzini. One participant stated: “We talked to Tinto around his work about creating environments that are conducive to student success. We talked about setting expectations for our students” (Interviewee #1, College C). Another participants shared: “Tinto’s work around Causes and Cures for Attrition and Kuh’s work around Creating Conditions That Matter have informed our recent efforts” (Interviewee #6, College B). It should be noted that it was clear that the key informants were well informed about various aspects of the literature on a
personal level but did not readily make the connection in the interview questions related to program design or assessment or evaluation. It appears that some major themes within the literature were underlying the program design but the document analysis and interview analysis shows that it was more implicit than explicit in most cases. One participant stated: “I think there is more of an understanding that that engagement piece plays a huge part and I think that more faculty understanding that that engagement piece is important” (Interviewee #5, College A). Another participant also commented on student engagement by stating: “Orientation goals included student engagement, faculty connection, education and career connection” (Interview #2, College A). These and similar comments show evidence that student engagement theory was regularly referenced during the interviews but explicit comments were not made. Similarly, it was implicit that orientation and transition programs were informed by models and theories but there was no explicit model used at any of the three colleges.

a. Canadian specific content

When examining the participant responses, only 8 out of 72 referenced Canadian specific literature with 3 out of 6 in response to question 9 that examined theories and models. In relation to general references to the literature, Canadian specific content was only referenced about 50% of the time. This is a significant finding as the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students was published in 2007. The study had important information included in its findings and implications section relevant to each of the colleges from this study as all three participated. In particular, a focus on career guidance and information was identified as an important element of student success in the Canadian context. Among the Canadian specific content, Dietsche and Finnie were both referenced. There were a number of implicit references that are similar to the implications and conclusions drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.
In particular, there were a number of references to career planning and guidance in question 12 that looked at new initiatives since 2010. One participant stated: “One new area of focus was around career planning for perspective students” (Interviewee # 4, College C). Similarly, another participant stated: “Our new approach to orientation was very focused on a program welcome tied to their career planning. Engaging with the faculty for the purposes of (creating) their relationships – faculty to student, peer to peer, and, program to career” (Interviewee #6, College B). References to Canadian content were less prevalent than references to the literature in general.

4.2.3 (iv) Structures, leadership and capacity

The study uncovered 21 out of 72 mentions related to structures, leadership and capacity. Under interview question 12, participants were asked what new developments related to orientation and transition were underway since 2010 and 6 out of 6 interviewees mentioned structures, leadership and capacity. Several of the participants’ responses were related to the organizational behaviour and structures in place at the institution. One participant stated: “There is a lack of cohesiveness that doesn’t allow for that cross-fertilization, the development that happens when people are working on similar work together. Right now, people are on their own in these areas” (Interview #2, College A). Another participant reflected on the distinct roles of different departmental areas within the college. The participant stated: “There was largely a separation between the academic areas and the student services areas. There was a resistance in terms of student services being involved in the academic program piece. Student services largely provided the centralized welcomes, the social orientation and the fun stuff” (Interviewee #3, College B). There were other similar responses that highlight some of the challenges associated with organizational structure. One participant observed: “It’s very hard to change things because
the structure – this 300, 400 year old factory model that we use – really is not very conducive to learning” (Interviewee #5, College A). This comment highlights some of the systemic challenges that colleges have faced when applying change principles to program and service delivery and design.

The participants indicated that leadership was important and that changes to leadership affected progress or lack of progress. One participant stated: “The other role for the director was in fact to do the evaluation on the outcomes of this particular approach. So they had resources, they had expertise, and then they worked with the division” (Interview #2, College A). This comment was similar to other comments that focused on roles within the institution. Another participant reflected on leadership and stated:

So the idea of having someone who focuses on the student services side of things obviously allows for a more elevated voice at the table. When you’re lumped in with an academic area obviously the priority is going to be the academic, so an organizational structure changes the focus. (Interviewee #3, College B)

Other participants also commented on leadership priorities and change in leadership. One of the participants commented on the importance of strategic investment by stating: “In 2008, we made a conscious decision at a senior management level to really invest in what was a coordinated and a collaborative approach to a strategic institutional student retention plan” (Interviewee # 4, College C). Several of the responses were related to a similar theme of resources and investment by the institutional leadership. One of the participants commented on the approach that the leadership instituted over time. The participant stated: “We’ve had lots of first year experience committees, retention committees, persistence committees, all of these things over the years but none of these things has ever been mandated – this will happen”
(Interviewee #5, College A). Similarly, another participant shared: “The leadership at the time wanted to know more about the student so that we could do more purposeful work with our students and not randomly do whatever we did with them” (Interviewee #6, College B). Both of these comments highlight the important impact that leadership has on the direction that a particular institution takes and whether or not it is mandated or it is simply a set of guidelines. Additionally, the interviewees noted that leadership at the executive level was important both to support the focus on student success and for the allocation of resources.

The allocation of resources was noted as essential to ensure that capacity to deliver support services, programs and activities was available. One participant stated: “We don’t have dedicated resources. It’s always on the side of somebody’s desk and that’s not a good thing if you want something done well you have to commit some time and resources to it” (Interviewee #1, College C). Similarly, another participant commented on the importance of a coordinated approach to build capacity by stating: “I do fundamentally believe that that whole thinking approach requires a whole institution and it can fall very short when the responsibility for orientation and transition lies in the hands of a few or it’s happening in siloed efforts” (Interviewee #4, College C). Overall, there were a number of responses that underscored the importance of structure, leadership and capacity.

4.2.3 (v) Information and communication

The second most frequent theme that emerged was information and communication with 36 out of 72 mentions or 50% of responses to the twelve questions. Interview questions 2, 4 and 6 focused on programs, activities, the information collected and any expected outcomes. Each of these three interview questions had 5 out of 6 responses related to information and
communication. One participant reflected on the challenges with the information gathering tools and processes:

The first step is collecting data on the students that were coming. So we would have the regular data that gets downloaded when the student applied. Their age, obviously what they would fill in on the application for the college. Things like their current grades would be in the system. But we really didn’t have a way to pull any of that information in a consistent way… very different than now (Interview #2, College A)

Several of the participants shared similar comments with the challenges of using the datasets that the institution collects. Overall, it appears that there was a lot of information and data but the challenge lies within accessing and effectively using the data.

Interview question 5 focused on the types of materials that were produced for orientation and transition and had 6 out of 6 responses. One participant stated: “When students attend a session they are given information about upcoming transition activities over the summer as well as any extra help that’s available to them if they need it in certain areas” (Interviewee #3, College B). Another participant responded about the information that is shared with staff and stated: “We provide them with information and just try to get them ready for the next steps – it’s about having them understand some cues so they can see when the student is somewhat vulnerable” (Interviewee # 4, College C). There were a number of other responses that shed light onto the different types of materials that were produced for both students and staff to assist with the orientation and transition process.

Interview question 2 focused on programs, processes and activities that were in place. The participants described a wide range of programs, processes and activities and the related
information and communication pieces that support them. One participant stated: “Our main goal is trying to get students as much information and as much support about what they need to do” (Interviewee #1, College C). Similarly, several of the responses focused on getting information to students in an effective manner while balancing volume and timing. Another participant stated: “There was a focus on getting the right information at the right point in time to students. Not overloading them with a bunch of information. When did they need to hear about it, and what is the next step in the process” (Interview #2, College A). The participants also responded about the types of tools that were used for communicating with students. One participant said: “We connected via email or phone or in person to see how things are going” (Interviewee #1, College C). The participants shared that the focus was supporting the student. One participant summed it up by stating: “We have to encourage people to think about how students view it. What their needs are at the moment and what information is necessary” (Interview #2, College A).

Interview question 4 focused on information that is collected about new students prior to orientation and question 6 focused on what were the expected outcomes of orientation and transition practices. Several of the responses indicated that the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS) was a common tool for data collection. The participants expressed that there has been an increasing focus on collecting information about students and over time, a greater focus on using the data proactively. One participant stated: “The institution didn’t have enough information about the students profile to assist in planning at the student level. Now we have a different way of doing it so the students would get something back that would tell them what we knew about them and get a referral to services that were available to them” (Interviewee #6, College B). Similar responses were observed by other interviewees.

4.2.3 (vi) Consistency of experience
Another theme that emerged from the study was consistency of experience with 12 out of 72 responses directly related to this theme and a further 49 out of 72 responses related to three sub-themes: early alert, peer services and supports, and, online learning and communities. There were general comments that expressed different aspects of consistency of experience. In some cases, comments were related to differences between campuses or targeted efforts for particular groups of students. One participant stated: “We need to do better job at the smaller campuses. That’s a challenge that colleges have. You need a tailored experience for the campus to be effective in transition and orientation” (Interviewee #6, College B). Another participant commented on specialty programming by stating: “They were supplemental to the orientation program but they have a specific focus for that population. For mature students the programming was focused on what it’s like to learn again… focused on coming back to school” (Interviewee #1, College C). Similar responses were captured for other groups of students including Aboriginal, international and students with disabilities. Early alert, peer services and supports and online learning and communities were other areas that participant responses were related to.

a. Early alert

Among the response to the twelve questions, 32 out of 72 mentions were related to early alert programs and were amongst the top prevalent responses. In particular, 5 out of 6 responses to question 10 concerning the linkage between orientation and transition activities to a broader student success strategy, and, 5 out of 6 responses to question 4 that focused on what information was collected about new students prior to orientation were related. The type of early alert initiative and the extent to which it is employed to all students groups was inconsistent in the specific applications that were reviewed. The programs ranged from simple outreach to a more detailed set of activities. One college shared that they use a calling campaign to reach out to
students and stated: “So that phone call is really helpful in reminding students to do those things that they need to do to get done as part of the transition experience” (Interviewee #1, College C). It appears that more sophisticated approaches were more common after 2010.

In general, there was a greater focus after 2010 then there was during the period between 2005 and 2010. One participant shared the following reflection: “If you’re talking about early alert you really want it way before people fall in the ditch and you’re trying to pull them out… It’s much easier if we know that someone’s coming in and they’re already feeling anxious, to be able to flag and intervene before you fail” (Interview #2, College A). Another participant said: The students answer questions that help us understand how they feel coming into the college. Confidence levels, whether they feel they have career clarity, whether they have their finances in order, do they feel that they have the skills and how they feel about their potential for success based on their characteristics and abilities. These are measured through an entrance survey (Interviewee #6, College B).

This is a promising finding showing that a focus on early alert was prevalent in both the literature and the responses to the interview questions by all six participants at all three of the colleges in this study.

b. Peer services and supports

Peer services and supports were mentioned by 4 out of the six participants 9 out of 72 potential times. In particular, in response to interview question 2 concerning processes, programs and activities and how they are delivered, 4 out of 6 participants mentioned that peer services were employed in the delivery of activities for orientation and transition. One participant stated: “We start hiring our peer mentors who actually do callouts to all our first year domestic students to welcome them to the college and then invite them to different activities on campus”
(Interviewee #1, College C). Another participant shared that peer services and supports is a part of ongoing orientation and said: “Peer leaders who have been trained to facilitate out of class sessions where students participate in activities that allow them to experience the learning a little bit differently than they did in the classroom” (Interviewee #5, College A). This participant made clear linkages to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy and highlighted the importance of peer services and supports. Another participant stated: “Upper year students take part in orientation and transition. It keeps them engaged but also engages them with first-year students. Since 2010, peer to peer engagement has been a large focus” (Interviewee #6, College B). All three colleges responded that peer services and supports were part of the orientation and transition program. While evidence of peer services and supports was clearly present, the literature identifies much more extensive use of peer services and supports and this highlights an area for further exploration by the three colleges in this study.

c. Online learning and communities

Online learning and communities was only mentioned 8 out of a potential 72 times by the six participants in the study. One participant reflected on an online tool that was created for students. The participant stated:

The orientation CD was a big hit. It was posted on the website and people got copies of it mailed. It tracked the number of hits. We looked at how many times people went back to look at certain information, what page they were looking at most and that told us that, we need more about this (Interview #2, College A).

College A was the only institution that specifically referenced the use of an online tool. Of the 8 mentions, some of the responses were related to the potential that online learning and communities could play in delivering orientation and transition programs in the future. One of
the three colleges in particular, noted that since 2010 an online learning platform was now a major part of its overall academic plan and related heavily to its student success plan. One participant stated: “Introducing people to the technology of online learning and also the pedagogy is a new way of looking at it. In terms of how we support the academic areas in familiarizing students with the concepts of online learning before they get here so they know what to expect” (Interviewee #3, College B). Some of the comments indicated that this was an emerging area of focus and has the potential to inform the future design of orientation and transition programs as part of a broader student success strategy.

4.2.4 Mapping Interviews to CCSSE and Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students

Both the CCSSE thematic framework and the conclusions and implications section of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students were used to examine how closely related the themes were to the responses of the six study participants retrospectively between 2005 and 2010. This section presents the findings from the responses to the interview questions by the six participants. Table 6.0 shows the frequency with which the content of interview responses was related to the CCSSE thematic framework.

Table 6.0 Interview Findings – CCSSE Thematic Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Findings – CCSSE Thematic Framework</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
<th>Q10</th>
<th>Q11</th>
<th>Q12</th>
<th>Q's</th>
<th>Total Mentions for all Q's</th>
<th>% Total Out of 72</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active and collaborative learning</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student effort</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total themes out of 30</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>120</td>
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</table>

Percentage of total: 43% 40% 7% 33% 27% 27% 33% 10% 47% 37% 33% 63% 33%
For the purposes of interpreting the results, the left column identifies the five CCSSE themes. The values included in table 6.0 represent how many times the theme was mentioned by the six participants during the interviews for each of the twelve questions noted as Q1 to Q12. The two far right columns indicate how many times each of the five individual themes was mentioned out of a potential 72 (6 participants x 12 questions) total mentions and the percentage indicates total percentage out of 100% that the theme was identified within all twelve questions. The two bottom rows of Table 6.0 represent how many times and what percentage the five themes were mentioned by the six participants and were related to the individual questions from Q1 to Q12 up to a maximum of 30 (5 themes x 6 participants) mentions for each question.

Table 7.0 presents the information and shows the frequency that interview findings were related to the conclusions and implications drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. For the purposes of interpreting the results, the left column identifies the six themes drawn from the conclusions and implications section of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.

Table 7.0 Interview Findings – Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Findings – Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Q4</th>
<th>Q5</th>
<th>Q6</th>
<th>Q7</th>
<th>Q8</th>
<th>Q9</th>
<th>Q10</th>
<th>Q11</th>
<th>Q12</th>
<th>Total Mentions for all Q's</th>
<th>% total out of 72</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting the diverse needs</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Career information and guidance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties during the first term</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic student success model</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total themes out of 36</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of sub-total</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The values included in table 7.0 represent how many times the theme was mentioned by the six participants during the interviews to each of the twelve questions noted as Q1 to Q12. The two far right columns indicate how many times each of the six individual themes was mentioned out of a potential 72 (6 participants x 12 questions) total mentions and the percentage indicates total percentage out of 100% that the theme was mentioned for all twelve questions. The two bottom rows of table 7.0 the values represent how many times and what percentage the six themes drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students were mentioned by the six participants and were related to the individual questions from Q1 to Q12 up to a maximum of 36 (6 themes x 6 participants) mentions for each question.

The following section summarizes the findings from the responses of the six participants to each of the twelve interview questions and provides a narrative and description of the data. The summary captures the frequency of responses related to:

1. The CCSSE thematic framework
2. The conclusions and implications drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students

4.2.5 Interview Findings - CCSSE Thematic Framework

The interview responses were examined to determine the frequency that each of the five CCSSE themes was mentioned by the six participants retrospectively between 2005 and 2010. The next section summarizes the frequency of interview responses that are related to each theme and highlights responses that expressed the concepts applicable to each.

4.2.5 (i) Active and collaborative learning
The concept of active and collaborative learning was mentioned 18 times out of a potential 72 or 25% of the time. The design of peer services often falls under active and collaborative learning where the faculty is engaging with senior students and new students are actively engaged with one another and peer tutors or senior students. One of the participants stated: “The idea is that the peer leaders could take some specific content and figure out a different way for students to understand it, by applying it, by games, by activities, by experiential learning. Using different learning preferences and styles to think about different ways to understand – it’s a “learn to learn” model” (Interviewee #5, College A). Another participant was describing an exercise that is used during the orientation and transition process and said: “It’s all about meaningful connections. Fun is another part of it but the meaningful connection part is what we are really looking for in an outcome basis” (Interviewee #6, College B). There were a number of different examples that the participants shared. One participant shared the following detailed reflection and said:

It’s a whole thinking, collaborative approach to transitioning because there’s so much that happens in the classroom, in learning between an instructor or a teacher, it’s about the infrastructure, it’s about institutional policies and processes, it’s really about paying attention to student and student learning in just about everything we do in the institution.

(Interviewee # 4, College C)

Another participant stated: “In fall 2008, we had student centered collaboration between student learning services and academic schools to facilitate the new student transition to college through semester start and beyond” (Interviewee #3, College B). Active and collaborative learning was mentioned in context of the orientation and transition programs at place at each of the three colleges in various settings throughout the process and aligned with student success strategies.
4.2.5 (ii) Student effort

Student effort was mentioned 14 times out of a potential 72 or 19% of the interview responses. The responses were either related to the assessment of student effort or the amount of student effort that a particular activity would require of a student. Among the most common responses were those related to the incoming assessment of a student’s skills and abilities. One participant stated: “We do an assessment of English or math in specific programs not for all programs. It’s only a sort of pre-sort… an assessment of student skill that takes place” (Interviewee #1, College C). There were also a number of responses that referenced the learning that students were engaged in. One participant said that students were engaged in a preconference prior to the start of classes: “So that they could create these learning opportunities that would help these students succeed” (Interviewee #5, College A). Other participants mentioned other programs and activities designed to help students prepare for the academic environment prior to the start of class or during the early weeks of the semester.

4.2.5 (iii) Academic Challenge

The concept of academic challenge was mentioned 8 out of a potential 72 times representing 11% of responses to all twelve questions. Among the CCSSE themes, academic challenge was the least representative of participant responses. One participant described the preentry survey that the college used to help new students and stated: “It gives us a baseline understanding of the challenges that our students are facing which haven’t necessarily changed that much over the last couple years. We try to provide more support as a result of that” (Interviewee #1, College C). Another participant described the focus that the orientation and transition program has to help students understand program expectations. The participant stated: “It’s really about ensuring that there was a sense of understanding. Some clarified expectations
of what the expedition was of a postsecondary student and an adult learner” (Interviewee # 4, College C). While this theme was the least represented, the literature emphasizes the importance of expectation setting as well as challenge and support. One participant describes the overall approach to the orientation and transition program by stating: “Challenging and supporting firstyear students… informs our approach to the first-year experience” (Interviewee #6, College B). Similarly, another participant shared that the student success program has a specific element related to academic competence. The participant stated: “Under ‘academic competence’ was the peer learning groups and also some of these other initiatives and under “early alert” was an early check in for probationary students” (Interviewee #5, College A). Each of these examples related to the concept of academic challenge within the design of orientation and transition programs as part of a broader student success strategy.

4.2.5 (iv) Student – faculty interaction

Student – faculty interaction was the second most frequent CCSSE theme mentioned by the six participants in the study. Of the potential 72 mentions, 21 were related to student – faculty interaction representing 29% of the total responses to the twelve interview questions. One participant stated: “Linking faculty, staff, and students to the college so that connection was present. There were opportunities to meet and interact with faculty, and a meaningful role for the faculty to play to increase the participation” (Interview #2, College A). Another participant described the way that faculty are involved in orientation. The participant stated: “We had a commitment to having faculty available, introducing the faculty… the students seeing that these are the people that will teach you, they are the people that you will come to know” (Interview #2, College A). Some of the responses were related to a lack of collaboration during the orientation and transition process. One participant stated: “So prior to 2005, everything was fairly
decentralized here. I would describe it as some quick chatting followed by a barbecue and a street party. It happened within the divisions so it really happened at the program level only and a sense of a more extensive or systemic orientation did not exist” (Interview #2, College A). In general, the participants described deliberate attempts to involve faculty with the orientation and transition activities for new students. One participant stated: “We embedded it into the first two weeks of classes and we partnered with faculty deliberately within the classroom. We did that work in 2010 and it is interesting because that saw an increase in first year retention that was statistically significant” (Interviewee # 4, College C). Overall, participants described a more deliberate and strategic approach in the later years of the study and beyond 2010.

4.2.5 (v) Support for learners

Support for learners was the most frequent theme that the interview responses was related to with 59 out of a potential 72 mentions related to this theme or 82% of all responses. Support for learners is the most natural link between orientation and transition and the CCSSE thematic framework as it is delivered by student affairs/services at each of the colleges that participated in the study. Participants shared a broader range of supports that are in place as part of new student orientation and transitioning programming. One participant stated: “We have 23 different orientation and transition programming activities that take place throughout our busiest time period in July August and September” (Interviewee #1, College C). Similarly, other participants responded that the orientation process runs three times annually for each student intake and has grown substantially during the period between 2005 to 2010 and beyond. The programming is diverse and covers a wide range of activity focused on upgrading, learn to learn, peer supports and campus welcome. One participant shared:
We ran a whole service fair. All the services available to students were on site so students entering into the bigger hall had to go through and were engaged by all the service areas. Counseling, disabilities services, financial aid… But they weren’t sincerely selling their wares as much as engaging the students letting them know that these things were available (Interview #2, College A).

The participants also shared that there has been a shift beyond a simple welcome to a more strategic approach that engages students and provides the necessary supports. One participant stated: “Based on what student needs are we developed programs and content. So commitments to somewhat of an evidence-based planning process I would say” (Interviewee #4, College C).

Piloting different activities was also a very common focus at all three of the colleges in the study particularly between the period of 2005 and 2010. One participant stated:

We have tried various models and I have a summary that we put together a number of years ago to inform the process. We’ve tried before Labour Day weekend and after the Labour Day weekend. We tried one day, two day and as much as a four-day model of transition and orientation” (Interviewee #6, College B).

Similar responses were common among all three colleges. Since 2010, the three colleges report that they have been applying the learning from the pilots to inform college strategy related to student success. Another focus that all three colleges reported is that they broadened activities from an event to a process. The renewed focus on the entire first year experience was consistent with the literature. Each college reported that they also use peer leaders to support the process. One participant stated:

We wanted students to experience the learning differently so the peer leader’s job was to create activities, to create models, to create different ways for the student to learn that
didn’t happen in the class, so, if I’m in a class, and I’m having difficulty understanding
the content, and I go to peer tutoring (Interviewee #5, College A).

The participants reported that peer services and tutoring was a common element that was tied to
the focus on ongoing orientation and transition throughout the first semester and first year
experience.

In summary, the six participant responses to the twelve interview questions provided
evidence that the CCSSE thematic framework applies to the design and delivery of orientation
and transition programs at each of the three colleges in the study retrospectively between 2005
and 2010. Responses ranged from a high of 82% (59 of a potential 72 mentions) under the
support for learners theme and a low of 11% (8 of 72 mentions) under the academic challenge
theme. Student – faculty interaction was the second highest with 29% (21 out of 72 potential
mentions) related to the theme, followed by active and collaborative learning with 25% (18 out
of 72 potential mentions) and the student effort theme had 19% (14 out of 72 potential
mentions).

4.2.6 Mapping Interviews to the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students

The implications and conclusions drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year
College Students was used as a tool to organize the responses from the interview questions from
the six participants to examine the frequency that responses were related to the six themes

4.2.6 (i) Meeting the diverse needs of students

Meeting the diverse needs of students was related to the interview responses by the six
study participants 19 out of a potential 72 or 26% of the time. In particular, the participants either
described the diversity of the student population and the varying degree of student supports that
are needed or specific programs designed to support the diverse needs of students including different learners within the institution such as mature, international, Aboriginal or students with disabilities. Specialty programming was generally more prevalent in the later years of the study and beyond 2010. One participant stated:

As we evolved into 2008-2009, we started to develop specialized programming and specialized events for mature and re-careering students. We also introduced additional programming for students with disabilities and programming for international students. So while they participated in the broader orientation day programs there was particular programming specifically for them. (Interviewee #4, College C).

This focus on meeting the diverse needs of students aligns with the shift from an events based model to a process at all three of the colleges. In order to design programming for specific groups of students, participants noted that they used incoming student data to inform programming needs. This is aligned with early alert tools that identify students that may need additional supports. One participant shared the following reflection: “If we didn’t have an early alert piece – a way of identifying the at-risk students and getting to them really early, then who are we helping? The 20% at the top who didn’t need us anyway” (Interviewee #5, College A). Similar comments were observed that demonstrate that a greater focus has been aimed at supporting students at-risk or students with a defined set of needs. Another participant stated: “If we identify risks at the assessments stage we’re able to send them targeted information about programs and services that may be able to assist” (Interviewee #3, College B). All three colleges reported that they were increasingly focusing their efforts on the diverse range of students and reported relying more heavily on early alert tools particularly since 2010. Another participant made the linkages between early alert, orientation and transition and student success strategy and
said: “We started to talk about the whole process behind transition to post-secondary starting with the students and the characteristics that students bring and then interface with the environment. How that impacts student’s engagement and retention” (Interview #2, College A). The participant’s reflection was similar to other interview responses and demonstrated that the colleges were increasingly focused on college impact models.

4.2.6 (ii) Skills development needs of students

The skills development needs of students was related to the interview responses from the six study participants 22 out of a potential 72 mentions or 31% of the time. Most of the responses were related to understanding the skills development needs of students while some participants identified supporting students with skills development needs as a challenge. One participant stated: “Some extensive early warning activity as part of transition in undertaken so we can identify students who are at risk. We also do our adjustment survey every term for first-year students to see how things are going” (Interviewee #1, College C). Other participants had similar responses and each college shared that early alert was important to meet the needs of students and to design support services. Another focus of skills development needs was related to peer tutoring. One participant stated: “We looked at first semester courses and identified a course where there had been a history of difficulty and also asked faculty what they perceived would be the most difficult and challenging first semester courses. Then we worked with that faculty to identify peer leaders who we trained in cooperative learning strategies” (Interviewee #5, College A). Peer tutoring during the first year was common to all three colleges. Another approach to support the skills development needs of students focused on offering workshops designed to tackle areas that students were experiencing challenges. One participant stated: “The service team would assist them by providing options from a menu of sessions that we were available to
offer within the first few weeks of their program” (Interviewee #3, College B). Each college reported that they offer a range of workshops to support skills development based on student need.

4.2.6 (iii) Career information and guidance

The Ontario college system is heavily aligned with career preparation and vocational training. Career information and guidance is a critical component of student success that emerged from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. The interview responses were related to career information and guidance 7 out of a potential 72 mentions representing 10% of the total. It should be noted that the study focused on the period between 2005 and 2010. Most of the responses that were related to career information and guidance came from question 12 that focused on new orientation and transition activities as part of a broader student success strategy that emerged since 2010. One participant stated: “Starting in 2013, orientation goals included career connections. Trying to connect students with where they’re headed in their career from day one – feeling confident that they’ve chosen the right school in the right program” (Interview #2, College A). Another participant had a similar response and said: “The program and career launch involving the academic faculty is a new initiative” (Interviewee #6, College B). Between 2005 and 2010 there were very few mentions related to career information and guidance.

4.2.6 (iv) Student engagement

The most prevalent theme that emerged from the six participant interviews was student engagement with 52 out of a potential 72 mentions or 76% of total responses to the twelve questions. One participant described the goals of the orientation and transition program as
follows: “To engage with faculty, engage with peers, and to understand that there is a broader network in the program that you’re involved in” (Interview #2, College A). Similar responses were recorded from all three colleges. Another participant stated: “The ultimate goal here is to engage the students, help transition and prepare the students. We need to intervene early and try to get them off to a good start in the first-year in terms of social and peer connections and academically” (Interviewee #6, College B). College impact models were implicitly linked to a number of the interview responses. One participant stated: “We started to talk about the whole process behind transition to post-secondary. Starting with the students and the characteristics that students bring and then the interface with the environment and how that impacts student engagement and retention” (Interview #2, College A). Another participant shared that they are moving to a more strategic approach that looks at the whole first year experience and the impact that has on students, the participant stated: “We don’t have a first year experience plan. There is no plan per se, we have a coordinating function within the orientation and transition program but we don’t have a set of learning outcomes for the whole first year student” (Interviewee #1, College C). During the period between 2005 and 2010, there was a lot of evidence that each of the colleges was piloting a number of new initiatives and redesigning orientation and transition programs as part of a broader student success strategy. Each of the three colleges reporting significant new develops since 2010.

4.2.6 (v) Difficulties during the first term

One of the areas of focus that was drawn from the implications and conclusions of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students is difficulties during the first term. This theme was related to the six participant responses to the twelve interview questions 12 out of a
potential 72 times or 17%. The responses ranged from how to identify students that may experience challenges early and the difficulties students encountered. One participant shared that they use a peer services approach to support students that are encountering difficulties during the first term. The participant stated: “We created a peer assisted learning centre to create a safe, interesting environment that was about learning” (Interviewee #5, College A). Other participants focused on early warning and made references to how they designed supports to help students that were experiencing difficulties during the first term. The participant stated: “We offer a series of workshops and sessions students can attend that assist them with different elements of learning and academic support. There’s a wide variety of sessions that we have available based on early feedback” (Interviewee #3, College B). Another participant stated: “We have a very diverse range of students at the academic level. Students coming in with really great marks and strong academic figures and some who are coming in as mature students who had lousy experiences in high school for example and are re-motivated and reenergized to come back” (Interviewee #6, College B). All six participants at the three colleges shared various challenges that they encounter based on student preparedness and they level of student support that is needed.

4.2.6 (vi) Holistic student success model

Holistic student success models were directly related to interview responses 5 out of a potential 72 times. “The real thinking behind it is that it’s a managed process: that students coming to the college should experience a continuum of care basically throughout the whole process through which they’re engaged in. So where the stakes were put in the ground first was around orientation” (Interview #2, College A). Another participant stated: “Those sorts of challenges and making sure that you are providing services and resources when people need
them and how they can access those resources” (Interviewee #3, College B). Overall, there was a greater focus on holistic approaches in response to interview question 12 that focused on new developments since 2010.

In summary, the implications and conclusions drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College students was applicable to the six participant interview responses ranging from a high of 76% related to student engagement and a low of 7% for holistic student success model retrospectively between 2005 and 2010. Skills development needs of students was the second highest with 31% of related interview responses, followed by meeting the diverse needs of students at 26%, difficulties during the first term at 17% and career information and guidance with 10% of interview responses related to the implications and conclusions drawn from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.

4.2.7 Supplemental documents retrieved from the participant interviews  During the participant interviews, the key informants were asked to provide specific student success strategies or plans to supplement the standard document retrieval process employed by this study. Each of the three colleges provided documents and College B and C each provided a document that was retrieved and included in the document analysis in section 4.1 above. College A provided a student success program document that was not retrieved as part of the document analysis.

The college included orientation and transition as a key component of the student success strategy and linked each component to the literature and the research in this field of study. The strategy was a fairly comprehensive document that framed the issue for the entire college. Broad goals were included but were not specific and measurable. For example, the document indicated that each college department needed to undertake an action related to one of the three
overarching pillars of the document. One participant stated: “So we do have a student success program and it has three pillars: ongoing orientation, academic competence, and early alert. It was a big pillar and the student success strategy started after the orientation piece of work that is going on” (Interview #2, College A). In this way, the strategy was more of a framework that guided stakeholders rather than a strategy that could be easily monitored and measured. One of the participants stated: “What we did is we created a menu of initiatives so there were 4 or 5 things under ongoing orientation. We always thought we would have arrived when we were able to take the word ‘ongoing’ off and people would understand that orientation was a process and not a day and not a week” (Interviewee #5, College A). Within the document, roles were clearly defined and responsibility lied within multiple areas within the college. One participant stated: “The support came from the top in terms of providing five years of implementation study funding that paid for the student success staff, the peer leaders, and for research support” (Interviewee #5, College A).

Among the references to the literature, Tinto was referenced most extensively. One participant stated: “Well a lot of Tinto’s work and his theories made real sense. It’s that connection between faculty and staff that make the difference and we need to create intentional opportunities for students to be able to make those connections” (Interviewee #5, College A). Specific references to orientation and transition were woven into the document and a plan was developed for orientation and transition with broad goals and roles identified for various stakeholders. Orientation and transition was assigned to one or more college leaders and measurement of results was undertaken but goals were not clear from the onset. Orientation and transition related to student success was prevalent during the entire 2005 to 2010 period. The strategy was formal and was somewhat comprehensive in length and had linkages to orientation
and transition as well as other related programs and services within a holistic college-wide framework but was not measurable or specific. The participant interviews confirmed the researcher’s observation that, while the strategy was formal and fairly comprehensive it was largely a series of pilot activities. The participant noted: “The student success program was again college-wide. It had multiple stakeholders there is a series of pilots that got funded but they got developed in different areas” (Interview #2, College A). I observed that it was missing some key elements that a comprehensive strategy would normally include such as specific measurable goals and expected outcomes, a communications plan and participation by all college stakeholders.

4.2.8 Interview Analysis by Research Question

The following section provides a summary of the findings from the interview analysis in relation to the four primary research questions of the study as follows:

1. What student orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?

2. To what extent are three large urban colleges utilizing comprehensive and deliberate approaches to student orientation and transition?

3. To what extent are these three colleges using student orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?

4. To what extent do these practices related to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

4.2.8 (i) Orientation and transition practices
The interview analysis provided additional evidence and detail that all three colleges had orientation and transition practices in place between 2005 and 2010. This information was consistent with the document analysis. The six participants provided more detailed information about the orientation and transition practices in place. The participants describe a greater focus on orientation and transition in the latter years of the study. The key informants note that while orientation and transition was often a one day welcome event prior to 2005, between 2005 and 2010 there was recognition that orientation and transition was a process. This observation was consistent at all three colleges. The participants reference a greater focus and resource allocation for orientation and transition between 2005 and 2010.

4.2.8 (ii) Comprehensive and deliberate approaches

The six participant interview responses provided further evidence that orientation and transition practices at each of the three colleges were deliberate and intentionally planned. This finding was consistent with the document analysis. Over the period between 2005 and 2010, each participant shared information about various activities that were expanded or piloted including orientation and transition activities for sub-populations including international students, mature students and students with disabilities. The interviews provide evidence that there was a greater emphasis on orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. The approaches were becoming more intentionally planned and more comprehensive moving from an orientation day to an orientation process. The participant interviews confirmed that some elements of a typical comprehensive strategy were missing. All six participants noted that some form of surveying students was conducted but also indicated that the data was difficult to interpret due to a lack of clearly defined and measurable goals that were consistent across the entire college. The interview analysis was consistent with the observations from the document.
analysis and indicated that additional work would be required to make the approach to orientation and transition more comprehensive.

4.2.8 (iii) Orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy

The interview analysis confirmed that all three colleges made clear linkages between orientation and transition and broader student success strategies. Each of the six participants exhibited a strong understanding of the literature and provided strong evidence that each of the three colleges consider orientation and transition to be a critical element of student success. The participants emphasize a greater focus on the literature including Canadian specific content after 2010. These findings are consistent with the document analysis.

4.2.8 (iv) CCSSE and Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students

While the document analysis was inconclusive regarding the extent to which orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy was related to the CCSSE thematic framework, the interview analysis provides substantial evidence that it is. Overall, the CCSSE thematic framework was relevant to the responses by the key informants between 7% for question #3 related to policies and procedures and 63% related to question #12 concerning developments since 2010. The strongest CCSSE themes were support for learners mentioned 82% of the time and active and collaborative learning 25% and student-faculty interaction 29%. One participant summarizes support for learners as follows: “transition and adjustment for firstyear students has been a priority for us in student services. A fair bit of attention has been paid on the orientation and transition of first-year students in a multitude of different ways… We did a fair bit of research around all of the things that are ailing and putting our students at risk and particularly with our new students. It’s really not knowing what they’re supposed to know, understanding the student, and understanding the whole process of transition and making it very
easy for students to access help and information” (Interviewee #4, College C). The other two colleges showed a similar focus on supporting students with information and connecting students to services. One of the interview participants summarizes the student – faculty interaction as follows: “It was really clear that where the faculty weren’t involved, it didn’t work because the students didn’t come. But what we also realized in that was that “wait a minute, this is one piece. That academic competence piece is a really important piece – but it’s one piece. What else is there, if we’re talking about student success and a student success program” (Interviewee #5, College A). The participant also reinforces the pilot nature of the student success program and how exploratory the focus was between 2005 and 2010. Academic challenge was lowest with 11% while student effort was only mentioned 19% of the time. One participant talks about the emerging focus on student preparedness as follows: “we’re working on models and we’re much better at using the information at the student level than we used to be and there’s still room for us to do even more… with a focus on some of our students who are not academically strong” (Interviewee #6, College B). Each of the participants reference a greater focus on data and student information by 2010 and after and all three colleges reference a growing focus on subpopulations including those at risk of early leaving due to academic characteristics.

4.3 Overall Summary of Findings: Document and Interview Analysis

The final section of Chapter 4 Analysis correlates the findings from the document analysis and the interview analysis related to the four primary research questions of this study.

4.3.1 (i) Orientation and transition practices

Both the document and interview analysis uncovered substantial evidence that orientation and transition practices are in place at each of the three colleges that participated in this study. While the document analysis did not have detailed information about the orientation and
transition practices in place, the interviewees provided additional information and expanded on
the kinds of activities and programs in place.

4.3.1 (ii) Comprehensive and deliberate approaches

The document analysis provided evidence that between 2005 and 2010 that there was an
increasing strategic focus on orientation and transition as part of a broader student success
strategy. That was confirmed by the interviewees and was described as more of a process rather
than a simple event. The interviewees also shared perceptions that the focus was largely on
piloting activities and programs between 2005 and 2010. When key themes from the literature
are triangulated with the document and interview analysis, it is clear that a number of these
elements are piloted or in place at the three colleges. Peer services are engaged, early alert
programs are in place to some extent at each of the three colleges and there is a move from an
orientation event to a process to a broader focus on the first year experience between 2005 and
2010 and beyond.

4.3.1 (iii) Orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy

Both the document and interview analysis presented clear evidence that orientation and
transition is in fact a part of a broader student success strategy at each of the three colleges in this
study. The document analysis provided strong evidence in several of the documents that were
examined. The interview responses provided further evidence that orientation and transition is a
critical component of orientation and transition and the participants confirmed that since 2010
that strategic focus was even greater than during the period between 2005 and 2010.

4.3.1 (iv) CCSSE and Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students

This case study indicates that there is reasonable model fit between the CCSSE thematic
framework and orientation and transition practices as part of a broader student success strategy.
The study also uncovers important areas that can be strengthened if this tool was adopted to inform design of program, policies and procedures, assessment and evaluation tools and student success strategies. One participant reinforced that between 2005 and 2010 measurement, assessment and evaluation was weak by stating: “Those are numbers we can run quite frequently and easily. But when we’re looking at 2005 two 2010 there’s not a lot there (Interviewee #3, College B). Other participants add that between 2005 and 2010 there was an increasing focus on collecting data and evaluating programs through surveys. Implementing policy that supports orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy would also enhance strategy and the CCSSE tool provides a strong thematic framework to design policy and programs.

The CCSSE survey instrument becomes increasingly more relevant after 2010 as strategies have clearly evolved from pilot to strategic planning. One participant describes the 2005 to 2010 period as follows:

Prior to 2005, a sense of a more extensive or systemic orientation did not exist. In 2005, based on some of the work from the strategic enrollment management team, they engaged Jim Black and he did an assessment at the college and it was found that potentially, a more strategic approach to orientation at the college could be very useful and would in fact help to set the stage for students as they were entering into the college system”

(Interview #5, College A).

Other participants described a similar evolution with both orientation and transition and student success.
The CCSSE thematic framework has even greater potential when the findings of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students are applied. It should be noted that CCSSE has a supplemental survey that was developed to measure orientation and transition outcomes specifically and a similar approach could be employed to reflect some of the key findings of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students to account for Ontario specific considerations including career information and guidance. One participant confirmed that career information and guidance is an important focus for student success since 2010 by stating: “The ultimate goal here is to engage the student. We use data to intervene early to help transition and prepare the student to make social and peer connections and to launch the student academically and into their chosen career… that’s why orientation is so important (Interviewee #6, College B). The participant captures several of the themes from the literature and in particular the ‘career information and guidance’ theme that needs to be accounted for in the Ontario context.

5.0 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the documentary analysis and interviews analysis were presented in Chapter 4 and reveal a number of observations specific to each type of document that was reviewed and each of the six participant interviews and 12 standard interview questions. Within the previous section the analysis focused on the CCSSE thematic framework to examine how often the interview results in particular were related to the framework. Additionally, the previous section captures how other themes were related to the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College
Students or were themes that were different from either, the CCSSE thematic framework, and, the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students.

The next section includes an analysis of all findings and general observations. The observations from the findings from both the document analysis and interview analysis were coded and grouped into themes that were different than the CCSSE thematic framework or Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. Once the themes were identified by the researcher, the general observations from the documentary analysis, participant interviews and key points from the literature were considered. The observations were coded and grouped under the themes and wherever correlation occurred, it is noted in the following discussion and helped to formulate the conclusions contained within this Chapter. The final section provides observations and conclusions concerning the efficacy of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) survey instruments as it relates to using the thematic framework for orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. The conclusions also consider how the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students as well as general findings from this case study may be used to supplement CCSSE to account for Ontario system design issues.

The following themes were observed by examining both the document and interview analysis. The following additional themes were identified:

1. Strategy and intentional planning
   a. Policy framework

2. Assessment and evaluation
   a. Reference to the literature
   b. Research (including internal research)
c. Canadian specific content

3. Structures, leadership and organizational capacity

4. Information and communication

5. Program design and consistency of experience
   a. Orientation and transition programs
   b. Early alert and intervention
   c. Peer services and supports
   d. Online learning and communities

5.1 Observations from Documentary Analysis

The document analysis used a standard protocol to retrieve 31 applicable publicly available documents between the period of 2005 and 2010 that formed the sample of documents reviewed as part of this case study. While 31 documents were retrieved, this does not suggest that other documents were not available. Additional documents may be available in different formats, may have been removed from the website or may be related but did not surface using the search protocol that was developed. The purpose of the documentary analysis was, therefore, to cross reference key information to examine and observe patterns, frequency and themes. The discussion that follows is concentrated on the content that was examined and the themes that emerged.

5.1.1 (i) Strategy and intentional planning

The documentary analysis uncovered documents that indicated some degree of operational and strategic planning concerning both orientation and transition and student success at each of the three colleges that participated in this case study. The analysis of the documents that were retrieved showed that there was a growing focus on orientation and transition as it
relates to student success by. All three of the colleges had either a plan, strategy or referenced the
development of a strategy within the documents that were retrieved. Between 2005 and 2010,
there were more references to orientation and transition associated with student success in later
years than 2005 and 2006 in annual plans, governing minutes and the MYAA reports. By 2007,
all three colleges addressed orientation and transition related to student success in at least one
strategic document included as part of the analysis. All three colleges from this case study had a
reference to orientation and transition as it relates to student success within plans or strategy
documents. One of the three colleges could be considered to be more comprehensive, one of the
three has substantial tactics or plans and one of three referenced the development of a strategy by
2010. By 2010, there was a greater focus on retention, orientation and transition as part of a
broader student success strategy as reflected in the documentary analysis.

Additional documents were requested during the participant interviews concerning
orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy that may not have been
retrieved electronically. Of the additional documents that were provided, one of the additional
documents at College A was different than those retrieved by the researcher. The document was
reviewed in addition to the documents retrieved electronically providing further evidence of
deliberate and intentional planning. The documents provided and retrieved showed varying
degrees of comprehensiveness ranging from tactics, to operation planning to strategy. While
some colleges reported having or developing strategies, none of the three colleges appeared to
have a clearly defined problem, definitions of key elements within the problem, goals or
objectives and how they were going to be measured, tracked and reported upon. The interview
participants confirmed that assessment and evaluation varied and that overall improvements
could be made in this area.
(a) Policy framework

Publicly retrievable policy statements were lacking with respect to orientation and transition and student success at all three colleges. Only one of the three colleges had any policies posted on the web site pertaining to this area and it was related to student withdrawal. The focus of this policy was early leavers rather than front-end support for new student orientation and transition. Additionally, the only Ontario policy framework comes from the multi-year accountability agreements (MYAA). The MYAA process has references to retention and student success and institutions are required to report on both retention and graduation rates. The analysis uncovered that definitions were not clear resulting in a great degree of variation of data that is presented and reported upon. Developing a renewed policy framework that builds on the MYAA to enhance it and accounts for important findings from the literature could provide for a more strategic and consistent approach to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy.

5.1.1 (ii) Assessment and evaluation

The document analysis showed that data was not reported consistently indicating that it was likely not collected consistently. The process for collecting and reporting data was unclear and lacks provincial definitions. The data reviewed within the document analysis appears to be incomplete, contains inaccuracies and inconsistencies. This raises serious questions concerning reliability and validity of the data reviewed as part of this document analysis and particularly, the data reported as part of the Multi-year Accountability Agreements (MYAA) between 2005 and 2010. Despite the inconsistencies with the data reported within the MYAA, the reports appear to be driving a greater focus on retention and student success. The document analysis at all three colleges showed a greater focus on orientation and transition as part of a broader student success
strategy starting in 2005 when MYAA was introduced by the Ontario government with increasing frequency in each subsequent year. MYAA requires colleges to report on student success and orientation and transition is widely viewed as an important aspect of student success as examined in the literature.

(a) Reference to the literature, research and Canadian specific content

Within the document analysis there were no references to the literature or body of research in any of the 31 policy, related program, governing minutes, reports, orientation documents or plans. There was also no reference to Canadian research. Further research is needed to determine whether the information simply does not exist or is not publicly retrievable with the protocol used in this case study. The linkages between the local, regional and Ontario context situated within the Canadian, North American and global setting was not established through the document analysis. The document analysis also found very little information about measurement, assessment and evaluation and benchmarking.

5.1.1 (iii) Structures, leadership and organizational capacity

The document analysis did not provide observations concerning structures, leadership and organizational capacity. In some cases, it is implicit that leadership at the institutions plays a key role in the focus of programs and how they are designed and captured in key organizational documents. The lack of clear definitions, absence of literature and research and the range between tactics and strategy may indicate challenges under this theme. The interview analysis provides additional insights that would suggest that this observation was in fact the case and that structures, leadership and organizational capacity require consideration at each of the three colleges. Alternatively, in some cases it indicates that a particular focus was driven by key institutional leaders and in some cases, changes to leadership appears to have a large impact on
organizational focus and progress a topic that was explored further in the interview analysis section.

5.1.1 (iv) Information and communication

Even though there was evidence of a greater focus on orientation and transition as it relates to student success, the strategy documents were not readily publicly retrievable based on the protocol used in this case study. Additional information may be available or may have been removed since 2010. Within the documents that were retrieved, the audience for these publicly retrievable documents was not clear. The documents were publicly retrievable yet do not address the applicant, student, parents and family and the general public. It appears that the documents were largely planning or strategy documents aimed at governance and management. The colleges should consider the audience when making documents available to the public. Colleges need to make the linkages for the public regarding the purpose and impact of orientation and transition programs and the value of broader student success strategies. Further document analysis and an investigation into the reasons why documents were not publicly retrievable would prove valuable. In particular, a more comprehensive document analysis may uncover the amount of time the governing bodies dedicate to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy as it does not appear that considerable time is spent on these issues given the importance.

5.1.1 (v) Program design and consistency of experience

The documentary analysis did not provide clear and conclusive information concerning the different types of programs and services that were offered related to orientation and transition and student success at two of the three colleges. One of the three colleges had some information
that was publicly retrievable. Within the documents that were analyzed, there were some references to the following programs:

- Orientation and transition programs
- Early alert and intervention
- Peer services and supports
- Online learning and communities

The document analysis provided references to the above mentioned programs and services but did not go into any considerable detail. Additional information was obtained from the participants and more comprehensive references were included in the participant interview analysis section. The interview analysis also looks at the consistency of the student experience for students from within different academic programs of study and with different skills and abilities.

In summary, the document analysis identified a number of themes surrounding the efficacy of the plans and strategies employed by the three colleges that participated in this case. There was clear evidence that orientation and transition practices were in place or under development. The degree to which the approaches were comprehensive and deliberate was not conclusive. In general, the three colleges had a range of tactics, plans and strategies and did not appear to be comprehensive. College A did provide an additional document that was a student success plan and showed some evidence of a more comprehensive strategy. The second college could be described more as a plan rather than a strategy, the third college appeared to be planning between 2005 and 2010 rather than working from a formal strategy. The document analysis uncovered gaps in the areas of goals, objectives, assessment, and, evaluation at all three colleges. There was clear evidence that orientation and transition related to student success
played an increasingly important role at the three colleges examined over time. It is not possible
to determine the extent to which actual strategies were linked to the CCSSE thematic framework
as the information retrieved using the data collection protocol did not uncover specific
references. In order to explore the extent to which the CCSSE thematic framework did have a
good model fit, the interviews and further analysis of strategy documents was required and the
findings were presented in the interview section of this chapter. It was also not possible to clearly
link the findings of the 2007 Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students to the findings
of this document analysis either.

5.2 Observations from Interview Analysis

Interviews were conducted with six participants from the three colleges that participated
in this case study. The participants included one senior student affairs administrator and one
front line manager or faculty member responsible or knowledgeable about the delivery of
orientation and transition between 2005 and 2010. Any similarities and differences in relation to
the research and literature and between the three colleges were documented. The findings and
conclusions are not meant to be generalizable rather are meant to be descriptive and provide a
full story or picture.

The following observations are presented using the same themes that were presented in
the document analysis findings. There are 5 main themes including: strategy and intentional
planning; assessment and evaluation; structures, leadership and organizational capacity;
information and communication; and, program design and consistency of experience. There are
sub-themes within both strategy and intentional planning and program design and consistency of
experience.

5.2.1 (i) Strategy and intentional planning
Within the interviews, the six participants reference a shift from event based orientation to process based orientation program between 2005 and 2010 demonstrating a growing understanding of orientation and transition best practices related to the first year experience. One participant summarized this thought well by stating: “…(orientation and transition activities) really wanted to look at a deliberate and intentional setting of the stage for student engagement and that was the purpose of it” (Interviewee #2, College A). The six participants reported a number of programs and services related to orientation and transition and broader student success strategies. Even though there was a greater focus on orientation and transition as it related to student success, the strategy documents are not readily publicly retrievable based on the protocol used in this case study. Intentional planning and strategy was referenced regularly by the participants throughout the interviews and in some cases referred to a lack of intentional planning and challenges with strategy. One participant stated: “We don’t have a plan to really say this is what really what we do for first-year students. We kind of have a mishmash of different things. And I think that’s a problem. And that’s what we want to make some changes to and I think that that is going to happen” (Interviewee #1, College C). The extent to which the participants reported information pertaining to strategy and intentional planning varied between the three colleges. It ranged from moderate to high and would be subject to difference of opinion due to the lack of clear definition, policy framework, assessment and evaluation. The description by the six participants of orientation and transition practices as it relates to student success demonstrated that the programs and activities were generally more exploratory or experimental than strategy based. One participant describes the evolution as follows: “we’ve been trying very hard to go from what is a comprehensive events based programming to more of a process over time” (Interviewee #4, College C). The emphasis appears to be heavily focused on welcome and
information in support of students between 2005 and 2010. One participant stated: “So we put a lot of emphasis around giving the students the support upfront and giving them information about supports and services upfront” (Interviewee #6, College B). Several key components of orientation and transition found within the literature appear to be missing and varied considerably between the three colleges. One of the three college’s strategies could be described as comprehensive, one as moderate and one as developing between 2005 and 2010. All three of the college strategies showed considerable improvement with a more strategic focus in the later years of the study. One of the informants shared: “so prior to 2005 everything was fairly decentralized here. And I would probably describe it as some quick chatting followed by a barbecue and a street party and it happened within the divisions so it really happened at the program level only and a sense of a more extensive or systemic orientation did not exist” (Interviewee #2, College A). Similar sentiments can be found in each of the six participant interview responses.

All three colleges and all six participants referenced a renewed strategic focus after 2010 and showed signs that orientation and transition as it relates to student success will be more heavily ingrained into planning and strategy in the future. All three colleges appeared to be focusing more on the entire first year experience by 2010 and beyond rather than only orientation and transition. One participant stated: “I would say then (2005 to 2010) it was a series of activities versus a formal strategy. It wasn’t so much a formal strategy as much as a series of activities… It was more fragmented and for those who were working close to it. It was a strategy it was strategic but it wasn’t formalized. It wouldn’t have appeared in our college’s strategic plan. Whereas now it does. So in that sense it wasn’t formalized. Or embraced in the same sense” (Interviewee #6, College B). This comment was consistent with the document analysis and
demonstrates a clear understanding by the participants that the deliberate approach to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy was more apparent after 2010.

Each of the sites also shared that a greater focus was being placed on student subpopulations. One informant stated: “beginning in about 2009-2010 we did some other extended orientation activities for mature populations for students who are to some extent re-careering, we did some extended orientation for our international population… and transition work for some of our students with disabilities” (Interviewee #1, College C). This was consistent with the growing importance of the first year experience identified within the literature review. This focus on subpopulations was also consistent with the growing understanding of identity development theories found within the literature to support the growing diversity of the student body. Similar responses were described by each participant demonstrating a greater focus on subpopulations at each of the three colleges.

(a) Policy framework

The interviews highlighted that there was a lack of policy framework within the three colleges and the participants indicated that within Ontario there is a similar lack of policy framework. Among the six participants in the study, some were candid that a policy framework does not exist and would be helpful. Participants from all three colleges confirmed that policy was lacking. This was also observed in the document analysis and confirmed by the participants. One participant stated: “well from a policy standpoint obviously we don’t really have a hard and fast policy” (Interviewee #4, College C). Another stated: “We don’t really have policies and procedures that govern it (orientation and transition)… Interestingly…” (Interviewee #6, College B). Additionally, the provincial multi-year accountability framework did not surface through the interviews. The document analysis identified that the MYAA was in fact one of the key policy
drivers in Ontario. The MYAA was more prominent in the document analysis and was not referenced in the interviews as a policy driver by any of the participants. Making explicit links within strategy documents to the provincial MYAA may also prove beneficial.

5.2.1 (ii) Assessment and evaluation

The interviews uncovered numerous opinions confirming that student success is ill defined and that strategies were often more tactical or operational plans rather than a strategy with clearly defined goals and measurable objectives between 2005 and 2010. Participants selfreported that outcomes and goals were lacking for both the institutions and within the design of student programs. One participant stated: “we’re working on models – we’re much better at using the information at the student level than we used to be and there’s still room for us to do even more. It has great potential and that’s one of our favorite topics right now. But that’s about transition so you know the transition to post-secondary into college for some of our students who are not academically strong is a big deal” (Interviewee #6, College B). Similar comments could be attributed to other participants within the study. All three sites described an evolving need to focus more on outcomes. There were no references to the MYAA reports by any of the six participants despite being asked about data collection, reporting, assessment and measurement of results. This is interesting as on one hand the MYAA reports appear to be driving a greater focus on orientation and transition as evidenced by the literature review yet the participants did not make the link explicitly. Supplemental researcher to understand why the practitioners did not make this link would be interesting. This would suggest that a well-defined and consistently measured set of objectives grounded in research could prove beneficial to the Ontario college system in support of better student success outcomes.

(a) Reference to the literature, research and Canadian specific content
With respect to the literature, Tinto, Pascarella, Terenzini and Kuh were cited most often. There were no references to Canadian research by any of the six participants. There was a complete lack of Canadian research referenced in any of the responses to the 12 interview questions. There was also no Canadian content found within the document analysis. In general, references to the literature were more implicit than explicit. The following is an example of this implicit reference to the literature: “…the goals were to help students to acclimatize and adjust and so the idea was for them to adjust socially, academically, and psycho-socially and financially, to their new program. So is really about ensuring that there was a sense of understanding” (Interviewee #4, College C). The participant appears to draw on a number of key themes that are found within the literature although they did not explicitly make the link to any specific theory. One of the three colleges was clearly influenced by Canadian research but again it was an implicit rather than explicit reference. The participants were clearly well informed and knowledgeable about the various theories and models but they did not readily make the linkages within the documents that were reviewed or in response to the interview questionnaire for the most part. This is an important point to consider as there are key themes identified in the literature that are specific to the Canadian and Ontario context and should be informing strategy at Ontario’s colleges. There is some evidence that this is improving beyond 2010 and it is generally implicit rather than explicit.

5.2.1 (iii) Structures, leadership and organizational capacity

The interview analysis found very little difference in perceptions based on interview responses despite the participant’s position as either the senior student affairs administrator or the front line manager or faculty responsible for orientation and transition. Modest differences were observed between faculty and administrators. In general, it appears that the senior administrators
tended to be more concerned with planning and strategy while the front line managers or faculty were more aligned with the student perspective. In some cases, participants referenced the importance of leadership, lack of leadership and consistency of leadership. One participant stated: “often times it depends on the support that we have administratively at a senior management level to be able to put in place some of these (strategies). I would argue that funding is always an issue; that we start and stop, but I also think… I do fundamentally believe that that whole thinking approach requires a whole institution and it can fall very short when the responsibility for orientation and transition lies in the hands of a few or it’s happening in siloed efforts. I don’t think that it can be successful” (Interviewee #5, College A). It is also clear from the participant interviews that leadership changes within the three colleges have had an impact and that institutional approach and commitment is in fact critical. It is also important to note that full participation from faculty and staff is a critical success factor based on the literature and needs to be strengthened at each of the three colleges. The participants referenced varying degrees of participation across the institution and there is evidence that beyond 2010, greater faculty and staff participation is being considered at all three colleges.

5.2.1 (iv) Information and communication

Information and communication was a common theme among all six participants and all three colleges. Participants raised concerns about lack of information and communication or difficulties communicating to the various stakeholder groups. In some cases, the participants provided contradictory information concerning the orientation and transition practices in relation to broader student success strategies at the three college sites in this case study. This may indicate that the information exists but the participants did not know or recall the information and may be indicative of communication challenges. When asked about materials and information for
students, none of the six participants referenced the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS). It would appear that this is a major opportunity to provide consistent information to students concerning orientation and transition as it relates to student success and some of the key themes from the literature. OCAS can also serve as an important application and tool to support early alert efforts by Ontario’s colleges. In general, it appears that the information that was provided to students focused on support services. One participant shared the approach to information sharing as follows: “these are the activities that are going to be taking place, these are the things you need to be thinking about doing prior to when you start and then these are some things that you look forward to kind of throughout the term” (Interviewee #1, College C).

In reviewing the literature, the idea of students creating an intentional plan surfaced in first year experience programs. This would indicate that colleges should consider moving away from simple information sharing and move towards coaching students through a process that ensures that they are intentionally planning their college experience including: the program of study, experiential learning, the support services that they need and the activities that they will be engaged in.

Communication is another major issue reported by all six participants as well. In some cases, communication with faculty was mentioned as a challenge and within the document analysis, it was not always clear who the audience was. Addressing effective communication with all stakeholder groups is critical to institutional strategies concerning orientation and transition related to student success. They type of communication with students needs to be considered to ensure that it is intentional and interactive. In general, communication should be a more integral component of each strategy and tactic used to implement it.

\( (v) \) Program design and consistency of experience
The interviews uncovered a number of references to program design for both orientation and transition and student success. Orientation and transition was most commonly focused on welcome and information between 2005 and 2010. Numerous programs were reported that help students acclimatize to the new environment. Over the period of the study, there is evidence of program improvements and a focus beyond welcome and information. In general there is a lack of consistency reported by all six participants. Consistency relates both to the student experience and institutional planning, assessment and evaluation. In some cases, participants described pilot programs or programs designed for only a portion of the student body. Other references concerned inconsistency by academic programs and challenges with effective communication for all stakeholder groups.

(a) Orientation and transition programs

The design of orientation and transition programs is clearly grounded in the literature concerning student engagement. Key themes from the literature are readily observed however, there were very few references to intrusive advising and career clarity between 2005 and 2010. Beyond 2010, there was increasing references to career clarity by the participants. One participant stated: “since 2010 I think that there’s been a wider acceptance in the academic area of the importance of the engagement and connection piece for students. I think that it’s not just… outside of the academic course outline, this is how you’re graded… I think faculty are realizing that this is an important piece… the career clarity piece is also more present and more important that students understand that” (Interviewee #3, College B). The six participants reported that after 2010, all three colleges were beginning to address career information and guidance as well as online learning and communities to varying degrees. Orientation and transition programs are
becoming more comprehensive focusing on the entire First Year Experience beyond 2010 but may require further refinement to be considered to be a thorough and formal strategy.

(b) Early alert and intervention

All six participants reported some elements of early alert, including entry surveys or testing and assessment. One participant stated: “so some of the stuff on how we communicate to students is a little different. So they get targeted emails based on risk factors… That is a recent development” (Interviewee #3, College B). Several of the participants shared that the approach to data collection is more deliberate since 2010 and there is a greater focus on using the data to identify risk and proactively use the information to support students. Within the six interviews, there was no indication that progress grades were monitored and no reference to interventions with students based on academic progress between 2005 and 2010. Beyond 2010, there was some indication that academic progress was more central to the orientation and transition process. Based on the literature and the key challenges that students experience, it is clear that this is an important consideration that needs to be addressed by colleges to improve student success.

(c) Peer services and supports

All three colleges reported information about peer services and supports. One of the three colleges had extensive services in this area that was part of the student success strategy. One participant stated: “so it needed to be a first year strategy so we looked at first semester courses and identified a course where there had been a history of difficulty and also asked faculty what they perceived would be the most difficult and challenging first semester courses and then worked with that faculty to identify peer leaders who we trained in cooperative learning strategies, in learning strategies as opposed to teaching strategies” (Interviewee #5, College A).
Other participants referenced the importance of peer services as well. In particular, peer services and supports and early alert initiatives were prevalent at all three colleges to some extent.

\[(d) \text{ Online learning and communities}\]

Between 2005 and 2010 there were only a few responses that indicated the presence of online learning and communities. After 2010, there were more references to online learning and communities. One participant shared: “there’s been a huge influx in changing delivery models in terms of blended learning. It is now is a big piece of what we offer here so looking at ways to introduce students to blended learning outside of the classroom” (Interviewee #6, College B). Specific links between online learning and communities, orientation and transition, and, student success were identified after 2010 demonstrating the growing importance of online learning technologies within the college setting.

5.3 Summary Conclusions

This case study examined deliberate orientation and transition practices as part of a broader student success strategy by comparing three large urban Ontario colleges between 2005 and 2010. The case study focused on four primary research questions. This section will examine each of the four primary research questions and suggest conclusions related to each.

Research Question #1:

What student orientation and transition practices are in place at each of three large urban colleges in Ontario?

The document and interview analysis showed that there was a range of activities in place at each of the three colleges between 2005 and 2010. During this period, the activities evolved from information sharing and an institutional welcome to a broader focus recognizing the importance of the orientation and transition process. There was clear evidence of the growing
understanding of the importance of the orientation and transition process as part of a broader student success strategy. In the latter years, there was an increasing focus on sub-populations, a renewed focus on peer services and supports and clear evidence that early alert was critical. Beyond 2010, the three colleges demonstrated a growing understanding that early intervention is also needed and the importance of career clarity is recognized. The three colleges also appeared to be focus more on the first year experience and show evidence that orientation and transition has evolved from an event to a process and from a process to a focus on the first year experience. Online learning begins to come into focus and there appears to be a growing understanding that technology plays an important role in student success strategies.

Research Question #2:
To what extent are three large urban colleges utilizing comprehensive and deliberate approaches to student orientation and transition?

The three colleges employ deliberate tactics observed throughout the case study between 2005 and 2010. The tactics were clearly intentional showing consideration for new approaches and demonstrating a move to a process based orientation away from a single event approach. The new approaches also have implicit references to themes from the literature. Although activities and tactics were deliberate the approaches could be described as experimental in most cases rather than comprehensive at two of the three colleges while the third could be described as somewhat comprehensive. There were missing elements of key activities and programs between 2005 and 2010 that are prevalent in the literature including: faculty and peer involvement, career clarity, financial literacy, early intervention for students at-risk, targeted outreach and program design for the diversity of learners and a holistic approach to student services. There is evidence that there was a concerted effort to improve and by 2010 and beyond, efforts were increasingly
more comprehensive accounting for some of the above and indicating a growing understanding of key challenges. In order to be more deliberate and comprehensive, clearly articulated goals, policies and procedures, outcomes and measurement need to be developed to move from a tactical approach to a more strategic one. Communication plans need to be incorporated into comprehensive strategies and strategies need to address structures, leadership and organization capacity as well as assessment and evaluation. Finally, references to the literature should become more explicit rather than implicit and institutions would benefit from drawing upon Canadian and Ontario specific literature to improve program design.

Research Question #3:
To what extent are these three colleges using student orientation and transition as part of a broader Student Success strategy?

There was evidence that all three colleges understand that orientation and transition needs to have a central place within any institutional student success strategies. One of the three colleges had orientation as one of the three pillars of the student success strategy, one college had orientation as part of its plan and one college offered a range of programming for orientation. All three colleges appear to be placing a renewed effort on orientation and transition beyond 2010 and are turning to institutional data to drive planning. Each of the three strategies may benefit from a greater focus on the literature and in particular, the findings from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year Experience and the recommendations contained within. Additionally, the CCSSE thematic framework provides a good starting point for the development of strategy that drives behaviours that are known to positively affect increased retention and are correlated to better student success outcomes. All three strategies would benefit from a greater
focus on outcomes and measurement and structures, leadership and capacity to carry out this important work.

Research Question #4:
To what extent do these practices relate to the Community College Survey on Student Engagement (CCSSE) thematic framework and the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students?

The case study highlights similarities and differences between the three colleges that participated. The three colleges all had similar dynamic student populations that reflected data reported as part of the Pan Canadian Study of the First Year College Student. The college student population is diverse and appears to represent greater diversity than universities (OCAS, 2013). The major difference between Ontario universities and colleges lies within the academic focus as either a typical four year liberal arts institution or predominantly two-year vocational and career focused college. In general, the three colleges appear to be in the pilot stage with respect to programs and services related to orientation and transition as part of a broader student success strategy. It would be interesting to examine whether other Ontario colleges were also in the pilot stage with respect to orientation and transition. Within the United States, there are more associations dedicated to professionals working within this field and training for individuals working towards the design and delivery of orientation and transition programs. While student engagement is common between all North American settings, the type of student engagement needs to be tailored to the Ontario context. Specifically, student engagement needs to start with pre-admissions advising to strengthen career goals and intentional student success planning by the student. General student engagement activities should be geared towards the career focus of the program of study in a co-curricular manner that improves networks and skills related to the
professional field and less on extra-curricular activity that is geared towards interests. One key observation is that universities appear to start with a review of the literature and then look at program design. By contrast, colleges appear to explore with program design rather starting with the literature and designing assessment and evaluation tools to measure success. This finding can be observed at the three colleges that participated in this case study between 2005 and 2010. Colleges should consider making more explicit links to the literature and in particular, should concentrate on the Canadian and Ontario specific literature.

5.4 Conclusions

The review of the literature, the document analysis and interviews demonstrate that there was a lack of provincial and local framework for both orientation and transition and student success. There is considerable Canadian and Ontario specific content related to student success and less related to orientation and transition. There is a clear need for greater linkages between orientation and student success and the focus should include the entire first year experience as demonstrated through the review of the literature and is referenced within the participant interviews. Orientation and transition is a critical component of student success and needs to be strengthened to ensure that students acclimatize to the learning environment. There is an opportunity to begin the orientation and transition process earlier tied to the applicant funnel and admissions process. There is also a need for specific transition programming to meet the diverse needs of students.

Definitions, goal and objective setting need to be strengthened and communications needs to be central to any effective strategy development. Assessment and evaluation needs to be engrained within the strategy. These two points are clear whether reviewing the literature, examining the document analysis or reviewing the interview responses. Data collection and
reporting would benefit from clear definitions and standards that should be applied to all Ontario colleges in order to provide an accurate view of provincial benchmarking.

The Ontario government can play a key role in establishing a policy framework but colleges have an opportunity to drive policy creation rather than respond to it. Institutional policy is also needed supported by strong processes aligned with principles of student success. Once a policy framework is in place structures, leadership and staffing should be aligned with strategy to ensure that the college is having the desired impact on student success. System-wide investment in early alert and intervention focusing on the pre-admissions and pre-registration periods is critical for overall student success efforts and to drive improvements to overall retention. The focus of early alert and intervention should be focused on academic preparation, financial literacy and career clarity.

Training, credentials of practitioners within the field and leadership within this important area requires careful consideration and planning. Participation in associations and the development of standards of practice would improve the overall strategic approach to both orientation and transition and student success. System-wide benchmarking would also help colleges to measure the impact of programs and help evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions.

There is an opportunity to enhance faculty participation in the orientation and transition process as demonstrated by the review of literature, the document analysis and the interview responses. Faculty and staff need to be more engaged in the delivery and design of programs and services. In particular, faculty and staff need to have more training related to the literature and more communication about student success plans and strategies. Faculty and staff engagement should begin pre-admissions and throughout the lead up to each new semester. Faculty also play
a key role in addressing academic preparedness and program design to address key themes from
the literature within the first year of study.

Program design and consistency of experience should be accounted for as demonstrated
by the review of the literature as well as participant interview responses. In particular, a greater
focus on early alert tied to intrusive intervention and advising is needed in a systemic and
deliberate manner utilizing technology to reach all students. Moving away from the *laissez faire*
approach to student services in favour of a more proactive approach to early alert and intentional
intervention by student services is also an important consideration for the design of programs and
services.

The monitoring of student progress should continue throughout the first year experience
to measure and evaluate the results of interventions. This needs to be fully supported by faculty
and tied to institutional strategies and supported by institutional systems. Students need to be
more engaged in intentional planning about the career that they are focused on and options need
to be clear should that program prove to be a poor match to the students’ interests and abilities.
Within the design of orientation and transition programs, there is not enough focus on
understanding students’ motivation levels, goals and helping them to understand the demands
and expectations of the program of study. Remediation and programs aimed at improving skills
and abilities should also be entrenched into strategic planning.

In 2007, the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students provided rich data and
replicating this study would update the information to see if findings remain consistent and if the
student profile if similar or different. Longitudinal data for Canada and Ontario is needed. The
findings of the Pan Canadian Study of the First Year of College and this case study shared a
number of findings. Attention should be paid to the recommendations contained within the study.
In particular, the Pan Canadian Study of the First Year of College calls for the development of holistic student success models that would be beneficial to both the student and the institution. The aforementioned points can be used to inform the development of holistic student success models.

Participation in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement also has considerable value as a tool that is longitudinal, has been tested and validated and shows positive correlation to academic outcomes associated with student success. Using these two tools in combination can provide even further efficacy to account for system design issues related to the Ontario college in comparison to two-year American community colleges. In particular, it should be noted that CCSSE designed a supplemental questionnaire that accounts for orientation and transition to add data to the already rich data set captured by the CCSSE survey instrument. Employing a similar supplemental survey instrument would allow for inclusion of some of the Canadian and Ontario specific findings of the Pan Canadian Survey of the First Year College Student including career information and guidance and financial literacy. This would address the one major shortcoming that the CCSSE thematic framework does not currently provide for in sufficient enough detail or specificity. This approach could be adopted to account for the key system design issues identified in the findings of the Pan Canadian Survey of First Year College Students while gaining the benefit of the CCSSE longitudinal data, benchmarking from hundreds of two-year colleges and the research that has tested the validity and reliability of the CCSSE tool.

By analyzing the interviews to determine how often the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) themes were prevalent within the self-reported interview responses, I found that the themes were well represented. Support for learners was most
consistent and was reported 75% of the time by the participants to the twelve survey questions. Student – faculty interaction was mentioned 31% of the time and other references to faculty engagement indicate that this is an important element of orientation and transition practices and one that has sometimes proven challenging. The third most frequent theme was active and collaborative learning. It should be noted that this is particularly important for extended orientation and transition programs that account for the entire first year experience and was less prevalent in early programs that were event rather than process based. This would indicate that the theme is even more applicable. Academic challenge related to the interviews 11% of the time while student effort was mentioned 19% of the time. These two elements are perhaps the hardest to embed in effective orientation and transition programs but are critical as it is clear that students that are unsuccessful often underestimated the effort needed to succeed or the academic challenge that they would face. Given the relative preparedness of a large percentage of Ontario’s college bound students, these two elements are critical success factors.

The analysis conducted within this case study would indicate that there appears to be good model fit with the CCSSE thematic framework within the three colleges that participated within this case study, notwithstanding its limitations. This case study adds further qualitative evidence that the CCSSE thematic framework is applicable to large urban Ontario colleges similar to the participants from this case study. This in combination with the Mandarino and Mattern HEQCO study provides evidence that the CCSSE thematic framework is a reasonable tool to plan and assess orientation and transition practices as part of a broader student success strategy. While this case study appears to be applicable, further quantitative research would be useful to provide further evidence of the efficacy of the CCSSE tool.
In conclusion, the three colleges that participated in this case study show progress between 2005 and 2010 related to the deliberate use of orientation and transition practices as part of a broader student success strategy. There is clear evidence that between 2005 and 2010, there was greater understanding and a move from orientation and transition as an event to focus on the process. Beyond 2010, there is growing evidence that orientation and transition is accounting for a greater focus on the entire first year experience. Strategies are becoming more formal and intentionally designed. Strategies would benefit from a greater focus on key themes from the literature and Canadian and Ontario specific content is a critical success factor for program design. Policy, clearly defined outcomes and assessment and evaluation are instrumental in advancing strategy. Ontario can play a key role in advancing the understanding of student success by considering system wide tools to support provincial benchmarking against other jurisdictions. In order to advance this critical dialogue, there is evidence that the CCSSE tool would be a good starting point and that accounting for the findings of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students through the use of a supplemental tool would offer a means to effectively support an early adoption by Ontario’s colleges within a reasonable time frame. Educational attainment is at an all-time high in Ontario and a continuing focus on measuring student success outcomes will ensure that Ontario continues to be an international leader in this critical postsecondary environment.

5.5 Considerations for research and policy

This case study identified a number of findings that present interesting directions for future research. In order to understand if the findings from this case study are applicable to other large colleges, small colleges and colleges from different geographic locations and non-urban settings in Ontario, additional research is needed. The retrospective character of this study presents
certain limitations and replicating this study to examine the period between 2010 and 2014 would be very beneficial to the Ontario college system and other researchers. In particular, employing this case study methodology for study the period between 2010 and 2014 would add significant value to the body of research to see if additional progress has been made since 2010. Specifically, it would be interesting to understand if a greater focus on student success strategies can be observed through a more recent and updated document analysis. The case study also considered the conclusions and implications section of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students that was conducted in 2005, replicating this study would prove valuable for Ontario and Canadian colleges to determine if the information is as applicable and consistent over time. This is particularly important as some of the recommendations from the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students including the focus on career information and guidance should be accounted for if the CCSSE thematic framework is used in Ontario. In order to strengthen the Multi Year Accountability Agreements (MYAA) in Ontario, a greater focus on research into the definition of orientation and transition and student success would prove valuable to help drive positive results pertaining to retention of students. The MYAA could be reviewed to ensure more commonality for tracking and reporting retention and student success. The MYAA could also provide a provincial policy framework that strengthens the approach to both orientation and transition and student success in Ontario. Further research into policy frameworks for colleges could also prove beneficial for colleges that want to enhance the approach to orientation and transition. Additionally, research into best practices for assessment and evaluation would help Ontario colleges design more effective and comprehensive strategies.

Based on the findings from this case study and other literature including the Mandarino and Mattern study, the CCSSE thematic would prove to be a valuable tool to help design and plan
orientation and transition approaches as well as broader student success strategies for large urban Ontario colleges. The CCSSE thematic framework provides a simple way to organize strategy into five themes as follows:

- Active and collaborative learning
- Student effort
- Academic challenge
- Student – faculty interaction
- Support for learners

Particular care should be made to account for all five areas. Using this framework to enhance planning and design could also ensure that faculty and staff throughout the institution were engaged in delivering orientation and transition programs as part of a broader student success strategy. The case study showed that two areas of the thematic framework were less prevalent than the other three including: ‘student effort’ and ‘academic challenge’ and should be accounted for in program design, delivery and evaluation.

The case study also reveals that the conclusions and implications section of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students should be accounted for if the CCSSE survey tool was adopted by Ontario colleges. In particular, ‘career information and guidance’, ‘meeting the diverse needs of students’ and ‘skills development needs of students’ should be accounted for. The CCSSE survey tool has adopted a supplemental section approach and has included a focus on orientation and transition in recent years. Employing a similar approach and designing an Ontario or Canadian specific supplemental section in addition to the CCSSE survey instrument would increase the effectiveness of the tool and could account for Ontario system design issues.
When examining opportunities for further research, it is important to consider the opinions and perceptions of early leavers to develop a full understanding of the experiences of students that have left college or transferred to another institution. This area of research could shed further light onto issues of institutional fit, motivation and what are the causes that affect a students’ decision to leave early. Undertaking this research across a number of institutions would be most beneficial to understand the overall impact for Ontario rather than limiting this information to a specific college. Re-engaging with students that have left early may also present an opportunity for students to re-enter the postsecondary environment.

Finally, the case study reveals that the institutions that are designing strategies should pay particular attention to defining desired goals and outcomes and ensuring that assessment and evaluation is thorough and effective. Any strategy efforts should account for appropriate:

1. Leadership, organizational structures and ensure capacity
2. References to the literature including Canadian content
3. Policy frameworks
4. Consistency of experience for all students
5. Use of technology to support online learning communities
6. Information and communication plans

In summary, the CCSSE thematic framework has a lot of value for Ontario colleges to consider when designing and planning initiatives to engage students in support of student success. Planning efforts need to be more intentional and strategic account for the items captured above. The CCSSE thematic framework can be strengthened by accounting for the conclusions and implications section of the Pan Canadian Study of First Year College Students. Using these two tools in tandem can provide a strong foundation to design effective strategies to enhance
efforts to better support students and foster greater student success outcomes for both the individual and the college.
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APPENDIX A: Administrative Consent February 2014

Attention: Name, College President

Dear Name,

I am completing my Doctorate of Philosophy in Higher Education at OISE, University of Toronto and am currently planning a research study entitled: Deliberate Orientation and Transition Practices as Part of a Broader Student Success Strategy: A Comparative Case Study of Three Large Urban Ontario Colleges. In order to begin the study, I require your written consent.

The purpose of this study is to examine the practices in use at three large urban colleges between 2005 and 2010 in relation to the North American context to look for similarities and differences as well as examine responses in relation to the thematic elements of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The case study will utilize qualitative interviews to gain an appreciation for and in depth understanding of the practices in place during this period and will be supplemented by an in depth institutional document analysis of key documents concerning orientation and transition and broader student success strategies. The understanding gained from this study could inform future planning in the areas of orientation and transition as it relates to efforts to engage students and improve student success. The findings may also provide a foundation for future enhancements and provide a template for more comprehensive approaches within the College system as a whole. This study will be carried out in Ontario, Canada under the supervision of Professor Peter Dietsche, Department of Learning, Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles.

Your college was selected based on its size and location within Ontario. As President, I am seeking your approval for your College’s participation in the study. The study will involve interviews of 2 of your staff. The first is the senior student affairs administrator/Dean of Students or a suitable alternative designate in the event that they are unable to participate. The second participant will be a front line manager or faculty/coordinator knowledgeable about your orientation and transition practices. Additionally, the study will involve a document analysis. The study will provide an interview questionnaire and interviews in which participants will be asked questions about your orientation and transition process and practices, related policies and your student success initiatives or strategy. Participants will be well informed about the nature of the study and their participation, including assurance that they may withdraw at any time. In addition, they may request that any information, whether in written form or
audiotape, be eliminated from the study. Participants at no time will be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm.

Only the Research Assistant, Supervisor and, myself, the Researcher will have access to the interview information. All information and data will be stored in a secure location at my residence in Hamilton, Ontario. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, colleges and communities cannot be identified. All raw data and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the study. Audiotapes will be transcribed by a Research Assistant and erased once transcribed and turned over to the Primary Researcher. Your staff’s participation is voluntary and they may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. They will be asked to provide informed consent prior to being contacted to book a suitable time for an in person or telephone interview at a time convenient for you by my Research Assistant. Finally, participants are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study.

If you agree to participate, please sign the letter below and return it to the Research Assistant, Eric Harvey in the envelope provided. I have included the name of the Dean of Students/senior student affairs administrator at your college for your verification. I am excited to have your institution participate in this study. The expertise of your institution and your staff in carrying out this research study is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: wayne.poirier@mohawkcollege.ca or (416) 471-6559. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Peter Dietsche at peter.dietsche@utoronto.ca or (416) 209-4324. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273.

Wayne Poirier, Candidate        Dr. Peter Dietsche, Professor
Learning, Higher & Adult Education        Learning, Higher & Adult Education
OISE, University of Toronto        OISE, University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West        252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6 CANADA        Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6 CANADA

By signing below, you are indicating that you are consenting to your college participating in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Name:      College
Signed:              Date:
To the participants in this study,

The purpose of this study is to examine the practices in use at three large urban colleges between 2005 and 2010 in relation to the North American context to look for similarities and differences as well as examine responses in relation to the thematic elements of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The case study will utilize qualitative interviews to gain an appreciation for and in depth understanding of the practices in place during this period and will be supplemented by an in depth institutional document analysis of key documents concerning orientation and transition and broader student success strategies. The understanding gained from this study could inform future planning in the areas of orientation and transition as it relates to efforts to engage students and improve student success. The findings may also provide a foundation for future enhancements and provide a template for more comprehensive approaches within the College system as a whole. This study will be carried out in Ontario, Canada under the supervision of Professor Peter Dietsche, Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. The study is entitled: Deliberate Orientation and Transition Practices as Part of a Broader Student Success Strategy: A Comparative Case Study of Three Large Urban Ontario Colleges.

Your college was selected based on its size and location within Ontario. Your President has consented to your College’s participation in the study and has confirmed that you are the senior student affairs administrator at your College that would be able to make a meaningful contribution to the study or identify a suitable alternative designate in the event that you are unable to participate.

The interview questionnaire will be provided initially to prepare for the interview ahead of time. This will be followed by a face-to-face interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes. During your interview you will be asked questions about your orientation and transition process and practices, related policies and your student success initiatives or strategy. The study will use a Research Assistant that has signed a confidentiality form and has been trained to conduct the interview and store the information securely. Only the Research Assistant, Supervisor and, myself, the Researcher will have access to the interview information. During the interview, the Research Assistant may ask clarifying questions for clarification or further understanding, but will mainly be there to listen to you speak about your views and experiences.

It is the intention that each interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. A summary of your interview transcription will be reviewed with you by the Research Assistant to add further clarification and correct any misrepresentations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location at the Researchers residence in Hamilton, Ontario. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, colleges and communities cannot be identified. Recorded audiotape data will be destroyed 2 weeks after it is transcribed by the Research Assistant and turned over to the Primary Researcher. All raw data and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the study.
Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You will be asked to provide your informed consent prior to being contacted to book a suitable time for an in person interview at a time convenient for you by my Research Assistant. The study participants will at no time be judged or evaluated and will be at no risk of harm. You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the study. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study.

The study will have two components: 1) interviews with the senior student affairs administrator/Dean of Students as well as a front line manager or faculty/coordinator knowledgeable about and/or responsible for orientation and transition during the period between 2005 and 2010, and 2) an in depth document analysis of orientation and student success materials. You will be asked to identify a front line manager or faculty/coordinator or staff to participate in this study and an alternate in the event that the first individual chooses not to participate by filling in the section at the bottom of this letter.

If you agree to participate, please sign the letter below and return it to the Research Assistant, Eric Harvey in the envelope provided. I am excited to have your institution participate in this study. The expertise of your institution and your staff in carrying out this research study is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: waynepoirierconsulting@gmail.com or (416) 4716559. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Peter Dietsche at peter.dietsche@utoronto.ca or (416) 209-4323. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273.

Thank you in advance for your support and participation.

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By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

name: __________________________
College: __________________________

Signed: __________________________ Date: __________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: _____
Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio taped: _____
Please provide the name, email and telephone number for the front line manager, faculty/coordinator or staff to be contacted:

First choice: __________________________

Name: __________________________ Email: __________________________ Phone: __________________________

Alternate: __________________________

Name: __________________________ Email: __________________________ Phone: __________________________
APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Letter – Front Line Manager, Faculty/Coordinator
February 2014

To the participants in this study,

The purpose of this study is to examine the practices in use at three large urban colleges between 2005 and 2010 in relation to the North American context to look for similarities and differences as well as examine responses in relation to the thematic elements of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The case study will utilize qualitative interviews to gain an appreciation for and in depth understanding of the practices in place during this period and will be supplemented by an in depth institutional document analysis of key documents concerning orientation and transition and broader student success strategies. The understanding gained from this study could inform future planning in the areas of orientation and transition as it relates to efforts to engage students and improve student success. The findings may also provide a foundation for future enhancements and provide a template for more comprehensive approaches within the College system as a whole. This study will be carried out in Ontario, Canada under the supervision of Professor Peter Dietsche, Department of Theory and Policy Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The data is being collected for the purposes of a PhD thesis and perhaps for subsequent research articles. The study is entitled: Deliberate Orientation and Transition Practices as Part of a Broader Student Success Strategy: A Comparative Case Study of Three Large Urban Ontario Colleges.

Your college was selected based on its size and location within Ontario. Your President has consented to your College’s participation in the study and you have been identified as an individual at your College that would be able to make a meaningful contribution to the study. The interview questionnaire will be provided an advance of the interview. This will be followed by a face-to-face interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes. During your interview you will be asked questions about your orientation and transition process and practices, related policies and your student success initiatives or strategy. The study will use a Research Assistant that has signed a confidentiality form and has been trained to conduct the interview and store the information securely. Only the Research Assistant, Supervisor and, myself, the Researcher will have access to the interview information. During the interview, the Research Assistant may ask clarifying questions for clarification or further understanding, but will mainly be there to listen to you speak about your views and experiences.
It is the intention that each interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interviews and transcriptions. A summary of your interview transcription will reviewed with you by the Research Assistant to add further clarification and correct any misrepresentations that could result. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and stored at a secure location at my residence in Hamilton, Ontario. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, colleges and communities cannot be identified. Recorded data will be destroyed 2 weeks following a review of the interview data with you. All raw data and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the study.

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You will be asked to provide your informed consent prior to being contacted to book a suitable time for an in person or telephone interview at a time convenient for you by my Research Assistant. The study participants will at no time be judged or evaluated and will be at no risk of harm. You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the study. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. The study will have two components: 1) interviews with the senior student affairs administrator/Dean of Students as well as a front line manager or faculty/coordinator knowledgeable about and/or responsible for orientation and transition during the period between 2005 and 2010, and 2) an in depth document analysis of orientation and student success materials.

If you agree to participate, please sign the letter below and return it to the Research Assistant, Eric Harvey in the envelope provided. I am excited to have your institution participate in this study. The expertise of your institution and your staff in carrying out this research study is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: waynepoirierconsulting@gmail.com or (416) 471-6559. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Peter Dietsche at peter.dietsche@utoronto.ca or (416) 209-4324. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273.

Thank you in advance for your support and participation.

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By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.
Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Name:              College:

Signed:              Date:

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: ____

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audio taped: ____
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>What orientation and transition activities has your college undertaken between 2005 and 2010?</td>
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<td>What programs, processes or activities are in place? How are they delivered and when are they delivered? How often are they delivered?</td>
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<td>Describe any policies or procedures that you have that govern your orientation and transition practices?</td>
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<td>Prior to attending orientation and transition activities at your college, what if any information do you collect about the new students? How do you collect the information?</td>
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<td>What materials do you produce for orientation and transition of new students? Are these materials generic or customized and in what ways?</td>
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<td>What are the expected outcomes of the orientation and transition programs? Are these outcomes formally documented?</td>
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<td>Describe the methods that you have used to measure the outcomes of your orientation and transition practices?</td>
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<td>What is the result of any internal research that you have conducted?</td>
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<td>Describe any theories or models that inform the design of your orientation and transition programs?</td>
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<td>How does orientation and transition activities relate to your student success strategy? Is it formally a component of your student success strategy?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe your institution’s efforts surrounding student success. Is it a formal strategy or a series of activities? Describe your college’s student success strategy.</td>
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<td>What new developments have taken place in orientation and transition activities since 2010?</td>
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