SOCIAL CONNECTION STRATEGIES OF ACADEMICALLY UNDERPREPARED COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

LIZBETH CARA SKEAT RAY

(Under the Direction of Richard H. Mullendore)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the social connections of academically underprepared college students, defined as those who test into one or more developmental education courses in college. Fifteen undergraduate students in the first two years of their college educations provided data to answer three research questions: 1. How do academically underprepared college students describe the formation and content of their social interactions during their time in college? 2. How do academically underprepared college students describe the effect of their social interactions on their college experiences? 3. How do academically underprepared college students utilize their social connections to meet their academic, social, emotional or other needs?

Data were analyzed using grounded theory methods, a rigorous way of coding data that results in the development of a data-based theory. Initial, focused, axial, and theoretical coding generated the results of this study, a theory of how friendships form and are utilized among academically underprepared college students. There were three main aspects of this theory. First, friendships were classified into six levels of closeness, each level having its own unique characteristics. Additionally, friendships proceeded through three stages: the beginning stage, the building stage, and the maintenance stage. Finally, friendships helped students manage both their social and academic transitions to college.
INDEX WORDS: College student, Two-year colleges, College student friendships, College student social interactions, Transition to college, Academically underprepared students.
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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009
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December 2009
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most students in the Student Affairs Administration program will hear the words “This is your own journey,” at some point in their time in the program. For me, this was both literally and metaphorically true. I logged countless hours on the roads back and forth between my work institutions, Georgia Institute of Technology and, later, Gainesville State College. First and foremost, then, I must thank my supervisors and colleagues at both of these institutions for allowing me to have such a flexible schedule and for their constant support during my time in school. Sally Hammock was my supervisor at Georgia Tech and, had she not allowed me to start this work four and a half years ago I would not be sitting here today finishing it. She was always interested in my coursework and encouraged me as I began my doctoral work.

For most of my time in school, Dr. Alicia Caudill was my supervisor as well as a mentor both at work and in the SAA program. She provided such a good example of how to handle work, school, and one’s personal life, and has taught me so much about our profession, how to succeed in graduate school, and how to be a good colleague. Watching Alicia complete her degree gave me hope that one day I would be in her shoes, finishing my dissertation and graduating. Now that that time is finally her, I am even more grateful than before for her good example.

My colleagues at Gainesville State College also enabled me to finish this degree, and I must acknowledge that without their flexibility and support this would have been a much longer process! Nancy Mattson and Brenda Adams have been my colleagues since I began to work at Gainesville State College, and I thank them for their support. Ruth Mancari and Joseph Pruitt are newer additions to our office, but are no less supportive. Additionally, our office has been enlivened by several graduate assistants and interns over the past three years: Jemilia Harrison,
Jessica Morgan, Brad Romig, and Katie Hight. I thank them both for the workload they took on and for their encouragement and interest in my journey. I hope I also provided them with encouragement and motivation for their own professional journeys, which are going to be incredible! They are truly the future of our field.

The Gainesville State College community has been a wonderful home during the past four years. These years have not always been smooth ones for me, and this community sustained me over some difficult places in my path. I would particularly like to thank Mack Palmour, Patsy Worrall, Michallene McDaniel, Al Panu, Betsy Cantrell, and Kelly Deasy for their encouragement and support, and also for being role models for me in my work with students. Gainesville State College would also not be the terrific place it is if it did not have such a diverse, interesting student body, and my interactions with students over the past four years have informed my writing, my studies, and my life in general. I thank them all for their support and their patience as well, as any student who worked closely with me has had to contend with my varied schedule during my time in school.

At the University of Georgia, my skills as a scholar-practitioner have been honed by a variety of instructors. First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee for their work with me through comps and this dissertation. Dr. Richard Mullendore has watched over my work with a fond eye, offering feedback and criticism whenever I needed it, but also allowing me great freedom as I decided what I would study and how I would conduct my research. He also provided a listening ear when I needed it most, and always reminded me to take care of my life outside of work and school as well. Dr. Merrily Dunn was endlessly encouraging as well. Dr. Corey Johnson elevated the quality of my methodology, and he and the other participants in his July 2009 qualitative writing retreat opened my eyes to the wider world of qualitative research.
Finally, Dr. Tom Walter provided on-the-ground understanding of my research topic and made sure that my work had practical, as well as research, significance.

I also had the great fortune to interact with numerous other faculty members at UGA. Dr. Diane Cooper taught many of my courses and greatly influenced my scholarly understanding of the field. Dr. Laura Dean’s American College Student class really started me off on my current research into academic underpreparation – little did she know that, in the summer of 2007, my dissertation research was slowly coming into being during that class! Finally, the instructors of my qualitative research classes laid the groundwork for my research. Dr. Trisha Reeves, Dr. Jude Preissle, Dr. Derek Alridge, and Dr. Jori Hall all influenced my understanding of what it means to be a qualitative researcher and helped me develop the skills that made conducting my dissertation research possible.

In all my years in school and in work, my friends have sustained my spirit. I would like to thank the “Guilford Girls,” Robin Hochel, Cory Curl, Susan Allen Feitel, Gretchen Richards Hartz, and Rebecca Rostand Foley for their fifteen years of friendship and for the many more years of friendship I am sure are to come. Friends from my Virginia Tech years, including Melissa Bealafeld, Jim Espinoza, Joan Hirt, Gerry Kowalksi, and Jamie Penven have also been great cheerleaders for me in school and in life. More recently-formed, but no less precious, have been my friendships with Lisa Sperling, Regina Sargent, Kathy Alday, Leigh Poole, and others from the SAA program at UGA.

My parents and sister, as well as our entire extended family, are also responsible for my success in this and all other endeavors. Beginning with their insistence on the importance of academics and involvement and continuing with their encouragement over the past four years, they have shaped my development into the professional, the researcher, and the whole person I
am today. The intellectual environment of our home ensured that I could read and digest the vast amounts of information provided in my graduate coursework, and that I could form and articulate complex opinions. My father provided my earliest professional role model and most likely set my entire professional career in motion. Riding my tricycle in the student center, attending my first NACA conference at the age of five, having an endless stream of babysitters who were members of the student activities programming board, watching college students build homecoming floats in our driveway, and, later, discussing my own professional experiences, no doubt shaped who I am today when I go to work. My extended family, although they have a less clear idea what exactly it is I do for a living, have been uniformly excited about my academic progress, and I thank them for this.

Finally, and most importantly, I thank my husband Brian Ray. At about the halfway point through my time in school, and when I was perhaps least expecting it, he came into my life, and it has not been the same since then. He has been constantly understanding of my academic responsibilities, and has been responsible for most of the hot food and good dinners I have eaten since the summer of 2007. Marriage has opened up new vistas of self-understanding for me, and building our life together has broadened my capacity to love and understand others. Additionally, through my marriage to him, my family has expanded to include his wonderful parents (all of them), who have also been incredibly supportive and encouraging to me in my academic pursuits, and to both of us as we build our lives together. For all of this, I am profoundly thankful.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

American institutions of higher education are home to a diverse range of students, ranging from recent high school graduates to returning nontraditional students, and including students of a variety of races and socioeconomic statuses. Today, most high school students and even most middle school students say they plan to attend college one day. Perhaps even more importantly, however, students today come from all levels of high school preparation. From the student directly out of secondary education who never planned to go to college to the mother returning to school after twenty years of parenting her children, students today may be facing their college education without the necessary preparation to succeed, particularly if they are low-income or belong to certain ethnic minorities (Haycock, Barth, Mitchell, & Williams, 1999).

Almost half of all college students will take some kind of remedial coursework (Haycock, et al., 1999), and many of those taking remedial coursework are found in two-year colleges similar to the site of this research (Makela, 2006; Zhao, 1999).

This situation has brought with it many challenges for everyone involved in college education. For the individual student, underpreparedness may play a role in the decision to drop out of college (Haycock, et al., 1999). Colleges must make difficult decisions about allocating scarce resources to deal with underprepared students (Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997). On a larger scale, student underpreparedness also has economic consequences for the United States. Despite the high numbers of students who attempt college, low graduation rates may leave US companies searching for qualified workers over the next twenty years (Conklin, 2005).

This study was concerned with understanding the world of the underprepared college student, in particular his or her social connections and how those may help or hinder the
individual student’s progress through college. Social connections are important for a variety of reasons. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that managing interpersonal relationships is a challenge for college students and an area in which development may occur during the college years. Social connections are also related to students’ persistence through college. Social integration is vital to retention at any educational institution (Tinto, 1994). For underprepared college students, social integration may be especially important, particularly if they are members of various demographic minorities. Involvement is another important factor in retention (Astin, 1993), and the various types of involvement suggested by Astin are related to the idea of social connection that this study seeks to explicate. In addition, Kegan’s ideas of students’ perceptions of relationships and themselves as social beings may play a role in student success (Kegan, 1994).

Purpose of the Study

Framed by Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) inclusion of managing interpersonal relationships as an important developmental task for college students, Tinto’s (1994) work on student attrition, Astin’s (1993) theory of involvement, and Kegan’s (1994) work on student development, this grounded theory study explored social connection strategies and their perceived outcomes for underprepared college students at a state college in the southeastern part of the United States for the purpose of understanding how and where underprepared students form relationships in the college context, and how those relationships may or may not contribute to their ultimate success in college. Research questions for this study included

1. How do academically underprepared college students describe the formation and content of their social interactions during their time in college?
2. How do academically underprepared college students describe the effect of their social interactions on their college experiences?

3. How do academically underprepared college students utilize their social connections to meet their academic, social, emotional or other needs?

**Defining “Underprepared”**

It was important to define “underprepared” in terms of college students’ level of academic preparation, as this term is used throughout the study. Underprepared students have been described as those who have “basic deficiencies in academic skills necessary for the satisfactory completion of college level coursework” (Zhao, 1999, p. 3). At the research site, these students were identified through placement tests. For the purpose of this study, "underprepared" is defined as students who took the state placement test and placed into learning support level classes in at least one of the three testing areas: English, reading, or mathematics. This definition has been used successfully in at least one other study (Zhao, 1999).

**Significance of the Study**

This study sought to examine the social connections of underprepared college students in an attempt to understand more about how these connections may help underprepared college students achieve their goals. In order to support such students to achieve their educational goals, colleges may initially focus on academic issues. However, student affairs units may also focus on the social integration of underprepared students. For example, a minority affairs office may provide mentoring programs, while a student activities office may offer programs aimed at diverse audiences. Therefore, this study may be useful to both faculty and staff and to both academic and student affairs administrators, as well as significant in terms of future research it could bring about.
In terms of practice, various groups may benefit. First, student affairs professionals who work in areas such as student activities and multicultural programs may benefit from understanding students’ social connections. Understanding this may help these offices design their programs, which are often designed to promote social connections and build community, so that they build on, rather than unintentionally counteract, what students are currently doing to build their social connections.

Student affairs practitioners who work with incoming students may also benefit. Orientation programs could be redesigned or revised to take into account the social needs of underprepared students, and to help them achieve better social integration, if these practitioners knew how students were likely to conceptualize their social connection strategies. In addition, because on many campuses student affairs practitioners join with academic affairs practitioners in providing support services to underprepared students (Makela, 2006), student affairs professionals who find themselves cast into the academic arena may benefit from this study.

Academic practitioners and faculty may also benefit from this study. For those who interact with students mainly in classroom settings, better understanding how students’ social lives affect their academic progress may be beneficial. It may help them frame discussions of issues raised by course readings or projects in terms of students’ day to day lives, which may make in-class activities more relevant and exciting for students. Academic administrators and faculty who serve as academic advisors may also find this study helpful, in that it will help them understand the students who come to them for academic advising. Students raise numerous questions and concerns during academic advising interactions, and understanding various aspects of students’ lives in addition to their academic careers may help advisors answer such questions in ways that are most useful to the student.
Current students may also benefit. By understanding their social connection strategies and how these might help or hinder their academic progress, they may be more likely to make beneficial decisions. For the participants, there is the added benefit of time for structured reflection, which may illuminate their understanding of themselves.

**Limitations of the Study**

Like all studies, this one may have had limitations. Because it was a qualitative study and because of the small number of participants in the sample, generalizability of the study is limited. The use of grounded theory methods mitigated this issue, but it is important to note that generalizability in qualitative studies comes from the reader’s ability to decide which parts of the study may apply to his or her situation.

The definition of “underprepared” may also have eliminated some students from participating. There is support in the literature for using low scored class placement tests to define students as “underprepared.” Nevertheless, this definition excluded some students from participation in the study. Because the study limited the definition of unpreparedness, the viewpoints of students who passed their college placement tests but who still did not feel prepared for college may have been overlooked.

Finally, the position of the researcher at the research site may have been a limitation. Because the researcher was involved in student life and social programming, participants may have been less likely to divulge their social issues, or may feel pressured to provide positive information. Efforts to mitigate this limitation are discussed in Chapter Three, Methodology and Methods.

This study is organized in five chapters: an introduction, the literature review, methods, findings, and discussion. The introduction explored the purpose of the study, including the
research questions, defines important terms, and discusses the potential significance and limitations of the study. The literature review examines relevant topics in existing literature, including the causes and consequences of underpreparedness among college students on the national and state levels as well as for individual students, the barriers for underprepared students, institutions’ helping strategies, individual students’ coping strategies, the importance of social support from both the institutional and individual perspective, and positions the study in terms of relevant theories. The methods chapter includes a discussion of qualitative research methods including grounded theory and discusses the sampling methods, data collection and analysis procedures, trustworthiness and authenticity, and includes a profile of the research site. The findings chapter includes the themes that emerged from the data and information about the participants. Finally, the discussion chapter includes a discussion of these findings, positions the findings within existing literature, and makes suggestions for future practice and research.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Underprepared students have emerged as a population worthy of study. Compared to a decade ago, more high school students are enrolling in college preparatory programs (Makela, 2006); however, many states did not consider college entrance requirements, or the requirements of college level work, when designing their high school curricula (Conklin, 2005). Therefore, the population of underprepared students on American college campuses is quite large, with estimates of those enrolling in remedial, or developmental, coursework ranging from 35% to 60% of all enrolled college students (Creech, 2001; Haycock, et al., 1999; Makela, 2006; Ohio Board of Regents, 2005).

Remediating basic skills is costly to students, colleges, businesses, and the US economy as a whole; one study places the cost at $16 million. To begin with, many students are not prepared for college when they leave high school. Therefore, they must take remedial coursework, which is costly to colleges. Underpreparedness may have large consequences for the United States economy as well. Despite the high numbers of students who attempt college, low graduation rates may leave US companies searching for qualified workers over the next twenty years. Most new jobs that will be created in that time period will require workers to have skills gained in postsecondary education, and the US simply will not have enough workers to fill these jobs (Conklin, 2005).

Many states have spent the past few years preparing for an influx of students with questionable preparedness levels. The state of Washington, for example, predicted in 1995 that their high school graduate population would increase by almost 50% and that their number of people ages 18 to 25 would increase by 32%. “Little hope is held for the resources devoted in
higher education in the public or private sectors rising commensurately,” wrote two University of Washington administrators (Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997).

**Defining Success in the College Context**

It is generally accepted that some college students succeed in their academic careers and that others do not. Predicting the academic success of college students has become a “large scale operation,” (Mouw & Khanna, 1993), especially as colleges try to measure their efficiency at dealing with increasing numbers of college students who do not finish within the four-year time span typically associated with college (Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997).

The question of what success actually is, or how to define it, has also been a matter of some discussion. Graduation after four years in school has typically been one measure (Mouw & Khanna, 1993), although not one friendly to today’s college student, who is more likely to be economically disadvantaged, of a nontraditional age, or occupied with family and work than students of previous generations (Gillmore & Hoffman, 1997). Grade point average is another variable often assigned to indicate success in college. Mouw and Khanna (1993) reviewed 39 studies of academic success, and found that in 34 of them, some sort of college GPA was used as the dependent, or outcome, variable. College GPA was defined as either freshman-year GPA or cumulative GPA after a time in college. The remaining five used some kind of course grade as a measure of success. The independent variables included wide-ranging measures such as high school performance data, standardized test scores, personality traits, and demographic information, all either singly or in conjunction with other variables (Mouw & Khanna, 1993).

Mouw and Khanna (1993) report that these studies had varying degrees of success in predicting college success. Overall the best set of predictors was high school GPA and standardized test scores. The studies that examined various variables singly did not tend to show
a high correlation between any one variable and academic success (Mouw & Khanna, 1993). In other words, it is in the intersection of multiple variables that the reasons for academic success may be found.

Another type of student success that has been measured is students’ adaptation to the college life. Social integration, campus activity participation and a feeling of attachment to the college are all aspects of adaptation. The need for social support to facilitate adaptation may differ between students of different cultures (Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995). As will be explored in subsequent sections of this literature review, social integration and adaptation to college is important to retention (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993) and is a measure of college student development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and exploring it plays a large role in this study.

A National Picture of the Scope of Underpreparedness

Once upon a time, college may have been reserved for the academic and social elite. However, this is no longer the case. Over three quarters of today’s high school students will go on to college, and over 80% of today’s sixth graders are expected to enter college one day (Haycock, et al., 1999). However, only 34% of high school graduates possess the qualifications to apply to even less-selective colleges, based on their high school coursework and test scores (Makela, 2006). This trend will bring more and more underprepared students to America’s college campuses (Zhao, 1999). As noted above, although statistics vary about the precise percentage, a variety of sources suggest that anywhere from 35% to 60% (Creech, 2001; Haycock, et al., 1999; Makela, 2006; Ohio Board of Regents, 2005) will take remedial classes in at least one subject to catch up to the level of academic work which their colleges expect of them. Students must spend longer in college to catch up with their better-prepared peers. Only a small percentage of today’s high school freshmen will complete their college degrees as quickly
as past generations have done (Conklin, 2005). It is clear that underprepared students currently make up a significant proportion of American college students.

Much of this data exists on the state level, so it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about the entire United States. It is possible, however, to view data provided by various states to achieve some kind of national picture. Recently, states have been working to improve their preparedness statistics (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006); however, when the data are examined and compared, a portrait of academic underpreparedness still continues to emerge.

A brief snapshot of some statistics from the 2006 Measuring Up report (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006) reveals some alarming statistics in various states. In West Virginia, only 44% of high school students are enrolled in an upper-level science class. In Iowa, only 43% of high school students are enrolled in these types of classes, while in Nebraska that figure is 37%. All of these figures represent significant increases over the past two years for these states, so in 2004 the figures were dramatically lower. The figures are better for math classes, although in the states given as an example of improvement, even the most improved state counted a quarter of its high school students as not currently enrolled in an upper-level math class. In addition, declines are being reported in eighth graders’ scores on math, science and reading proficiency exams (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006), which does not bode well for the future preparedness levels of college freshmen.

Several states have provided recent data about the courses taken by their high school students. In general, many high school graduates do not take the classes they need to be prepared for college (Haycock, et al., 1999). In Ohio, for example, about 24% of recent high school graduates had taken a rigorous college preparatory curriculum (Ohio Board of Regents,
2005), and nationwide about 34% of recent high school graduates could be said to be qualified to apply to “minimally selective” four-year colleges (Makela, 2006, p.1). Test scores also confirm students’ underpreparedness in Tennessee, where students’ ACT results from 2005 predict that only 16% of students who took the test would one day make a C or higher in college science and math classes (Tennessee State Board of Education & Higher Education Commission, 2006).

Entering college freshmen who recently graduated from high school may be suffering from the lack of alignment between their high school, and earlier, curricula, and the level of knowledge needed to undertake freshman level work. For example, in Tennessee, a workgroup stated that “Tennessee K-12 curriculum standards need to more closely align with the ACT Benchmarks for Success, so that more students begin postsecondary study without needing remedial or developmental study” (Tennessee State Board of Education & Higher Education Commission, 2006, p. 3). In Maryland, a similar workgroup has suggested that the admissions requirements for the state’s university system also be adopted as the “default program of study for all high school graduates” (Maryland Partnership for Teaching and Learning, 2004, p. 4). These suggestions may lead to future improvements in academic preparedness, but for the moment, students may find that their high school experiences bear little or no relationship to their colleges’ expectations for them.

In Ohio, where only 24% of students took a college preparatory curriculum, 57% of recent high school graduates enrolled in college somewhere in the United States, most of them in Ohio. Forty-one percent of the recent graduates who enrolled in public colleges in Ohio enrolled in remedial classes upon arriving at college (Ohio Board of Regents, 2005).
Students’ level of academic underpreparedness does not dampen their enthusiasm about their ability to succeed in college. Many of these students are surprised to find themselves facing difficulties in college. For example, in a series of surveys over a five-year period in Tennessee, results showed consistently that over half of all high school graduates felt that they were prepared to take on college work (Tennessee State Board of Education & Higher Education Commission, 2006). In short, students who enter college now have not previously been judged by standards that relate at all to what they are expected to do as college freshmen.

**Predicting Success in College**

As noted above, predicting student success is a popular task as today’s faculty and administrators are confronted with underprepared students. Academic factors, nonacademic factors, and demographic factors may all be considered in predicting student success. The degree to which any of these predictor factors is accurate is a matter of some discussion. An overview of quantitative studies showed that using a large number of participants can result in statistically significant correlations between various factors and eventual academic success, even when the correlation coefficients are relatively low (Mouw & Khanna, 1993). Clearly, understanding the predictor factors, causes and consequences of underpreparedness in American college students is a complex undertaking.

**Academic Predictors, Underpreparedness, and Success in College**

Various measures of student academic success prior to attending college may be used to predict their success in college. High school performance is one of the oldest indicators of academic success in college (Mouw & Khanna, 1993). It is still widely used in college success studies (Mathiasen, 1984). Another common way of predicting academic success has been
through the use of standardized admission tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT) (Mathiasen, 1984; Mouw & Khanna, 1993).

**Demographic Predictors, Underpreparedness, and Success in College**

As noted by Astin (1993), students bring various characteristics to college with them: their genders, race, and socioeconomic status, their high school education, and other aspects of their identities that may influence their performance as college students (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006). Today’s college students come from much more diverse backgrounds than their predecessors, and student demographics are often used as a predictor of success (Cruce, et al., 2006; Mouw & Khanna, 1993).

**Race as a predictor factor.** Race may be one factor in college achievement. For example, one study found that black students ended their first year of college with lower GPA’s and fewer credit hours earned than did their white or Asian counterparts (House & Wohlt, 1990). Underpreparedness is also tied to students’ ethnic backgrounds. Caucasian students are typically better prepared for college than their Latino counterparts, although only about 40% of Caucasian students can be said to be adequately prepared for college. The number falls to 20% for Latino students (Conklin, 2005). In addition, members of racial minorities are much less likely to take college preparatory level coursework than their white counterparts (Conklin, 2005). However, race and ethnicity cannot completely explain differences in students’ abilities to cope with the stressors of college (Phinney & Hass, 2003). It is merely one aspect of a much more complicated picture.

**Gender as a predictor factor.** Gender is also an interesting demographic variable to consider in predicting academic success. On one hand, higher numbers of women than ever are now in college; they make up the majority of college students and are pursuing nontraditional
(for females) degrees in greater numbers than ever. On the other hand, there is evidence that women are still negatively affected by bias, sexual harassment, discouragement, and unequal opportunities (Ancis & Sedlacek, 1997). Women’s academic success may also be more difficult to predict than men’s. For example, their standardized admission test scores typically predict grades lower than the women actually earn (Ancis & Sedlacek, 1997).

**Socioeconomic status as a predictor factor.** Socioeconomic status also plays a role in underpreparedness. Students bring to college all of the social inequities that may be found in the broader community (Missouri K-16 Task Force, 2002). Low-income students are much less likely to take college preparatory level coursework than their wealthier counterparts (Conklin, 2005). Even when students come to college from a relatively small geographic area, studies have found inequities between high schools located in wealthier school districts and those located in poorer ones (Ohio Board of Regents, 2005), although even students from wealthy areas who attend community colleges tend to need remedial coursework (Haycock, et al., 1999). Two students from the same high school may also find that they are unequally prepared, if one was tagged early as “college material” and placed in a college preparatory track of classes and one was not. These locally based inequalities have been termed the “achievement gap” (Missouri K-16 Task Force, 2002). Students from urban areas have been found to be more likely to be underprepared academically than their rural counterparts (Ohio Board of Regents, 2005). For all of these underprepared students, making a successful transition to the first year of college is the definition of student success (Clark, 2005).

**First-generation status as a predictor factor.** Status as a first-generation college student may also be a risk factor for students’ academic success. Families of first-generation college students may lack understanding of the complexities of college admission, financial aid,
and successful practices for students once they enter college. This lack of understanding makes it difficult for first-generation students to decide to go to college, at least in the absence of college awareness programs (Terenzini, Cabrera, Deil-Amen & Lambert, 2005), in addition to creating barriers to success once they get there (Phinney & Haas, 2003). These students face such stressors as financial pressures and family responsibilities (Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). They may be expected to share in housekeeping or childcare duties just as their noncollege-going family members are expected to, noted one study, since their relatives may not understand the amount of study time required for college classes (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

Students may experience larger issues, as well, if their families are not merely unfamiliar with college but actively unsupportive of the student’s pursuit of higher education. For example, in one study this meant leaving an Indian reservation and an inner-city neighborhood, respectively, for two participants (Terenzini, et al., 1994). Even though these students consciously made the decision to leave their original environments, the adjustment to college was still difficult. For students who are ethnic minorities, this can raise difficult issues of shedding versus retaining one’s ethnic identity. This contrasts greatly with the (largely Caucasian) students whose parents are college educated. For these students, the decision to go to college is barely a decision at all, but rather a matter of course (Terenzini, et al., 1994).

The interaction of various demographic variables, for example as seen in first-generation college students who are also members of ethnic minority groups, may also affect the odds of students being well prepared for college. First-generation students who are also ethnic minorities face greater amounts of stress than other college students (Phinney & Haas, 2003). They are
more likely to have great financial need and therefore more likely to work, which may take time away from their academic pursuits (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

**Nonacademic Predictors, Underpreparedness, and Success in College**

Nonacademic factors may also affect student preparedness and success in college. This class of prediction factors includes a wide range of variables that are not academic or demographic in nature. Examples include self-esteem, access to role models, community service, student attitudes and student expectations. These variables may interact with academic variables and demographic variables and affect different groups in different ways.

**Attitudinal variables as predictor factors.** One class of nonacademic variables that affect college student success has to do with students’ attitudes. These studies help address the question of students whose grades or standardized admission test scores indicate that they should succeed in college, yet whose college performance leaves something to be desired (Mathiasen, 1984). One commonly used attitudinal variable is students’ attitudes towards studying (Mathiasen, 1984; Mouw & Khanna, 1993). Another is “conscientiousness,” or “the tendency to carry out tasks in a careful manner until their completion” (Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000, p. 326), which was found to be a statistically significant contributor to GPA and retention (Tross, et al., 2000). Quality of effort is related to developmental gains, career gains, and academic gains, particularly in math and science (Knight, 1994) and as reflected in students’ grade point averages (Lounsbury, Huffstetler, Leong & Gibson, 2005).

**Expectation variables as predictor factors.** Another class of nonacademic variables that can affect college student success might be described as “expectation variables.” Students who expect to do well may be more likely to actually do so (House, 1998). Achievement motivation was found to be positively related to GPA regardless of academic ability in one study
(Mathiasen, 1984). One factor that may lead to increased achievement motivation is out-of-class interaction with faculty (Mathiasen, 1984). This may be especially important for women, who sometimes receive biased messages about their ability to succeed in college. One study found that a factor entitled “Realistic Self-Appraisal” predicted grades among women at a statistically significant level. The authors speculated that in the face of negative comments about women’s ability to succeed in college, the women’s ability to continue to believe they could succeed was key to that success (Ancis & Seldacek, 1997).

Expecting to do well in college and planning to work hard to achieve this success are two different things, but even without being motivated to achieve, just holding their academic abilities in high esteem can be related to students’ academic accomplishments. Having a good self-concept in terms of one’s ability to achieve academically, overall or in particular disciplines, is positively related to retention (House, 1992a), grades in freshman English classes (House & Prion, 1998), grades in chemistry classes (House, 1993) and achievement in college introductory mathematics and more advanced calculus courses (House, 1991, 1994 and 1995). House (1992b) also found that students’ academic self-concept was a better predictor of eventual persistence to graduation than their expectations for success. In other words, whether or not students expected to succeed, their belief in their abilities was important to their ultimate persistence to graduation (House, 1992b).

Similarly, college students who do not expect to succeed may face barriers once they arrive at college. For many at-risk students, high school experiences invalidated their identities as learners and showed them that others did not perceive them as good learners or capable of achieving a college education (Terenzini, et al., 1994). They therefore arrive in college expecting to have difficulties or to fail altogether.
Gender and nonacademic predictor factors. Nonacademic factors may be especially relevant in predicting women’s academic success, particularly those variables that include or affect women’s relationships with others. Women’s development in many areas is significantly affected by their relationships with others, the amount to which they allow others to dictate or silence their voices, and their understanding of their own ability to create knowledge. Therefore, it makes sense that interpersonal variables could be incredibly important to women’s success in college (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). Nonacademic variables that are particularly important to the success of female college students include self-esteem, role models, and leadership experiences (Ancis & Sedlacek, 1997). Ancis and Sedlacek (1997) found that both academic and nonacademic variables were key to women’s academic success. For example, they found that mathematic and verbal skills predicted academic success, but that the single greatest predictor for grades in each of the semesters examined in their study was participating in community service projects before college. They speculated that these community service experiences helped the women in their study develop interpersonal skills, which were positively related to their academic accomplishments (Ancis & Sedlacek, 1997). Women’s participation in community activities or other activities of a nonacademic nature was also positively related to academic success, as was the availability of a strong support system (Ancis & Sedlacek, 1997).

Barriers and Helping Strategies on the Institutional Level

Beyond considering the various predictor factors for underpreparedness in college, it is important to consider what makes the underprepared student successful in college. Colleges may sponsor interventions to attempt to help underprepared students and to address the issue of underpreparedness. These interventions include academic services such as remediation, tutoring,
and advisement, as well as nonacademic services such as counseling and creating supportive and encouraging environments. Successful interventions may positively affect student learning and development outcomes (Cruce et al., 2006). In addition, interventions could promote the development of social support networks, which is vital in helping underprepared students achieve (Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995).

**Academic Interventions**

Maintaining a high GPA is key to success in college (Zhao, 1999). Early and plentiful remediation is one of the most important services colleges can provide to underprepared students (Zhao, 1999) in order to create students who are capable of going on to achieve relatively high GPA’s. Much of this remedial coursework takes place at community colleges (Makela, 2006).

Developmental classes are not the only way in which underprepared students can become more prepared to undertake college level coursework. Makela (2006) notes that tutoring, advisement, mentoring, counseling, and supplemental instruction are also important. Tutoring increases the number of credit hours that underprepared students attain, as well as positively affecting GPA (House & Wohlt, 1990). In one study (House & Wohlt, 1990), first-year students were grouped by their participation in a voluntary tutoring program. All of the students being compared attempted 12 credit hours each semester of their first year in school. Those who participated in tutoring earned more credit hours than those who did not. Males who participated also earned higher GPA’s than men who did not participate, though there were no similar differences for women (House & Wohlt, 1990).

Advising interventions are also important to underprepared students. Advising interventions, particularly in two-year schools or schools that host both two- and four-year programs, may use several strategies. One is the “cooling out” path, in which students who are
seen as incapable of finishing four-year degrees are steered into two-year or certificate programs (Makela, 2006). This is accomplished through testing and counseling for students who may need to “cool out” and eventual probation for students unable to attain satisfactory grades. “Cooling out” has, however, been deemed inappropriate by some community colleges (Makela, 2006). Instead, many advisors and counselors today emphasize a gentler method of advising, in which students are not labeled as failures for being unable to complete a college education (Makela, 2006).

**Nonacademic Interventions**

Nonacademic interventions are also important to academic success among underprepared students. Underprepared students benefit from counseling and advising that they encounter both early in their college careers and on an ongoing basis throughout their college years (Makela, 2006). Students are underprepared not only in their math, reading and writing skills, but also in areas such as self-esteem and study skills (Makela, 2006). Therefore, appropriate interventions may also include counseling, life skills development, and advising (Makela, 2006). For example, developing a sense of identity is positively related to a higher GPA (Lounsbury, et al., 2005), so providing programs that help students do this may ultimately contribute to the success of underprepared college students. These types of interventions have been linked directly to pass rates in remedial math and English courses (Makela, 2006).

Creating an encouraging environment is vital to underprepared students (Zhao, 1999). Zhao also notes that encouragement is particularly important, since academic success seems to bring about more academic success, and it is important that remediation be seen not as an indication of failure, but as an opportunity for development (Makela, 2006). Students’ experiences once they arrive at college may also serve to validate or invalidate their identities as
learners. Students’ interactions with peers, families, and instructors may affirm to them that they can learn and succeed in college, or they may do just the opposite. Terenzini, et al. (1994), note that the idea of validation is explained by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986). Professors who talk down to students, for example, may invalidate students’ identities as learners (Terenzini, et al., 1994). Therefore, the people and structures found at colleges themselves may serve as barriers or as “helpers” along the way to academic success.

**Students’ Efforts to Cope with Barriers**

In addition to the efforts put forth by colleges to address the issues surrounding academic underpreparedness, students also put forth their own efforts to achieve success. All students must develop coping strategies to deal with obstacles to success (Clark, 2005). For underprepared students, these coping strategies will be especially important. Coping mechanisms may also affect the barriers students perceive to their college success. Those with highly developed coping skills may find it easier to face challenges than those who do not have such coping skills. This may be related to their having a sense of control over their academic futures, also termed an internal locus of control.

To understand various coping strategies, it may be helpful to describe them as either “approach” or “avoidant” coping strategies. Approach strategies are those that focus on the source of the stress and students’ reaction to the stressor. Avoidant strategies, on the other hand, focus on anything but the actual source of the stress and students’ reaction to the stressor (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004).
Coping Strategies and Demographic Variables

Coping strategies, like underpreparedness itself, may also be affected by race and gender. The choice of approach and avoidant strategies in general may depend on cultural factors, as may students’ choices of individual strategies within those larger categories.

Race and coping skills. The types of coping skills that students tend to employ may be related to their race or ethnic group, although studies of this phenomenon are far from conclusive (Phinney & Haas, 2003). One study found internal locus of control is positively related to the pursuit of active coping mechanisms in some ethnic groups including Caucasian, Asian American and Latino students, although not in African American students (Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995). Therefore, according to this study, Caucasian, Asian American and Latin American students may tend to try to cope by asserting control over their lives.

However, other studies have found that Asian American college students may also cope more by withdrawing from their peer groups and using avoidance mechanisms (Phinney & Haas, 2003; Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). In general, Asian Americans are also believed to be most likely to stay away from mental health services that may provide assistance with coping. This seems to be true among a variety of Asian American ethnicities, including Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Korean Americans. However, in Sheu and Sedlacek’s own study, this difference did not hold true (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). Latino students also had high scores on instruments that gauge coping through avoidance (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

Coping mechanisms are also hard to measure on a large scale because each student’s issues and context are unique from any other (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Similarly, it is difficult to place responsibility for dealing with risk factors on any one type of variable. Cognitive and
psychosocial variables all apply (Ting & Robinson, 1998), as do various cultural, gender, and racial identity development variables.

For African American students, indeed for African Americans in general, coping mechanisms may focus on religion and spirituality. At least, note Sheu and Sedlacek, the existing research certainly has this focus. However, they note that little research comparing African Americans’ coping mechanisms with other cultural groups has been done (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). In their own research, Sheu and Sedlacek found positive attitudes among African American students in terms of seeking time management and study skills help. These students were more positive towards such help-seeking strategies than either their Asian American or Caucasian counterparts. However, they were not similarly more likely to take advantage of clinical counseling; rather, they were not likely to do so (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). There seemed to be an emotional mistrust of personal helping services such as counseling, as opposed to the more impersonal helping services of time management and study skills workshops.

**Gender and coping skills.** Help-seeking strategies may also differ by gender. Women may be more likely to seek counseling and other help with stress than their male counterparts (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004). However, Sheu and Sedlacek note that in various studies among racial minorities, this difference has been less pronounced, and their own research (1994) found that women, regardless of ethnic group, were more positive towards career and personal counseling and time management training.

**Attitudinal Aspects of Help-Seeking Behavior**

Just as attitudinal variables may affect student academic success overall, students’ attitudes about their academic abilities affect their help-seeking behavior in college. Help-
seeking behavior, at least in terms of academic help, may also be related to students’ perceptions of their need for help in a way that is perhaps counterintuitive. One study found that students’ likelihood of seeking academic help had a curvilinear relationship with their perception of how much they needed that help. On one end of the grade spectrum, students who expected very high grades were of course not prone to seek help in the class. This is to be expected. Interestingly, students who expected an overall grade of less than a D in a class were much less likely to seek help than those who expected grades in the middle ranges of B- to C+. In the words of the study’s authors, “Those who need help the most are often least likely to seek it” (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988, p. 408).

Help-seeking behavior is not without cost to the student. One primary cost is that the decision to seek help may threaten the student’s self-esteem (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991). In an academic setting, students with higher self-esteem are more likely to seek help than those with lower self-esteem (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991). This is characteristic of the tendency of people with high self-esteem to cope actively with stressors (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Actively coping with stressful situations is positively correlated with optimistic attitudes, self-esteem, and the feeling of having some control over a stressful situation (Carver, et al., 1989).

Individual psychological characteristics are also important (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Some studies have also tried to measure the relationship, if any, between various personality traits and academic success. Introverts have been found to receive higher grades than extroverts, when academic ability was controlled for (Mathiasen, 1984). Phinney & Haas (2003) note how difficult it is to separate “social support and self-efficacy in coping situations” (p. 723).

Even successful students have barriers to overcome. Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, and Trevino (1997) found that for ethnic minority students, these typically fall into one of four
categories, which they termed discontinuity barriers, lack-of-nurturing barriers, lack-of-presence barriers, and resource barriers. Discontinuity barriers are those that affect students’ transitions from high school to college, which successful students tended to deal with by using a strategy that the authors terms “developing an expectational stance” (Padilla, et al., 1997, p. 130). These students conditioned themselves mentally to expect less support at college, and took specific actions such as making independent decisions and “shrinking” their social world to make it more manageable (Padilla, et al., 1997, p. 130).

Social Support as a Coping Mechanism

This study concerns the idea of underprepared students’ social connection strategies and how those may help or hinder them through college. Therefore, the idea of social support as a coping mechanism for students deserves special consideration and examination.

Social support has been found to be almost universally helpful when individuals face difficult situations (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Social support is also generally held to be important to the academic success of all students (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Social support may be measured by the “availability of tangible help, guidance, and emotional support” (Phinney & Haas, 2003, p. 710). For college students, measures of this might include whether a student takes advantage of academic assistance programs, asks his or her instructor for assistance, or seeks “emotional support from family and friends” (Phinney & Haas, 2003, p. 710).

Social Support and Academic Performance

Social support has many uses to college students. It is often considered to be a factor in student’ academic performance. Lack of such support may increase students’ stress and result in diminished academic performance (Newby-Fraser & Schlebusch, 1997). Social support from
students’ families may be a factor in predicting which students will have higher grade averages (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, & Russell, 1994). Parental social support was a significant predictor of grade point average among undergraduates, as was the absence of family conflict. Parental social support has several components, including reassurance of worth and social integration, which were predictors of students’ grades (Cutrona, et al., 1994). Cutrona, et al., also found that friend social support and romantic partner social support were not significant predictors of grade point average. Nevertheless, students may find that validation enhances their college experience and leads to greater academic success. Teachers who tell or show students that they can learn may be helpful in this validation process. Family and peers can provide similarly encouraging feedback (Terenzini, et al., 1994).

Social connections may also form a way for students to gain informal knowledge about how to succeed in college (Padilla, et al., 1997). This knowledge is not typically passed on formally in the college setting, but rather passed along informally, from student to student. For example, one such piece of heuristic knowledge would be when to drop a class rather than to fail it (Padilla, et al., 1997).

Social Adjustment to College

Social support may help students adjust to college, and social integration is one measure of success in the college setting. This support may be emotional support, support in the form of guidance, material or financial support, feedback, physical or instrumental support, or it may come in the form of social interaction. Satisfaction with support received in these forms helped to predict whether students would adjust socially to college, although it is not associated with internal locus of control (Zea, Jarama, and Bianchi, 1996).
Even for students who are not first-generation college students, adjusting socially to college may be overwhelming (Terenzini, et al., 1994). Precollege friends who are also enrolled in the same college and undergoing the same transitions may be especially helpful, but will most likely later fade away in favor of new relationships formed in classes, in the student union, or in other college settings. In addition, if students’ original friends’ interests change, for example from studying to partying, precollege friends can pose difficult issues (Terenzini, et al., 1994).

For Caucasian students, the cultural transition from high school to college may feel rather seamless (Padilla, et al., 1997). Less is known about how ethnic minority students may find such social support on campus, as well as about the outcomes of such support. For ethnic minority students arriving on predominantly white campuses, the transition may be more difficult (Kenny & Stryker, 1996). Less is known about how ethnic minority students may find such social support on campus, as well as about the outcomes of such support. Kenny and Stryker (1996) note that some sources of support may be considered to be more acceptable than others depending on the student’s cultural heritage. Social support from one’s family may be more important for ethnic minority students’ social adjustment than for that of their white counterparts.

For both groups, however, their social contacts provided reassurance of their own worth; for Caucasian students this was important in their social and academic adjustment, as well as personal adjustment to being in college, while for nonwhite students it was associated with academic adjustment, personal adjustment and institutional attachment. For nonwhite students, social integration was very important for social adjustment, but for Caucasian students it was not (Kenny & Stryker, 1996).

Students who are less comfortable in the college environment may deliberately choose social connection strategies to alleviate their discomfort. For example, at-risk students may opt
for cooperational strategies to validate each other as learners. They may actively avoid criticizing each other’s work. For the students in this example, the sense that they were navigating a dangerous passage in transitioning to college led to a feeling of community among the students (Terenzini, et al., 1994). In another study, ethnic minority students who were academically successful took specific social actions such as joining ethnic affinity clubs to increase their comfortability on campus (Padilla, et al., 1997).

Social Support and Satisfaction with College

Social support has been linked to college satisfaction (Weir & Okun, 1989). Students who reported higher amounts of contact with others, whether they are faculty, friends, family members, or fellow students in clubs and organizations, also reported high levels of satisfaction with the college experience. Weir and Okun term contact with one’s social network “structural social support” (1989, p. 761). They also examined what they called “functional social support” (1989, p. 761), which concerns the availability of one’s social network for tangible purposes, such as the loan of a car, or more intangible benefits such as the boosting of self-esteem. This type of social support had no direct impact on college satisfaction, but that its presence did boost the effect of other aspects of the college experience on satisfaction (Weir & Okun, 1989). Weir and Okun also note that interaction with faculty members may boost self-esteem more than other types of social interaction, because faculty members are perceived to have power and status within the college community and because they are not obligated to provide positive feedback, in the way that a student might expect his or her friends to feel obligated (Weir & Okun, 1989).

Social Support and Race

Social integration is generally held to be a meaningful contributor to college adjustment and academic success for nonwhite students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, various
studies have produced differing results. Kenny and Stryker (1996) found that for nonwhite students, the support of friends was not significantly related to any type of adjustment to college for their sample. Kenny and Stryker (1996) posit that their results may be due to nonwhite students’ economic status, which may restrict them from full participation in the social activities enjoyed by the Caucasian students in their sample, and to the fact that for the nonwhite students in their sample, college was viewed as a way to prepare for a career and gain economic advancement much more than it was viewed as a social opportunity.

Aspects of ethnic minority students’ social world also helped them overcome barriers related to lack of nurturing, or lack of campus resources devoted to supporting them during college. Ethnic affinity clubs were particularly important in overcoming this type of barrier, as was establishing an on-campus “family” of supportive individuals and even involving biological families in the college experience. Successful ethnic minority students sought out faculty, staff, and fellow students to build this nonbiological family and also purposefully sought extra help from whatever the institution provided, such as tutors and advisors (Padilla, et al., 1997).

Theoretical Context for the Study

Various studies have shown the importance of social connections to the academic success of many college students. The idea of social connections is at the heart of several theories pertaining to college student development, and these theories form the context for this study. They are Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model of identity development, Tinto’s (1993) work on student attrition, Astin’s (1993) involvement theory, and Kegan’s (1994) work on adolescent and adult development and models of thinking.

For Chickering and Reisser (1993), learning to form social connections is a developmental task undertaken by college students as part of identity development. Chickering
and Reisser note that for many students, college presents a time to form new friendships and other relationships and to achieve a balance of their need for autonomy and togetherness. For some, this task involves separating from parents; for others, it involves learning to share oneself and resolve differences. In order to achieve mature interpersonal relationships, students must increase their capacities for both tolerance and intimacy. At the same time, individuals must improve their communication skills and learn to choose healthy relationships over unhealthy ones. Increasing one’s ability to form relationships across cultural boundaries is also important (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Students’ social relationships may be integral to their identity. These relationships may be one-on-one or involve students with larger groups. As students experiment with greater intimacy, defined as forming close relationships with others, whether platonic or romantic, they may lose themselves in a group identity. Therefore, at the same time as they develop their abilities to relate closely to others, students working with this vector must also develop their ability to stand alone (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

At the same time that students are developing their abilities to conduct mature interpersonal relationships, those relationships are playing a key role in students’ decisions to remain enrolled in, or to leave, college. Tinto’s (1993) work on student attrition considers the many reasons students might choose to leave college. As other studies discussed in this chapter have borne out, students’ intention to achieve a college degree and commitment to that intention play a major role in students’ decisions to stay in college. However, other factors also play a role, and these other factors may be relevant to this study.

Tinto notes that even the most committed student may face trouble adjusting to college. Many adjustment issues are social, putting social connections at the heart of student success.
Going to college may necessitate an entirely different set of social skills than one’s prior experience. For students who are minorities or from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, the challenges of fitting into a more middle-class collegiate environment may be substantial (Tinto, 1993).

Academic underpreparedness also plays a role in Tinto’s research, and he notes that students from ethnic minority or lower socioeconomic status backgrounds may be less academically prepared than others. Academic underpreparedness combined with the social challenges described above certainly makes for a great deal to overcome in order to achieve success in college (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto writes that college attrition depends on two factors: incongruence and isolation. Incongruence refers to the lack of compatibility between individual students and their environments. This mismatch may occur in numerous areas: the student may find the academic work of the college too challenging or too easy, the faculty may exhibit an intellectual orientation or classroom practices with which the student is uncomfortable, or the student may feel a lack of congruence with peers. Incongruence with peers is particularly relevant to this study. Students who feel that they are congruent with their peers in terms of “social values, preferences, and/or behavioral styles” (Tinto, 1993, p. 53) of the dominant student culture may be less likely to leave school than those who do not feel as well matched.

Another aspect of social connections that is key to Tinto’s work on attrition is the concept of isolation. Students who do not have enough social contact with others may be more likely to leave college. Student-faculty contact is important to this concept, but so is peer-to-peer contact. Particularly in their first year in college, students may have trouble building the social connections that will help them avoid feeling isolated. In short, writes Tinto, the student “must
find some compatible academic and/or social group with whom to establish membership and make... contacts” (Tinto, 1993, p. 59). Whether a student feels congruent with the whole college or just with a subculture of the college, students must feel some level of social integration to persist in college.

Issues of academic and social integration are experienced differently depending upon race, socioeconomic status, gender, and age. For ethnic minority students, social integration may mean finding support within one’s own ethnic community at the college. In addition, students from ethnic minority or lower socioeconomic class backgrounds tend to cite academic issues over social integration issues when they withdraw from college, at least from predominantly white institutions. However, if students from these backgrounds have noncognitive abilities that allow them to adjust to academic demands, they are more likely to succeed. Also, formal social integration such as belonging to a committee may matter more in the retention of ethnic minority students, while informal social interaction such as the formation of friendships may matter more in the retention of Caucasian students. For women, social integration may play a larger role in departure decisions than for males. Social integration is also more important for younger students than for their nontraditional-aged classmates, in part because older students are more motivated by the economic utility of their work in college than by anything else (Tinto, 1993). Clearly, academic and social integration are complex topics without one clear formula for success among underprepared students.

Astin (1993) also considered the importance of students’ social interactions in their persistence to graduation, and his work also forms the theoretical basis for many of the studies discussed in this chapter. Astin’s theory of involvement put forth the idea that students bring with them to college certain input variables (one that is relevant to this study is level of academic
preparedness) which then combine with various environmental variables on the college campus (peer-to-peer interaction is one that affects this study) to create certain outcomes, most importantly persistence to graduation but also including a wide range of outcomes such as changes in attitudes, values, and beliefs, Grade Point Averages, career choices, and so on (Astin, 1993).

According to Astin, peer group involvement is one environmental variable that was shown to affect students in numerous ways. For Astin, understanding the makeup of the peer group was important. The selectivity of the college and the socioeconomic status of the peer group have historically been used to understand students’ interactions with their peers, but Astin also sought to define the peer group by other variables, including the intellectual self-esteem, permissiveness, altruism and activism tendencies, materialism/status-seeking tendencies, feminism, the likelihood of the peer group to live or work outside the college and the scientific orientation of the peer group all played roles in how students interact with their peers. For Astin, all of these factors formed the “big picture” of students’ peer-group interactions (Astin, 1993, p. 63).

Astin called students’ peer groups “the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993, p. 398). The peer group influenced students’ changing political beliefs, values, and aspirations; students became more congruent with their peer group in all of these areas. Astin discusses the peer group in terms of individual students’ identification and affiliation with the group, in some ways the positive “flip side” of Tinto’s (1993) incongruence and isolation.

More than just a different way of stating the same ideas, however, identification and affiliation are complex ideas in their own right. They define the peer group and help determine
how influential the peer group will be on the individual. Peer groups with whom students identify more strongly will be able to assert a stronger influence on students. Frequent and strong feelings of affiliation also influence the magnitude of the effect the peer group may have. In addition to these two concepts, Astin also asserts that the peer group offers students the chance to gain the approval and acceptance of others and to offer that approval and acceptance in return. The extent to which this approval is seen as important affects how strongly the peer group might influence an individual student (Astin, 1993).

In addition to the importance of relationships and social integration, it is important to understand students’ evolving self-concepts and methods of meaning making in terms of the importance of those in students’ social circles. Kegan (1994) explored, among other developmental issues, how people conceptualized the self and others, and found that this changed as people moved through adolescence and into adulthood. Kegan’s work depends on the idea of subjects and objects. “Subject refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in,” while “object refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, assimilate, or otherwise act upon” (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). As humans grow and develop, things which were previously subject become object. Emotions are one good example of this: as humans develop, they are more able to see their emotions as something they “have” and can therefore control, and less likely to insist that their emotions are just an uncontrollable aspect of their natural selves.

Kegan suggests that there are five orders of human consciousness, terms he prefers over stages, each characterized by a changing view of the subject-object relationship. The first stage refers to childhood and is therefore not relevant to the study of college. College students,
People in the second order of human consciousness see the world in terms of durable categories for the first time. This means that children or adolescents in this stage view themselves as separate from the world and can see that other people and objects exist outside of themselves (Tinberg, 1998). They can see differentiation among people and understand that others may have different preferences than they themselves have. They may start to see themselves as having certain characteristics upon which they can reflect. People in this stage are also unlikely to be able to think of themselves as part of a larger community except one defined by their own self interests and needs. Their own emotions depend upon how others receive them and react to them (Love and Guthrie, 1999). This way of seeing the world operates from about the age of 10 to the late teens, so it is possible to encounter college students in this stage (Tinberg, 1998).

Students in their late teens may still demonstrate signs of Kegan’s second order of consciousness. In this stage, what is subject to them is a concrete, absolute data-driven view of the world, a tendency to conceptualize relationships as matters of reciprocity, and their own needs and preferences. Objects, on the other hand, may include their perceptions of the world, particularly social perceptions, and impulses to action. In other words, students, and people in general, using this type of thinking view their relationships and needs as things that they are, rather than things that they have (Kegan, 1994).

The transition out of second-order and into third-order thinking involves beginning to see oneself as a member of a broader community and introduces abstract thinking. The transition
can happen anytime between the ages of 12 and 20, so first- and second-year college students may certainly be grappling with this transition (Love and Guthrie, 1999).

The third order of consciousness, called the interpersonal or cross-categorical order, builds upon the second and cements ideas that students may have considered during the transition from second- to third-order thinking. Things that are subject to students in this order include abstract ideas, a concept of their roles in mutual relationships, and their own subjectivity. Objects include more concrete thoughts, points of view, and needs and preferences. Things that were subject in the second order have now become object, and thus more under the control of the individual (Kegan, 1994).

In this stage, people are more able to understand the relationships between the durable categories understood in the second order, and are able to think abstractly about these relationships. For example, people in this stage are able to think about their values and how those values affect their actions (Tinberg, 1998), while also recognizing that others are also developing value systems and basing their actions on those systems (Love and Guthrie, 1999). Emotions may also be seen more as something one is experiencing, than something one is, which illustrates the different subject-object view being taken in this order of thinking (Love and Guthrie, 1999). This can sometimes be perceived as people becoming more objective about the world around them (Tinberg, 1998). However, people in this stage still depend on others to help them create their identities; it can be said that their identities are “cocreated” with those around them (Ignelzi, 2000).

For Kegan, the transition out of third-order thinking into fourth-order thinking is the key transformation to adulthood (Kegan, 1994). Relationships, and how they may change or end, are a principal part of this transition. In the third order, students perceive that they are their
relationships; fourth-order thinking characterizes relationships as something one has. This transition may be painful and may involve loneliness (Love and Guthrie, 1999).

Some college students, particularly nontraditional students, may demonstrate fourth-order thinking, or may at least be capable of doing so. Those in the fourth order may have as subject ideologies and self-authorship, and are able to understand multiple roles in relationships. Objects include abstract ideas, the concept of mutuality in relationships, and self-consciousness (Kegan, 1994).

In the fourth order, people become more able to understand the value systems of others and to reconcile differences between them. People are able to take on other people’s value systems and ways of making meaning, at least temporarily, to understand how others’ perspectives might differ from their own (Tinberg, 1998). They are more able to integrate multiple perspectives and theories while learning, as well (Ignelzi, 2000). In addition, students in this stage will be able to rank or compare their own values and see those values as subordinate to a larger ideology. Students in this stage can make decisions about their relationships and see themselves as separate from those relationships, an idea they began to consider during the transition into this stage (Love & Guthrie, 1999).

Kegan (1994) notes that much of the college curriculum, hidden and obvious, seems to be directed at students who are in the fourth order of consciousness, while the students themselves may only be in the third order of consciousness. He offers examples including the contrast between faculty members who demand that students demonstrate independent thinking in a paper and students who are confused when they write their own ideas but receive low grades. Clearly, there is a disconnect between faculty understanding of independent thinking and students’ understanding of the same idea. Students may find similar challenges in their lives outside the
classroom, as they are asked to coconstruct their student culture and wrestle with issues of how to, or indeed whether to, reconcile the cultures in which they were raised with the new intellectual culture, ideas, and opportunities for reflection they experience in college (Kegan, 1994).

One example of Kegan’s orders of consciousness is particularly relevant to this study. For Kegan, one developmental task to be completed by late adolescence is the ability to be an unselfish friend, to “orient to the welfare of a human relationship” (Kegan, 1994, p. 75). However, Kegan notes, this and other developmental accomplishments of late adolescents and early adults (i.e. those in their early twenties) are not sufficient to meet the demands of modern adult life. Kegan also postulates that as adults are ever more disconnected from the communities that used to exist, adults must learn to think on the level previously occupied by the entire community. This epistemological shift accounts for much of modern adults’ feelings of incongruence with their world (Kegan, 1994).

Chickering’s work showed that the formation of social relationships is an important developmental task for college students. Tinto showed that social integration is key to student retention, while Astin elaborated the effect and influence that students’ peer groups have upon individual students. Kegan demonstrated how students make meaning and how they understand themselves and others. This study is situated at the intersection of these four theories or models, in that it seeks to examine social relationship formation and its effects on one particular group of students, those who are underprepared for college, and how these relationships might affect their path through higher education.
Conclusion

From existing literature, it can be seen that underprepared students are of great concern to the academic community, particularly those parts of that community concerned with student success. It can also be seen that numerous helping interventions and coping strategies exist, and that social support and integration are important to the academic and nonacademic success of at-risk students. Therefore, a study exploring these students and their social connection strategies is appropriate.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Academic underpreparedness is a major issue on many college campuses today. Researchers have sought to understand and even predict academic underpreparedness by examining the roles played by race, gender, socioeconomic status and high school experiences. Many interventions, such as tutoring and counseling efforts and developmental education, have emerged in attempts to remedy academic underpreparedness. At the same time, research has shown that peer relationships and social integration are important to student success, as well as being important developmental tasks faced by college students. This study sought to understand how academically underprepared students create their social connections and how they use these connections in their college experience.

This study was qualitative; I used grounded theory methodology to develop a theory of the social connection strategies of academically underprepared college students. Research questions included

1. How do academically underprepared college students describe the formation and content of their social interactions during their time in college?

2. How do academically underprepared college students describe the effect of their social interactions on their college experiences?

3. How do academically underprepared college students utilize their social connections to meet their academic, social, emotional or other needs?

This chapter explores various aspects of grounded theory methodology as well as specific methods that have been used to answer these research questions, the nature of qualitative research in general, the unique attributes of grounded theory in particular, the site of the research,
sample selection techniques, data collection techniques, data analysis strategies, ethical considerations, researcher biases and how these have been mitigated through the use of various techniques to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity.

**Qualitative Research: An Overview**

This study honors the traditions of qualitative research in general. The first of these important traditions is that the study seeks to understand the participants from their own perspective (Charmaz, 2006), and to understand how they make meaning from their experiences in college. Descriptive data are key to qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Therefore, the participants’ own descriptions of their social experiences make up the data in the study. The research questions and interview protocol were designed to gather information about how and with whom students form social connections, where these connections occur, and how students utilize their connections to navigate the college experience.

Second, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I gathered the data in the form of students’ stories myself, through interviews that I conducted. After they were transcribed, the interviews were coded using strategies established for grounded theory work. Through initial, focused, axial and theoretical coding, themes or categories were identified and the relationships between the identified categories were explained. The coding of data in grounded theory research is described in detail later in this chapter.

As in all qualitative research, the design of this study had to remain flexible to allow for the further exploration of themes as they are identified. The first interview started with a series of predetermined questions, but additional probing questions were also asked to allow the participant to further elaborate the information elicited by the predetermined questions.
Additionally, as interviews yielded information relevant to the study, these themes were further developed during interviews with subsequent participants, and the interview protocol changed and grew to encourage participants to discuss these emerging themes.

**Grounded Theory**

This study used grounded theory methodology to arrive at a theory of student social connections in college. Qualitative research is, by its very nature, inductive: the researcher’s understanding of the subject grows from the data provided by the subject, rather than from the researcher fitting the subject into *a priori* theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Grounded theory is one specific method of inductive analysis, used when the researcher seeks specifically to develop theory, rather than just understanding of the experience of the current participants, from his or her data. Grounded theory is also designed to provide a rigorous method of understanding research participants’ experiences, and may provide a way to deal with claims that qualitative research does not produce substantive, generalizable information that may be replicated by future studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Origins and Evolution of Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory can be summarized as the discovery of theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967), who may be credited as the originators of grounded theory methodology, described grounded theory as a type of research that could generate theory that is useful to practitioners. They felt that requiring practitioners to fit the behavior of their participants (patients, students, and so forth) to existing theory that may or may not apply to them was not useful to practitioners, nor did it help them improve their practice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
Following the initial discovery of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the two researchers took different paths. Glaser preferred more empirical methods that reflected his positivism, while Strauss was influenced more by postmodern ideas of symbolic interactionism and constructivism (Charmaz, 2006). Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) work represents the revision of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) early work, and Glaser was not pleased with the results (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz’s (2006) work is more closely aligned with Corbin and Strauss’s work, of which the 2008 edition is the third edition. This study is influenced by and uses the techniques presented in both of those works.

**Components of Grounded Theory Work**

Grounded theory methodology is defined by several “key components” (Charmaz, 2006). This rigor is designed to produce formal theory (Schwandt, 2001). Most importantly, the analytic codes used in grounded theory research must arise from the data itself, not from existing theories or hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006). Other important strategies used in grounded theory include the constant comparative method of data analysis, memoing and theoretical sampling, as well as a specific set of coding procedures.

**Constant comparative method.** Qualitative research in general depends on the use of the constant comparative method of data analysis, and grounded theory is no exception. Grounded theory depends on collecting and analyzing data at the same time, so that concepts discovered early on in analysis can be explored in subsequent data collection efforts. Grounded theory researchers use the constant comparative method of data analysis to arrive at categories, to seek their saturation, the point at which new data no longer expand the understanding of a category (Schwandt, 2001), and to begin the development of theory early in the data collection process.
**Memoing.** During this process, researchers constantly write memos, or summaries, describing their process and their emerging theories (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest creating memos about data analysis at the various stages of analysis, in order that researchers might maintain records of their thought processes. Memoing should occur during the first stage of data analysis after a category is coded for three or four times. This helps the researcher analyze his or her thoughts about the code, explore potential conflicts around the code, and explore any conclusions that might already be reached about this code. Memoing can continue throughout the development of each category (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Theoretical sampling.** The development of grounded theory also relies upon a theoretical sampling technique aimed at constructing theory, rather than the quantitative technique of choosing a sample that represents an entire population (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling refers to purposefully choosing participants to explore and test particular aspects of conclusions the researcher may begin to draw from the data (Charmaz, 2006) and is explored further in the “Sample Selection” section of this chapter.

**Role of existing literature.** The place of the literature review in grounded theory is also unique. Although literature in the researcher’s field is reviewed before data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it must also be reviewed after the theory is constructed, to explore where the theory the researcher has developed fits into the existing theoretical framework and existing literature of the researcher’s field (Charmaz, 2006). This is related to the idea of not fitting data collected into *a priori* categories; similarly, the study as a whole must not be forced into fitting with *a priori* literature and theory, and many grounded theory researchers feel that exploring the literature in too much depth before doing the study may cause the researcher to do just that.
I have reviewed existing literature with the goal of understanding the importance of social connections to college students as well as to understand the challenges that exist for academically underprepared college students. However, I have not, in Chapter Two, tried to come to any final conclusions about the links between the two. Peer support has certainly been mentioned as a coping strategy and an indication of success in college, but the idea of how students form these connections and exactly how they use them on a day to day basis is not explored in any of the literature reviewed prior to my conducting this study. Rather, in Chapter Five, I explore the links I found between my findings and existing theory and literature.

**Data Analysis in Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory also depends on a defined procedure of data analysis, over and above the constant comparative method. This process is discussed here in general, and my own implementation of it is discussed below in the “Data Analysis” section. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe four steps to the constant comparative method. Glaser and Strauss’s methods have been refined and enhanced by later researchers. Specific techniques have been described to help researchers accomplish each step, and the way in which categories may be created has been further elucidated. Therefore, the data in this study was coded based on both Glaser and Strauss’s initial method and these later refinements, which are described here.

Various authorities on grounded theory use different terms when discussing the stages of data analysis. Therefore, I have chosen one set of terms to represent the stages of data analysis, Charmaz’s (2006): initial, focused, axial and theoretical coding.

**Initial coding.** Initial coding is the first stage in coding data to produce grounded theory. This step is an attempt to move away from the stories told by the participants into a more analytic understanding of the topics explored by these stories. To do this, the researcher assigns
codes to words, lines, or longer stories from the data. Codes may be short words decided upon by the researcher or they may be *in vivo* codes, which are derived from participants’ wording.

The first step is to code the data as completely as possible into various categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In addition to sorting the data into these categories, Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest rigorously comparing each new item of data to the others already in the category in order to “generate the theoretical properties of the category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106). In other words, this step does not just consist of grouping like items together, but also of defining and describing these like items as a group.

Initial coding is the researcher’s first overview of the data, in which codes are quickly assigned to capture the researcher’s first impressions of the data. Charmaz (2006) suggests that using gerunds as codes may be particularly useful, more so than using nouns: wanting, leading, choosing, describing. The interview transcripts were first coded in a “line by line” manner (Charmaz, 2006) in which each line of the transcribed interviews was assigned a code.

Concepts are lower-level interpretations of data. During the open, or initial, coding phase, words are assigned to represent ideas found in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During open coding, the idea is to break data apart from complete stories into concepts. Through the constant comparative method, each new incident in the data is grouped into an existing concept or begins a new one (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Concepts are then grouped into categories, which Corbin and Strauss say are the same thing as themes, “higher-level concepts under which analysts group lower-level concepts according to shared properties” (2008, p. 159).

**Focused coding.** Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) second step is called “integrating categories and their properties” (p. 108). This step represents moving away from just describing incidents in the data to comparing the theoretical properties of each category with each incident
contained in that category. This helps expand the understanding of the category and to
demonstrate how it is related to the other categories the researcher has also created. Here the
researcher moves to more conceptual codes. The wide range of codes that the researcher may
have initially assigned must be narrowed down to the most important and essential ideas. Data
must be compared to data in order for the researcher to decide which codes are most essential.
Then, each piece of data is compared to the codes, which can then be expanded into categories
(Charmaz, 2006). For example one participant may describe a negative interaction with a peer
that may be assigned a code during initial coding. A second participant may describe a positive
interaction with a peer that may be assigned a different code initially. During focused coding, it
may become apparent that these two stories are two sides of the same coin, leading to the
decision to group them within the same focused code. The two stories then provide greater
information about the properties of a category that was described during the third phase of
coding, axial coding (Charmaz, 2006).

**Axial Coding.** Next, Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that the researcher must describe
the theory that is emerging. In the axial coding phase of data analysis, the properties of
categories and subcategories are expanded and defined. After the data is abstracted during the
first two stages, and separated out of the stories told by the participants, it must then be
reassembled into a cohesive whole that illuminates the research question at hand. Axial coding
provides a framework for understanding the phenomenon being studied, by which the researcher
can understand the conditions, actions and consequences of the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss,
2008).

In grounded theory, the researcher must explain the dimensions and properties of various
concepts. Dimensions give “specificity and range” to concepts and explore the “variations
within concepts” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 159). Properties are the defining characteristics of concepts. During this process, the researcher relates the various concepts to each other (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

At this point, the researcher is making small refinements to the theory rather than radically overhauling the theory as each new bit of data emerges. The theory is clarified and made more logical at this point, as the researcher decides which categories are most relevant and which may be removed from the theory. The researcher must also carry out what Glaser and Strauss term “reduction,” which occurs as the researcher reviews the original categories and replaces them with “a smaller set of higher level concepts” (1967, p. 110). The main goal here is to create a theory that is not specific to the incidents described by the participants, but rather to create a theory that may also apply to participants in other studies of the same topic. At this point, categories may be combined and refined so that there are fewer of them. Theoretical saturation of the categories is obtained at this time, meaning that the incidents coded into each category thoroughly explain that category. Once a category is thoroughly explained, it is said to be saturated, meaning that even if new bits of data emerge that might belong to this category, they no longer add anything new to our understanding of that category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Theoretical coding.** Finally, say Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher must write the theory. Here, the researcher must engage in theoretical coding. In this step, the categories, the reasoning behind them, and the stories from the data itself combine to create a complete description of the theory discovered by the researcher. At this point, the researcher also brings in his or her memos and uses information from them to further elaborate on the theory. The researcher has now created a substantive theory generated from his or her data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
In order to move past analysis into generating theory, the researcher must integrate the categories described in the open and axial analyses. At this point, the researcher chooses one central category and explores how the other categories are connected to the central category. At this level, the researcher examines the relationships between categories developed in the focused coding stage. This stage is what sets grounded theory apart from other types of qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Grounded Theory and the Present Study

Grounded theory is appropriate to the research questions at hand. Because the research questions concern understanding the participants’ own perceptions and experiences, various qualitative methodologies may be appropriate to answering them. However, while this study certainly started with gathering information about students’ perceptions of their social connection strategies, my overall goal was to create a theory by which other students might also be understood. My application of grounded theory’s rigorous methods resulted in a theory that can be useful to other practitioners and researchers.

Grounded theory is also a methodology well suited to my own nature. In determining my own identity as a scholar, I have concluded that my natural tendencies lie somewhere between postpositivism and social constructivism. Postpositivism, sometimes also called postempiricism, is characterized by a departure from strict logical empiricism, which strictly relies upon facts, the scientific method and observation to reach immutable conclusions about society. Postpositivism introduced the ideas that “all knowledge claims are interpretations,” (Schwandt, 2001, pp. 68-69) and that the scientific method and strict reliance on observable facts are not the only ways by which one might obtain knowledge. The postpositivist believes that data and theory are related, and that meanings and facts are interrelated (Schwandt, 2001). I do not believe we can totally
divorce the meaning students make with the fact of their lives; nor do I believe that we can ignore existing evidence in judging new claims (Schwandt, 2001) about students’ lives.

Constructivism, in its most general sense, is the idea that knowledge is constructed in one’s own mind. Social constructivism is the idea that people’s knowledge and reality are coconstructed with the world around them. Researchers who hold this viewpoint try to understand how people construct this reality (Schwandt, 2001). My own experience with college students has certainly led me to an acceptance of many of the principles of social constructivism. In my experience, students’ views and interpretations of their experiences are certainly internally constructed. Their ideas about how things work at the college, why and how policies exist and are implemented, and other aspects of their experiences are certainly their own interpretations and represent the students’ attempts to reconcile what they are experiencing now with their preexisting knowledge.

Grounded theory seems to me to be the perfect methodology for someone whose epistemological views fall somewhere between postpositivism and social constructivism. The theory I generated was based in data, but it also described the reality that students construct, and coconstruct, through their social relationships. For me, the meanings that students might make out of their social connections and their progress through college has always been linked to more objective facts about their (lack of) preparedness for college, as evidenced by their placement test scores. Grounded theory allowed me to take into account all of these aspects of underprepared college students’ lives in order to build a theory that explains something about their social connection strategies.
Methods

The methodology for this study was grounded theory. Specific aspects of this study are described in this section, including the site of the research, sampling techniques, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations and information about trustworthiness and authenticity.

Site of the Research

This research was conducted at a mid-size state college in the Southeastern United States, which has been assigned the pseudonym of Hartwell State College. The college primarily offers two-year degrees but is also expanding its four-year degree offerings in niche areas demanded by the geographic location of the school. For example, because the surrounding community is in need of teachers, Hartwell State College has recently begun offering four-year degrees in teacher education. The college has two campuses, one in a more rural area of the state and one near the town where the state’s flagship institution is located.

By many people’s understanding of the term, Hartwell State College is essentially a community college. This is particularly true of the more rural campus, at which this research was conducted. The admissions requirements of the college are lower than those of the state’s exclusively four-year institutions. To be admitted to Hartwell State, a student must have a high school diploma and a 2.0 high school grade point average from the state’s college preparatory curriculum, or a 2.25 high school grade point average if the student was enrolled in the less academically rigorous technical preparation program. All students who meet these requirements are automatically admitted upon application.

Additionally, the students served by the college are primarily local and commute from home. No residence halls exist, unlike most of the state’s four-year institutions, which adds to
the community college feel of the campus. The top feeder counties of the rural campus of the college are the county in which the college is located and three contiguous counties.

Another aspect of Hartwell State College that contributes to the community college feel is the preparation level of the students. Many students must take developmental, or remedial, classes. The goal of these classes is to bring students’ abilities up to the college level, so the classes focus on basic mathematics, writing and reading skills. These classes must be completed if the student’s placement test scores are below a certain cutoff point. Many students who attend Hartwell State College were not eligible for admission at the state’s larger, exclusively four-year institutions, due to their high school grade point averages, low or nonexistent college admission test scores, or other deficiencies in their applications.

However, Hartwell State College also has some characteristics that counteract the community college atmosphere. Two-thirds of the students are enrolled full-time. Many of the common academic offerings of community colleges nationwide, such as vocational and technical education, are offered instead by a separate technical college system. The majors offered at the college range from liberal arts to preprofessional ones such as premed and predentistry. In addition, a greater proportion of the students are aged 18-23 than one would normally expect to find at a traditional community college: the average age of the students is 21.8 years old. Many students participate in student organizations, spend time in the student activities center, study abroad, and participate in other traditional pursuits of the American college student.

Hartwell State College’s students are 80% White, 6.5% Hispanic, 4.6% African American, 3.1% Asian American, .7% multiracial, and .3% American Indian. Just over 4% of the students enrolled declined to provide any data about their racial and ethnic heritage. In addition, the college is 54% female and 46% male.
Sample Selection

There are many qualitative sampling strategies, and I chose the ones most likely to obtain a useful sample from which data can be obtained to answer my research questions. I utilized purposeful sampling to obtain an initial sample, and also planned to use the snowball sampling technique if my purposeful sampling had not yielded an adequate number of participants. Finally, the study employed theoretical sampling to ensure that the research questions are satisfactorily answered.

As in many qualitative studies, my initial sampling efforts attempted to recruit participants who can provide data that answers my research questions. This sampling logic, in a broad sense, refers to choosing participants based on their ability to illuminate the research questions. As opposed to quantitative research, in which the researcher attempts to choose a sample that best represents the entire population under study, sampling in qualitative research is designed to choose a sample that can best answer the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

This initial sampling was purposeful in nature, meaning that participants were recruited and chosen based on their ability to provide data that would illuminate my research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This study concerns underprepared college students. Therefore, the participants had to be able to be considered underprepared. For the purpose of this study, academic underpreparation was determined by the participant’s testing into developmental, or learning support, classes. At Hartwell State College, all students must provide sufficiently high SAT or ACT scores to opt out of developmental coursework, or they must take placement tests in English, reading, and mathematics. Those whose scores are lower than a certain threshold are judged to be in need of developmental coursework before they can be said to be ready for
college-level coursework. For the purpose of this study, "underprepared" is defined as students who took the state placement test and placed into learning support level classes in one, two, or three testing areas: English, reading, or mathematics. I desired a sample size of between 10 and 16 students, and reached data saturation at 15.

I had intended, if I had trouble finding enough participants through purposeful sampling, to use a technique called “snowball sampling.” In snowball sampling, the researcher asks each participant if they know of anyone else who might be interested in participating in the study. Since this technique may be useful if the researcher cannot find enough participants or desires a particular population for the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), if I had trouble finding participants I planned to ask students to recommend my study to classmates in their developmental classes. I did not have trouble recruiting enough participants, so I never had to resort to this. Instead, I found that unintentional snowball sampling had occurred, in which students who participated returned to their classes and student organizations and told their classmates and friends they had enjoyed the interview, and encouraged their peers to call me if they wanted to participate.

My sample was solicited through an advertising campaign on the college campus. I contacted faculty who teach learning support classes, as well as faculty and staff who teach freshman seminar courses, which are required for students who test into learning support classes, and asked them to tell their students about the study and to provide my contact information to their students. In addition, I asked club and organization advisors to announce the study to their students at meetings. Notices were also placed on the college’s Intranet bulletin board and on physical bulletin boards. The intranet and email posting can be found in Appendix A, while the bulletin board notice can be found in Appendix B. As an incentive to participate, each student who completed the study received a $10.00 gift card, usually to an area gas station, since high
gas prices were a major concern for students at the college when the study was conducted. I also offered, as an alternative, a gift card to the school bookstore. One student chose that option instead of the gas station gift card.

In order to create a sample of students who could provide useful information, I established several parameters into which potential participants had to fit. Since the subject of the research is students’ social connections, they must have been enrolled at the college for at least the semester prior to the semester in which the study was conducted, in order that they would have had sufficient time as college students to form these connections. Since this study concerns social connections made by college students, participants may not have sat out recent fall or spring semesters, as this would render them unlikely to have formed social connections in the college context. Finally, they must not have been enrolled at the college for more than four continuous fall or spring semesters, because students who have been at the college this long may be distanced from their feelings of underpreparedness, since they have had ample time to take developmental coursework and catch up with their better-prepared peers. I have chosen to exempt the summer semester from these calculations on the grounds that it is still not uncommon for students to take the summer semester off from classes, to work, to study abroad, or to vacation, and it cannot be said to provide the same social context as a fall or spring semester, when almost all enrolled college students are physically present on the campus.

This advertising campaign generated as many, if not more, students than I required for my desired sample size. Therefore, as interesting ideas emerged in the data, I was able to easily engage in theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling refers to choosing individuals to participate in order to further illuminate a category (Charmaz, 2006). As a category is defined, it may become apparent that more information from a particular type of participant is needed. In
In this study, this included needing more information from nontraditional-aged students and from male students, in order to create a data that reflected these two populations as well as the female, traditional-aged students who made up so many of my initial sample. In order to gain the necessary data, I identified particular interested students who embodied these traits, and declined offers to participate from interested students who did not. This allowed me to further define the major categories that I identified, as well as to “check my hunches” as Charmaz says (2006, p. 103) that any tentatively identified categories are important and meaningful to the study.

Theoretical sampling advances the study because it allows for the immediate verification of developing hypotheses, to identify emerging problems in the analysis and to remedy these problems. It also allowed me to fully delineate the properties of each category that I identified, rather than relying on my initial sample to fully explicate each category. It also allowed for the emergence and exploration of variation within the categories, which helped further define the categories (Charmaz, 2006).

**Data Collection**

I collected data through participant interviews. Interviews are one of the most common methods of gathering data in qualitative research and may be highly structured or almost completely unstructured (Merriam, 2002). In this study, the interviews fell somewhere in the middle, with a list of predetermined questions to provide a starting point to the discussion. This list can be found in Appendix C. However, although these questions guided the discussion, their order and precise wording varied as each interview conversation progressed (Merriam, 2002). In addition, I asked additional probing questions or departed entirely from the list of questions to explore an interesting point the participant may have raised. As participants raised new and interesting ideas, I added questions about these ideas to the protocol for future interviews.
Grounded theory analysis is aimed at understanding processes and actions of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, interview questions were primarily concerned with the participants’ process of making social connections. Charmaz (2006) suggests that understanding social processes can begin from asking questions about how the processes emerged, how participants construct social processes, who controls the processes, how participants attribute meaning to the processes and what these meanings are, and how participants’ understandings of processes and the meanings they make of them change. Although Charmaz mostly discusses studies regarding illness and addiction in her 2006 work, I believe these suggestions can also frame an interview protocol for understanding the much more benign world of college students and their social connection strategies.

Interviews have been described as negotiated conversations (Charmaz, 2006). While they allow participants to explore their own stories, interviews also allow the researcher to take control of data, which is important in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher may direct the participant to explore topics in-depth and provides questions designed to elicit particular information that may add to the analytic understanding of the topic being explored.

Charmaz (2006) also offers specific techniques that the researcher may use during the interview to ensure that it generates useful data, and these were adapted for this study. Several of these techniques revolved around understanding the stories being told by the participant at a deeper level than perhaps even the participants understand them. To do this, researchers must utilize techniques including paying attention to participants’ actions and processes in addition to their words, gathering information about the setting and context of stories that participants may tell, making sure to understand not only what happened but also why, and understanding the conditions under which the story being told happened. Charmaz also describes techniques that
involve analyzing the data, preliminarily at least, even as the story is being told. Researchers are advised to examine which words participants focus upon while telling their stories, looking for hidden assumptions behind the stories being told, and finding ways that the stories may be interpreted as data.

I was prepared for the interviews to take place in several locations. For convenience and for privacy, the first location I suggested to participants was my own office, although I also said that we could go anywhere they chose. If a student did not want to visit with me in my office, I was prepared to suggest other options both on campus and off campus, such as coffee shops, participants’ homes, the campus library, or lounges in classroom buildings. However, no participant wanted to use any of these locations, and all chose to meet with me in my office.

My office had several advantages that may have helped participants feel more comfortable. Located in a central location in a popular student gathering space on campus, it was convenient for many students, yet it also offered the participant a chance to speak behind closed doors, in a room with no windows. In addition, students in many clubs and organizations frequent my office, so participants would not feel singled out as they approached my office. The front desk staff members in my office are accustomed to my receiving student visitors for a number of reasons, so a few more than usual were not noted or remarked upon. This helped protect participants’ confidentiality.

The interviews took place over the course of the first half of the Spring 2009 semester. They were spaced appropriately to allow for transcription after each interview, so that I could review the transcripts and begin to analyze the data drawn from each interview before moving on to the next. Data provided by the first few participants interviewed helped me begin to establish
categories. This allowed me to shape the interview questions for subsequent interviews so that those tentative categories could be further explored.

It was important to protect the confidentiality of the participants, and I used several strategies to do so both before and after the study. First, I used my direct office phone number on all publicity, and offered my personal cell phone number as well. This meant that potential participants did not need to go through my administrative assistant to reach me. Although my administrative assistant was certainly alerted to the fact that I was recruiting participants for a study so that she could direct people to me if they visited the office to find out more, she was not privy to which of my callers or visitors were study participants, unless they self-disclosed this information to her. Second, once a participant was identified, he or she was assigned a pseudonym. I used this pseudonym on my calendar, where I identify my meeting schedule, and I marked appointments with participants as “private,” meaning that those who share my calendar could only see that I was unavailable at that time, not with whom I was meeting or for what reason. These pseudonyms were also used in the file names of the interview recordings and transcripts, as well as in my final written product. I kept a record of which pseudonym belongs to which participant in a locked drawer in my home. Third, I offered to meet with participants in locations other than in my office, if that would make them more comfortable. To enhance the privacy of students who participated in the study, all digital communication was deleted after the study was completed, and recordings of the interviews will be deleted after three years. I will maintain informed consent records and transcripts, but these will be stored in a locked drawer in my home.

I recorded the interviews on a digital recorder and transferred the file to my laptop computer using the software provided by the maker of the digital recorder. I then deleted the
recording from the digital recorder itself in order to free up space and also to protect the privacy of the participant: it is unnecessary to have the interviews stored in multiple places, particularly on small digital recorders that could be lost. I saved each interview recording using the pseudonym associated with each participant as well as the date the interview was conducted (for example, “Lisa Interview 08JAN09”). These precautions were explained to the participants in the Informed Consent form signed by each; a sample of this form can be found in Appendix D.

The recordings of interviews were transcribed as soon as possible following the interview. Immediate transcription is very important to qualitative analysis in general and grounded theory methodology in particular, since it allows the researcher to conduct data analysis simultaneously with data collection. As soon as my first interview was concluded, data analysis began.

During this process, I kept an audit trail, or a detailed journal of how each piece of data was collected and analyzed (Merriam, 2002). To track aspects of participant selection and data collection, I kept a journal of that process. Since this was a grounded theory study, the memos I wrote during analysis formed the audit trail for that portion of the study. These documents together formed a “trail” that any future researcher could follow to ascertain that my conclusions were logically derived from my data, and that the data collection process had integrity to begin with. Due to the large number and length of the memos I created, they are not all appended here. Rather, a sample memo is included in Appendix E.
Data Analysis

Data collection proceeds simultaneously with data analysis in many qualitative research studies. This is particularly true and important in grounded theory, as codes developed from early data must be explored in later data collection efforts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory, like other qualitative methodologies, utilizes the constant comparative method of data analysis, in which each bit of data is continually compared against the data that emerged before it, so that emerging concepts could be given increasing credence as more and more data that support them are found (Merriam, 2002). Grounded theory depends on the rigorous extraction of these bits of data from the interview transcripts. This was done through coding the interview transcripts and then coding the codes themselves, to understand both the broad themes that emerge as well as to discover the central theme around which all the other themes may revolve (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Initial coding.** The initial coding of each transcript was carried out using the line-by-line method described above for the first few interviews. I assigned each line of the data a tentative code, usually a gerund to suggest the action described by the participant in each line. This broke each story up into its composite parts and allowed me to begin to identify the issues discussed by the participant, as well as lead to new ideas about what to explore in subsequent interviews. Lines proved a helpful way to break up longer stories told by participants into small bits of data that may be easily compared to others, and to see the data in a more analytic and abstract way, especially while I was coding the first few interviews. Later, as I refined my codes, it was easier to code multiple-line sections of the data.

As I coded the first few interviews, I assigned numerous similar codes. In order to bring some organization to the process, I paused and wrote a list-style memo of all my codes, then
looked for similarities and unintentional duplication. I found that I had used over one hundred
different words as codes, which would not be sustainable for the ten to fifteen interviews I had
yet to conduct, transcribe, or code. I scanned my list for similar words, and combined them into
a list of approximately forty usable codes.

Following the development of this shorter code list, I was better able to compare each bit
of data to my existing codes (Charmaz, 2006) and to decide when new data did not fit, and
demanded the establishment of a new code. As a visual person, I used a visual strategy to
manage my data at this point. Each participant, using his or her pseudonym, was associated with
a color of paper. I printed out that person’s interview transcript on the appropriate color of
paper. This allowed me to separate pages of the interview according to identified themes without
worrying about remembering which comments came from which participants. As I identified
tentative categories, I labeled a large piece of paper with the name of that category. I then pasted
the portions of each interview that belong to that category to the larger sheet of paper. That each
participant’s transcript is a different color meant that I could separate out a line or paragraph
from the transcript without worrying about later having to track back through the electronic
copies of each transcript to figure out who said what.

In addition, this process allowed me to see how widely the categories were found
throughout my participants. When I noticed that one category turned out to have only been
found in two interview transcripts, for example, I was able to make a conscious effort to explore
that idea with subsequent participants, to decide whether or not to use theoretical sampling to
discover more about that idea, and ultimately whether or not the idea could be combined with
another code instead of existing as a stand-alone code.
As Charmaz (2006) recommends, during this phase of coding I looked for evidence of the participants’ actions, assumptions, thoughts and feelings, the processes he or she describes when asked about friendship-making and any changes that may appear in the participant’s descriptions. In all initial coding efforts except for the very first interview transcript, I compared the line-by-line codes I found with those in previous interview transcripts, to look for similarities that indicated the identification of a tentative major code. At various points, I stopped to record my thoughts about what I saw in my data in a memo. By the end of the initial coding phase, I had developed a set of categories that included numerous related smaller concepts. This grew from my list-style memo about codes; for example, the initial code “meeting in class” contained the original line-by-lines codes of “being close to,” “class type,” and “sitting next to,” all which I had assigned to lines of data when coding the first few interviews, then later collapsed into the initial code “meeting in class.” Again, an example of these memos is appended.

During the initial coding phase, I did notice one characteristic of my data that should be mentioned. While the participants in my study provided rich data, they did not provide many longer stories that could be presented as long quotations, as are typically seen in qualitative research reports. I believe this represents some characteristics of my population. Many students, though no less intelligent than their peers attending other state universities, are dealing with learning disabilities both diagnosed and undiagnosed. Many have Attention Deficit Disorder. Others have been generally invalidated as learners throughout their secondary education careers, and very few seem to have been encouraged to reflect on their experiences. These conclusions are all substantiated by the raw data. Their conversations with me were tangential in nature, as their answers skipped from topic to topic, rather than presenting me with compact stories that were easy for me to relate in this report. Therefore, the reader will encounter many shorter
quotes, or stories that I had to piece together from different sections of the interview transcript. I have indicated these breaks with ellipses in my written representations of the stories.

**Focused coding.** The focused coding process started after the second or third interview underwent initial coding, since it generated some conceptual, broader codes. At this point, I had formed ideas about which were the most significant and frequently used codes in my line-by-line analyses, and tentatively elevated these to focused code status. The memos I wrote during the initial coding process helped me decide which codes were most significant. The focused coding stage began while I was still doing some interviewing and initial coding, but it did not end until all of my interviews were transcribed, had undergone initial coding, and their initial codes had been included in the focused coding process.

During this stage, it became apparent that my initial codes could be grouped together thematically. The initial codes became, in a sense, data themselves, and I was able to group like bits of data together. I created, as Charmaz (2006) suggested, an informal, abstract map of the codes and the connections between them using the clustering technique, and then refined that into the “ordered working version” of the map that Charmaz (2006, p. 120) describes.

From this process, I emerged with five focused codes, each encompassing another five or six initial codes. I phrased each focus code as a question, with its properties and the initial codes serving as answers to the question. For example, one of my focused codes was, “How Do Participants Make Friends?” The properties of that focused code were the ideas of proximity to others and stages of friendship development. The property of proximity included the initial codes of “meeting in class”, “meeting in student organizations,” and “re-meeting.” Thus, the focused codes grew out of the initial codes to lend increased structure to my conclusions.
**Axial coding.** After I completed the focused coding stage, I moved into the axial coding phase: the identification and exploration of a major central category. At this point, the data, which had been so fractured in the first two stages, began to be reassembled (Charmaz, 2006). I looked for relationships between categories, and tentatively established the central category for my study. I also began to examine which of the remaining categories were subordinate to that central category, and to explore how those relationships worked.

Corbin and Strauss, discussed in Charmaz (2006), suggest an axial coding strategy that I used. They suggest including the conditions of the category, the actions and interactions that go on in this category, and the consequences of these actions and interactions. Describing these helped me fully explain “what was going on” with the students in my study.

**Theoretical coding.** During this phase, which occurred after all of the other coding had been done, I actually developed my theory. In this stage, I suggested how all the categories are related (Charmaz, 2006), formalizing the relationships I had begun to develop in the axial coding stage. In this stage, one central category must be selected (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and so I committed myself to the central category I had tentatively identified in the axial coding stage. Corbin and Strauss describe this stage as “moving from the descriptive story to the theoretical explanation” (2008, p. 107). I wrote memos here as well to fully explore my thoughts on the central category and the theory I was developing.

**Ethical Considerations and Researcher Biases and Assumptions**

It is appropriate to explore ethical issues that may be raised by my research design as well as my biases and assumptions that may influence the work. It is normal for researchers to bring their biases and assumptions with them into research. However, to minimize the effect of these
biases and assumptions on the results of the research, it is necessary to recognize and admit
them, then attempt to set them aside.

The fact that I work at the college where the research was conducted does provide an
ethical concern. It was important to me to avoid exerting undue influence on students to
participate in the study. Therefore, I did not approach students with whom I worked directly as a
club advisor. In fact, in one case I turned down a participant whom I knew too well to be
objective while analyzing the data she would provide. Other students whom I knew less well did
eventually end up being in the study, but I did not personally recruit any of them.

My work in student affairs in general, outside of my particular work site, may also have
influenced the conclusions I drew from this research. My first assumption as a researcher, based
on my observation of students at several institutions, is that most, if not all, students create social
networks in college. While my own experiences and observations bear this out, I must admit that
it is possible that not all students create such networks. For example, nontraditional-age students
who have families and jobs outside of the college may not have the time or inclination to form
relationships on campus.

Next, I must admit to the belief that social connections are an important and beneficial
part of the college experience. Some participants may not agree with this, and it is important for
the researcher not to insist to these participants that they are somehow lacking or disappointing
because they do not share this belief. While my biases about the benefits of social connection
strategies have been borne out by research (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993), some students may simply
not derive satisfaction from their social networks.

Finally, I tend to assume that students who have social networks rely on them, at least in
part, to navigate the college experience. For example, prior to beginning the study, I expected to
find that students sought information from their peers about college academic requirements, academic events such as advising and registration time periods, and other college-related topics. It was important that I remember that for some students, this simply may not be true; they may turn instead to faculty advisors, staff members with whom they interact, or the college website to discover this information. In fact, my assumption was not entirely borne out by my data, so this study did force me to reconsider and adjust my assumptions.

**Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

Issues of biases and assumptions lead directly to issues of trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness and authenticity are both techniques used to assure quality in qualitative research (Stage & Manning, 2003). Trustworthiness and authenticity are better suited to qualitative research than their more quantitative counterparts, reliability and validity (Schwandt, 2001). Authenticity in particular is situated in the constructivist paradigm, while trustworthiness is more rooted in conventional paradigms (Stage & Manning, 2003). The ethical considerations, biases, and assumptions discussed above must all be dealt with to increase trustworthiness and authenticity, and my methods of doing so are discussed here.

**Trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness involves the ideas of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Schwandt, 2001). Ortiz (2003) suggests that there are steps the researcher may follow during interviews to ensure trustworthiness, including keeping an audit trail and using member checks, and my use of these methods is described below.

Credibility concerns the closeness of fit between the participants’ descriptions of their lives and the conclusions the researcher may choose to draw and how the researcher represents participants’ lives in a research report (Schwandt, 2001). I ensured credibility through offering my participants the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and the conclusions I
drew from those interviews, ensuring that they have the chance to confirm that my conclusions represent the messages they intended to send during their interviews.

Transferability is similar to generalizability, in that it is achieved if the researcher gives the reader enough information to draw good conclusions about whether or not the work may be applicable to the reader’s own world of life and work (Schwandt, 2001). I used quotations from interviews to support my conclusions in order to increase the transferability of my research report. In some cases, I have provided bracketed inserts into participants’ quotes, to elaborate on their meaning, offer clarification, or to keep my document internally consistent. For example, students used the word acquaintance to indicate many different instances of friendship; in this study, the word acquaintance refers to one specific level of friendship. I have always honored the participants’ intended meaning, but in some places I have replaced the word acquaintance with another word, in brackets, so that the quote is consistent with wording used in the rest of the document.

Dependability refers to whether the inquiry is logical and how well the researcher documents his or her research process (Schwandt, 2001). I ensured the dependability of this research by maintaining an audit trail during data collection and analysis. This audit trail is described in detail above, and the notes and memos that comprise it form a “trail” that any future researcher could follow to ascertain that my conclusions were logically derived from my data, and that the data collection process had integrity to begin with.

Confirmability is judged by how strongly the researcher is able to support his or her conclusions with information gathered from participants (Schwandt, 2001). My audit trail, in addition to contributing to dependability, helped ensure the confirmability of my research.
**Authenticity.** Authenticity is concerned with whether a researcher is able to truly represent his or her research participants. Unlike trustworthiness, which parallels quantitative concerns like reliability and validity, authenticity is more related to the constructivist paradigm and concerns how the researcher represents the world that he or she has learned about while conducting the research. Authenticity concerns viewing the world from participants’ viewpoints and accurately representing their experiences to the reader (Schwandt, 2001). Criteria for judging authenticity include fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity.

Fairness concerns the need for the researcher to be balanced in his or her representations of the participants, including the way the concerns and ideas of the participants are portrayed. Ontological authenticity refers to the ability of qualitative research to improve the participants’ own understandings of the way they construct reality. By participating in the research, participants can benefit in that their own understandings may become more sophisticated. Educative authenticity is similar to ontological authenticity in that it concerns the participants. However, it is different in that it refers to the opportunity for the participants to gain greater understanding of others’ constructions of reality, rather than their own. Catalytic authenticity concerns whether the research prompts others to action. Tactical authenticity is related to catalytic authenticity and concerns whether or not participants are prompted to act by their participation in the study (Schwandt, 2001).

Ortiz suggests that keeping an audit trail and using member checks may enhance authenticity in interview-based research, just as they enhance trustworthiness (Ortiz, 2003). My audit trail and sample memos are appended to my research, so that the reader may judge for himself or herself the fairness of my representations. When I sent my conclusions to my
participants for member checks, I increased the ontological authenticity of my research because I offered participants the chance to better understand their own viewpoints through the process of reading and verifying my conclusions based on the information they provided. In addition, if during the member check process the participants are spurred to action about issues of underpreparedness, this process also increased the catalytic and tactical authenticity of the study.

**Conclusion**

This grounded theory study yielded information about how college students make, and make meaning of, their social connections, particularly in terms of dealing with issues of academic underpreparedness. The interviews I conducted yielded meaningful data that was coded using grounded theory techniques. Through the use of member checks and an audit trail, issues of researcher bias were mitigated, and trustworthiness and authenticity were ensured. A theory was identified and described, based on the data gathered, that makes sense of the information provided by the participants.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

To explore the social connections of academically underprepared college students and how those connections affect their college experiences, I conducted interviews with fifteen college students at Hartwell State College, a predominantly two-year access institution in the Southeastern United States. During hour-long semi-structured interviews, participants discussed their friendships on- and off-campus, how those friendships formed and developed, and the relationship between friendships and their academic experiences. Specific research questions included

1. How do academically underprepared college students describe the formation and content of their social interactions during their time in college?

2. How do academically underprepared college students describe the effect of their social interactions on their college experiences?

3. How do academically underprepared college students utilize their social connections to meet their academic, social, emotional or other needs?

In order to analyze this data, the interviews were first transcribed and then analyzed using grounded theory methods, with the aim of generating a theory that can be used to explain and understand the formation, content, impact and meaning of friendships among academically underprepared college students and between academically underprepared college students and their more prepared counterparts. I first identified initial codes, then refined these codes into more focused codes that contained properties made up of my initial codes. I then developed axial codes, which further abstracted the data. Finally, using theoretical coding, I reassembled
my data into a cohesive, whole story of friendships among academically underprepared college students.

The results of this study are presented in this chapter. First, I present participant profiles, so that the reader may more clearly understand the participants. Next, I discuss my central category resulting from the data analysis, followed by further explanations of categories and properties within this central category. These categories and properties are all illuminated by quotes from study participants. Additionally, the categories and properties that emerged affect two aspects of student life in college, the growth and development of friendships and the transition to college. Together, the core category and the aspects of college life it affects provide answers to my research questions, and those answers are also explored in this chapter.

**Participant Profiles**

**Faith**

Faith was the first participant I interviewed. I had met her before through my job, and we had something of a rapport, so the interview was not difficult. Faith appeared Caucasian but often mentioned her membership in the Black Student Association and the friends she had found there during her interview, as well as her experiences attending a wide range of student events. Faith was also an avid user of the student center’s study spaces, which she said she often occupied with a group of friends. This study time, which was also social time for the group, formed the basis of many of her stories. The friends about whom Faith told me were diverse in age as well. Faith identified herself as a nontraditional student, meaning one who has spent five or more years out of school between high school and college. Faith reported, though, that she had many traditional-age friends. Faith was married and often felt that her friends, while
supportive, did not really know what it is like to be married. Faith spoke eagerly, with many hand gestures and lots of excitement in her voice.

**Maria**

Maria was one of the first people to contact me to be in the study, but due to weather issues and other scheduling issues, I did not interview her for several weeks. She was quite eager to participate, though, and we persevered to find a meeting time. Maria, a recent immigrant to this country, mentioned many friends back home in Central America during her interview. She spoke hesitantly, but with a musical accent and an ever-present shy smile, and often worried during her interview that her English was not good enough. However, she was very eloquent and also passionate about the college, her friends and her experiences there, and her commitment to helping more English-as-a-second-language students realize they can attend college. She had been involved in a wide range of activities since she started school, and (interestingly) had become the treasurer of a student organization for Southeast Asian students. During the semester the research was conducted, she was also involved in a scholarship program for Hispanic students and a liberal, political activist organization.

**Beth**

Beth was my second interview and the most difficult. She was shy and hesitant, although she showed up eager to sign up for the interview and claimed to be eager to talk, she had difficulty articulating complex answers to my questions. She told me that she does not drive, and that her father drives her everywhere. This was a telling attribute of her life; she seemed very sheltered and reliant on her parents for everything. She spoke quietly and often said she had “lost her words” or “couldn’t speak right today.” She favored yes and no answers and, where
she could not use those, short one-sentence answers. At the same time, though, she did have some thoughts on the importance of friendship and illuminated my understanding of some of the college’s students.

**Dale**

Dale was in the same class or club as Beth where the announcement of my research was read out. They actually came to me together to sign up, and it was difficult to separate them to preserve a semblance of confidentiality. Dale spoke with a slight speech impediment, and often visibly slowed himself down to express his ideas. He was thoughtful in answering the questions, and had clearly spent some time processing what college has meant for him. At the time of the interview, he had not yet had some experiences which he considered his peers might have had, such as a romantic relationship, but he talked about how much he enjoyed his membership in a student organization made up of anime (Japanese animation) enthusiasts, where he had found peers with whom he shared interests.

**Meghan**

I had met Meghan before the study began, through her involvement in several activities offered by my office, so our time together felt much more like a conversation than a formal interview. She spoke eagerly, yet was difficult to keep on topic. She was clearly having a wonderful time in college, and contrasted her experiences at Hartwell State College with high school days, which she did not feel were productive. She alluded to being part of the wrong crowd in high school and engaging in negative activities, and during her interview she contrasted this with her college experience of seeking out positive friends as well as interactions with faculty and staff. At the time of the interview, she was involved in a campus governance organization, held an on-campus job working for a faculty member, and participated in a wide
range of campus activities. She clearly idolized another student leader with whom she has worked, and many of her friendship stories had to do with this person.

**Pam**

Pam funded her education in part by a student job in the same building I worked in, so we encountered each other regularly during the semester in which I conducted these interviews. We had never discussed my study, but she saw a flier I had put up, realized it was my study, and came to me about participating. Pam’s extracurricular interests were mainly focused on role-playing games. I think her interest and participation in role-playing games have led her to think in stories, because she was able to give wonderful examples for all of her answers, although like many of those I interviewed, her stories wandered off on tangents that were not particularly useful to my research. She was one of the few participants who instinctively understood what I meant when I asked her to share stories in response to my questions. She seems to have had some difficulty fitting in with her peers in college and had gone through two sets of roommates at the time of our interview. She also had a boyfriend and was one of only a few participants to mention a romantic partner. In addition to her friendships, she often mentioned people who dislike her, which provided an interesting lens through which to view college friendships.

**Brittany**

Brittany was a traditional-aged college freshman who came from a more metropolitan area than some of the students I have interviewed. She exemplified a more typical college freshman than some other participants, and represented the portion of students at Hartwell State College who identify more strongly with the nearby large state university and hope to transfer there one day. She was bouncy and bright and excited to participate when she came to my office
for her interview. While speaking, she was visibly excited about her college experience, bouncing up and down in her chair as she spoke.

**Mike**

Mike was gregarious and clearly liked to talk. He was very open about the crises he and his friends have suffered: deaths of parents, hospitalizations of older relatives, and parental job losses due to the current economic situation. Mike was a traditional-aged college student who found himself at Hartwell State College due to the fact that he possessed a “tech prep” diploma, which does not qualify one to go on to the bigger state universities. This meant that he entered college with a number of credit deficiencies as well as testing into some learning support classes. He was very open about this, just as he was with the descriptions of crises in his life and his friends’ lives. He seemed to be very happy in college and had joined at least one student organization and formed meaningful connections with the people he met there. He was also sad about the fact that these friends would graduate before he would, and worried that this would leave him alone and lonely once more.

**Leigh**

Leigh was a tall, physically commanding woman. She projected an attitude of not caring what anyone thinks. She said that she liked to go up to people and introduce herself or start talking to them. During the semester in which we spoke, Leigh was active in one club on campus, one that concerns Japanese culture, and she has been responsible for much of the club’s growth during her time at Hartwell State College. She seemed organized and capable, and told me about her life without hesitating. She was interested in the college as a whole, and had opinions about college and state policies. She also saw herself as being “in the know” and took pride in providing information to others in her role as a club leader.
Richard

Richard identified as a nontraditional student. He was quiet and deliberate when he spoke, and was clearly passionate about his cultural and musical interests, many of which concern the Hindu and Vedic culture. He started a club on campus this year and spent much time actively recruiting people to it, although he is unsure of what will happen to the club once he graduates. He was enthusiastic about the students he has met, whether traditional-aged or older. His life, otherwise, he described as largely separate from the college, and he mentioned that he is not looking for permanent friendships from the people he has met at the college. Rather, he said, those already exist in his life due to his marriage, family, neighborhood friends, and others.

Lisa

Lisa was recruited to the study by Leigh, in a sort of inadvertent snowball sampling. At the time of the interview, she was new to the area, having moved from several states away, and did not seem happy with where she was living. Nor did she seem happy with where she came from; it was not homesickness she projected but a general sense of looking for her place in the world. She described herself as “shy,” and it was very interesting to me that a self-described shy person would participate in a qualitative study. Her answers were short, but interesting, and she seemed surprised when the interview concluded. She could not imagine that she had said anything interesting and looked at me in disbelief when I told her she really had.

Lolly

Lolly was the first participant to actually take me up on the offer to make up her own pseudonym. During our interview, she was vivacious and eager to talk about her experiences. Lolly came to college as a nontraditional student, and age was clearly one way by which she
made meaning of her college relationships. Whenever she described a friend or acquaintance, she mentioned the age of the person. It was after interviewing Lolly that I started thinking about the concept of levels of friendship, which she mentioned several times. She told me how she consciously divided her friends up into levels – acquaintances versus buddies versus those she might see out of school. She also told me that she saw friends in the lower levels as having potential to move up to closer relationships.

**Bethany**

Bethany was recruited to the study by Lisa, in another example of the inadvertent snowball sampling that occurred when Leigh recruited Lisa. She did not mention this to me until the end of the interview, however. Bethany did not have many friends in high school and, now that she is in college, appeared thrilled to find out that she has made friends. Prior to coming to college, she had always viewed herself as flawed for not having friends in high school and shared with me that she was happy to have found out that this was not really the case. She told me that she believes that people in college like her for who she is. She had an idealistic view of college, possibly because the semester when I interviewed her was only her second semester there, and she felt that anyone can succeed, find meaningful relationships, and be happy in college. She wanted to encourage others to find the happiness she has found.

**Rhonda**

Rhonda started school at the age of seventeen, and has seen the college go through a lot of growth over her almost two years as a student. She herself has also grown, from a nervous first-year student to a more self-assured student leader. She was home-schooled during her high school years and finished high school more quickly than her friends in traditional high schools, and immediately upon coming to college she began to join clubs and make friends. She was
bubbly and admitted that she will talk to anyone – and that she had done so during her time at Hartwell State College, resulting in a broad array of friends at the college.

Kevin

Kevin was a nontraditional student, meaning that he returned to college after some years in the workplace. Like Lolly, he told me during the interview that he is a parent. His identity as an older student came up frequently during his interview. Kevin had devoted a lot of time and attention in college to making friends, and was proud to describe both his efforts and the resulting friendships. The friendships he described during his interviews crossed barriers of age, gender, and professional status, as he considered some faculty members to be his friends as well as a large number of students.

Overview of Central Category and Properties

The purpose of this study was to understand social connections, or friendships, in the lives of academically underprepared college students. Through grounded theory analysis, I developed a model that explains both the development and effects of friendships for these students. Analysis revealed that college students define and make meaning of their friendships through a complex system of categorizing their various friendships into levels. Participants described six levels into which their social connections could be categorized. Each level was described by its degree of familiarity, activities, territorial and temporal limitations, greeting behaviors, the origin of the friendship, and the potential future of the friendship. Additionally, each level of friendship was characterized by the types of academic, social, and emotional support derived from friends at that level.

Therefore, the central category in this theory can be said to be the act of categorizing friendships into levels, with the categories being the six levels of friendship: Friends Whose
Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, Acquaintance Friends, During-College Friends, Friendships with Lasting Potential, and Friends Forever. Within each of these categories, understanding of the category was enhanced by examining the properties of the category: its degree of familiarity, activities, territorial and temporal limitations, greeting behaviors, the origin of the friendship, and the potential future of the friendship and the academic, emotional, and social support received with each level of friendship. The matrix formed by these ideas describes how students classify and understand their friendships, and how they interact with their peers based on where their peers fall in the matrix.

The way that students made sense of their relationships through categorizing their friends into this complex system of levels also influenced two processes in which they engage during their time in college: the growth and development of friendships and the transition to college. The growth and development of friendships are essential to students’ persistence to graduation, according to the theoretical framework of this study. Both Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) credit social support, or the existence of a friend group, with great influence over students’ academic success. The transition to college was also vitally important to students’ success (Tinto, 1993), and this transition may be particularly tricky for those who are academically underprepared. This study shows how students’ social connections provide support for that transition.

Explanation of Properties

By the time I interviewed Rhonda, I had begun to form my analytic propositions about how students make meaning of their friendship by classifying their friends into levels. When I asked her if she had found this to be true, she said, “I agree, I think there were different levels of how you can be friends with somebody.”

Rhonda provided a short explanation of the idea of levels of friendship:
There might be some people that, you know, that you talk to on a regular basis and you’re not really close to them, but you talk to them. Then, there were people that you were close to, but you’re not as close. Then there’s those people who know everything about you, and you know everything about them. They’re like your best friends.

Rhonda’s explanation showed a quick, vivid picture of this idea. However, arriving at a complete picture of how students make meaning of their friendships through a classification system required a deeper examination of the data. First, it was important to define the properties that will then be used to describe each category of friendship.

**Familiarity.** This property explored how well participants know each other. Levels of familiarity range from not knowing someone’s name to thinking of a friend as a sibling. Familiarity might also describe how close a friend or potential friend was allowed to be; one example of this was whether or not a friend has been inside one’s house or one’s room. Participants used the word “friend” to describe many vastly different levels of familiarity. Lolly explained it this way, as she inadvertently coined the name of one of the categories: “Even if you’re just an acquaintance friend, or even if you’re just a passerby even, you know, until you do something otherwise, I’m going to consider you a friend.”

**Activities done together.** This property explored what friends do when they were together. These activities could be either academic or social in nature, and ranged from working math problems to “just hanging out” to long hours spent talking about important life issues. This category involved the social activities of the participants. It asked where friends spend time together and what they were doing. Aspects of this property included the location of activities and the nature of the activities done.
One important aspect of this property was “location,” which referred to where friends spent time together and what areas of the campus and the wider community provided locations for the development and execution of friendship and friends’ activities. Locations mentioned on campus were the gym, the student center, a testing and tutoring center, outside on the lawn, the library and the mathematics tutoring lab. These locations were generally important because of their function, because of what students could accomplish there, but also because of the socializing that took place at each location.

Students also discussed off-campus socializing, and frequently this was mentioned in the negative, as something that students did not do, whether because of scheduling and logistical issues, financial issues, or because of a general feeling that off-campus activities were not as safe as on-campus activities. However, some locations were mentioned such as going to the movies, going bowling, and going to a nearby lake.

The second aspect of this property was the nature of the activity conducted by students. This idea concerns what students were actually doing in the locations they described as important to them. Again, what students were doing in some of the locations was both self-evident and inextricably linked to the place. In the mathematics lab they did math homework; in the foreign language lab they worked on foreign language homework. Students also described the socializing that takes place in these locations. These social activities were just as important to the development of students as the homework being done was important to their academic growth. In addition to academic activities, activities carried on by students include eating together, attending organized student events, and just hanging out.

The most frequently discussed activities were academic in nature: doing homework together, helping each other with problems, helping both in class and out of class, doing
organized group work together, and explaining work to each other. Interactions regarding academics were central to friendships in this study; frequently, academic interactions were also social in nature, so social interactions and academic interactions were not separate and distinct but rather enmeshed with each other.

**Territorial and temporal limits of the friendship.** This property explored where the friendship was conducted and when it begins and ends. Some friendships existed only in the classroom, while others spilled over into more social areas. In addition, some friendships began and ended with the academic term, while others carried on after a given class ends. Some of the friendships that carried on past a given class or semester ended with college, while others were seen to have the potential to continue after college. All of these attributes contributed to the level of friendship experienced.

One aspect of modern life affected students’ understandings of the territorial limits of friendship: the current popularity of online communication. Text messaging was certainly the most popular method of communication discussed; emailing and Skyping were also mentioned. Social networking sites were also included in this idea and were important to students. Students also learned about technology from each other, so this learning was just as interactive as the academic learning discussed above.

**Greeting behaviors.** This category refers to how students interact, particularly upon seeing each other for the first time that day. Greetings ranged from saying things like, “What’s up,” to spending a significant amount of time talking. Where the greetings take place was also important; whether or not friends greeted each other in the hallways or outside of familiar environments like class characterized the level of the friendship. Additionally, the obligation to
greet or not to greet differed between levels of friendship, as did the amount of time spent
greeting friends.

**How the friendship started.** Because I wanted to examine the formation of friendships,
I asked students where they made friends and how that happened. Friendships were largely
formed within the academic arena. Lower-level friendships in particular were often made
because two people had class together and, more importantly, because they sat together in those
classes or were forced into proximity by being placed in a group project together. Friendships
may also develop through the proximity experienced by students who join student organizations.
Efforts put into the formation of the friendship (for example, if names or numbers were
exchanged) also determine the level of friendship that was ultimately formed.

An important part of this property was the idea of proximity, that students meet those
who they were near. Students meet largely because they sit next to each other in class or
encounter each other in a student organization. Proximity can also be achieved through group
work or other forced interactions. The type of class described by the participant also affects the
likelihood of proximity and therefore the likelihood of any actual meeting. Classes that depend
largely on lectures, such as some math and science classes, did not engender proximity and
therefore, according to participants, resulted in fewer meetings that might lead to friendships
being formed. Meeting new or potential friends in class was one way the transition to college
was eased, as was forming relationships with teachers, so this also affected how the levels of
friendships affected students’ transitions to college.

Students also found themselves in proximity through student organizations. Although
they may at first be there for the food, as a couple of participants pointed out, student
organizations provided another venue for the development of friendships. Much like classes,
they put students in proximity to each other through the club’s projects and through general meetings. Friends met in clubs were categorized into levels just as friends met in class were; clubs were also a place to form higher-level friendships than those formed in class.

Work provided another area in which students came into proximity with others. The hours spent at a job, whether on or off campus, allowed students to get to know those who they spend time with. Work was a place to learn why you were in college (as Leigh said, it taught her that she wants to avoid having to work retail for the rest of her life) as participants explored making friends with people unrelated to, and unfamiliar with, their college lives. Finally, work was also an impediment to participants’ friendships, as it was yet another thing that took them away from chances to re-meet potential friends and socialize with actual friends.

Proximity was enhanced by what I have termed “re-meeting,” the process by which students encounter the same other students repeatedly in various contexts: in class, in the student center, at a social event. During these re-meetings, participants’ friendships developed. Repeated incidents of proximity enhanced the likelihood that students who encountered each other will become friends. Students’ stories of re-meeting detailed various locations where they encountered and re-encountered their fellow students: the math lab, the foreign language lab, the student center, and other locations.

**Potential future of the friendship.** This category was tied to the territorial and temporal limits of the friendship, but also described how participants felt about the future of their friendships. In other words, it did not merely describe the limits of the friendship. The potential future of the friendship might have been large in scope, as students considered whether or not they want to remain friends after a class ends or after college ends. It may also be small, as Kevin noted: Some friendships seem to begin and end each day, as class ends and starts again.
The potential future of the friendship was also determined by the effort put into building and maintaining the friendship. As friendships developed, according to participants, they went through stages. The data showed evidence for three stages of friendship: beginning, building, and maintaining.

The first stage was the beginning stage, in which students met, re-met, and got to know each other. This stage was characterized by many words indicating “first encounter” – students used words such as introduce themselves, they would go up and ask, they felt new and were quiet at first. Eventually, if they found common interests and goals, friendships might have proceeded to the second stage. If the only thing the friends had in common was being in the same class, friendships might never have left this first stage. Instead, they were classified as Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, or Acquaintance Friends.

Friendships began over commonalities. Maria, for example, first became friends with students and teachers who spoke her first language, Spanish. “At first, I just talked with people who speak Spanish first and then they came in with people who were not Spanish speakers.” She met people who did not speak Spanish in the company of her Spanish-speaking friends and learned that she could also form relationships with those who do not share her first language.

The second stage of friendship development was the building stage. This stage was characterized by participants’ feelings of building relationships, finding out more about each other, exploring shared interests, and enjoying the friendships. During this stage, participants were most likely to classify friends into the higher levels of friendship, deciding that they were During-College Friends, Friendships with Lasting Potential, or Friends Forever.

The third stage of friendship development was the maintenance stage. Maintaining social connections was a choice for participants, not a given. Students did not seem committed to
maintaining friendships past college; nor do I want to insist that this is the only reasonable goal for college friendships. Rather, this stage was characterized by students considering how and if to maintain in-class relationships after class (in other words, to “upgrade” their In-Class Friendships), considering how their friendships may last or not last after college, and reflecting about how to maintain their individuality within the continuing friendship. This stage also involved students pondering what it meant to stay behind as their classmates left them to graduate or transfer, and how to maintain both friendships and individuality as the left-behind person.

**Academic, social, and emotional benefits.** Participants discussed the academic, social, and emotional benefits they derived from their friendships. First, participants derived academic benefits from their social connections. This support was largely positive, although some negative types of support were mentioned, in particular some cheating that was reported during one student’s interview. Positive types of support included having friends help the participants navigate the sometimes difficult terrain of undergraduate education. The most important way friends supported participants was by providing support through difficult classes, by spending time together studying and doing other academic activities. Participants’ friends helped them complete difficult projects, providing ad hoc tutoring for example. Friends who were further along in the academic process lent notes and expertise to students completing lower-level classes. Most importantly, friends provided the motivation and support that let participants know that they could, even when they most doubted themselves, be successful in college. The amount and strength of benefits derived from friendships depended on the level of the friendship.

Second, participants derived social benefits from their friendships. These benefits were closely tied to academic benefits. As friends sat together to do homework, they were deriving
both social benefits and academic support. Participants derived social support when friends were there for them, and also discussed this idea by sharing their experiences when they did not have as many friends as they would have liked, indicating that the lack of social support was also a defining incident for some participants. Social support also helped students overcome various issues associated with the transition to college, such as feeling socially uncomfortable or having academic difficulties, by helping students feel more positive about their college experiences.

Finally, participants found emotional benefits from their friendships. Emotional support was often tied to academic or social support. For example, participants who talked about how their friends got them past a difficult moment of believing they would never succeed in college and helped them re-focus on the (usually math) problem at hand were simultaneously describing academic and emotional support. Likewise, participants who described friends supporting them through difficult emotional situations by visiting, arranging social occasions, and providing company were describing both emotional and social support. The emotional benefits of friendship were also characterized by a feeling of closeness with friends, indicating that emotional benefits, unlike academic benefits, were most available from friends classified into one of the higher levels of friendship. Therefore, the benefits derived from friendships varied according to the level of the friendships.

**Making Meaning of Friendship through Categorization**

As students negotiated the difficult territory of transitioning to college and succeeding once they were there, friends played a crucial role. For academically underprepared college students, this role was especially important, as these students were at a disadvantage in terms of the likelihood of their persistence to graduation. The peer group in general, and interpersonal friendships in particular, play a key role in encouraging students to persist to graduation and in
giving students the tools to do so. For the individual participants, making sense of friendships meant categorizing friends into levels. At each level, different benefits may result from the friendship, and each level of friendship plays a different role in helping students succeed in college.

**Friends Whose Names Are Unknown**

The first level of friendship may not, to outside eyes, seem like much of a friendship at all. This was the level of friendship in which the student was not even aware of the other party’s name, much less any more personal information. The first time I heard a story that began something like, “Well, I have a friend in my math class, I don’t remember his name,” I was amused and thought that this couldn’t be a “real” friendship or one that would be relevant to my study. However, this idea kept reoccurring in different student’s stories. The word “friend” was often used to describe someone whom the student saw only infrequently, but with whom he or she had pleasant interactions. This level of friendship was different from other, higher levels expressly because of the lack of awareness of the “friend’s” name.

**Familiarity.** These friendships carried the lowest degree of familiarity. They were based mainly on facial recognition. Participants described friends who sat near them in class and whom they recognized, but with whom they had never traded the most basic information, such as names, email addresses, or phone numbers. However, even friendships at this level provided an atmosphere of camaraderie and caring. Lolly gave one example when she describes the people who sit near her in a class:

There’s another girl, we’re not really, I couldn’t really tell you her name at this moment, but we’re not really close friends, but friendly enough with each other where she said,
“Oh, I meant to give you this,” and she gave me a piece of candy that she got from Colombia, just being nice.

**Activities done together.** Activities done between friends whose names were unknown were mainly limited to in-class group work. For example, two students who sat near each other might have worked a math problem together, or might have participated in a group exercise designed to help them learn the class material. Lolly described working on group projects in her anthropology class with a group that developed from who was sitting next to her, for example.

In addition to describing one-on-one friendships in which the student being interviewed did not know the name of someone he or she called a friend, this category also included feelings of friendship that occur in situations where the participants were not truly meeting new friends. Hartwell State College’s campus includes various locations where students encountered each other for academic or social reasons, and students who frequented these sites discussed them while discussing their social lives, even though they may not necessarily have formed lasting friendships there. Meghan, for example, said that there was not a building on campus that she could not enter and at least recognize someone, and she said this with a great deal of satisfaction. Her wide range of friends, even lower-level friends, clearly gave her a sense of belonging and familiarity with the college.

Participants also mentioned that they enjoyed working in the labs on campus, which provided a feeling of being part of a group without the existence of formal groups. A mathematics lab and tutoring facility in particular was mentioned frequently. This was a room that houses math tutors as well as just space to work, and was often filled with individuals and small groups working together or side-by-side. There seemed to be a feeling of camaraderie, that even though the students may all be working different problems they were all working on math
and were therefore in it together. “So you’ll notice the same people in the Math Lab . . . all friends and all talking, helping each other,” Faith described it. Richard spoke of his enjoyment of watching students doing various types of math, from learning support math all the way to complicated physics problems involving math. Even though those working in such close proximity may not have known each others’ names, they still derived a feeling of friendship from the communal experience.

**Territorial and temporal limits of the friendship.** These friendships were necessarily limited in scope. While students may have recognized each other out of class, they did not interact outside of class, other than perhaps to say hello as described below. In addition, these friendships were not long-term relationships, and generally ended when the semester ended. “When they leave here, nobody talks to each other,” Richard said of this type of friends. These friendships may have extended past the semester in terms of students casually saying hello or nodding to each other the next semester, but not in terms of ongoing contact at a more meaningful level. “I did have some friends . . . that I did not know previously,” Mike said. “I can’t remember any of their names right now.” These friendships did not extend past the boundaries of the class in which Mike encountered them, even to the extent of his being able to remember their names. This differentiated the friendships from other types of friendships that ended when class ended, because these friendships were not even strong enough to generate lasting memories of names.

**Greeting behaviors.** Mike termed these friends, “what’s up kind of people,” because that was how he would greet them, by saying “What’s up!” when he passed them in the hallway or saw them in class. A student might have said hello to the people around him or her when sitting down to begin class, or even outside of class if a face was recognized, but that was the
limit of the greeting. Lisa described one such friend by saying, “I can’t remember her name now. It was last semester. But, I would sit and talk to her a little bit before class.” Kevin noted that even these friendships can contribute to camaraderie among students, though, when he said, “I’ve never done anything more than say hello, but because I say hello, every time I see them they say hello.”

**How the friendship started.** These friendships start in class, due to proximity of desks or forced group work. Friendships at this level may also just start from students nodding or saying hello to other students who look vaguely familiar. Kevin was one student who has met, or at least encountered, large numbers of students through spending time in a variety of social settings on campus. “Just walking to this interview, I passed about 20 people in the cafeteria who know who I am, but I’ve never hung out with them,” he said, demonstrating the idea that students may know large groups of people by sight yet not really know their names or personalities, or have spent any sort of quality time with them.

**Potential future of the friendship.** Participants had few thoughts on the potential future of their relationships with Friends Whose Names are Unknown and provided little data about this idea. These friendships, unless students encounter their same seatmates later and strike up conversation, were necessarily limited in terms of their future potential. By definition, there was no real future potential for the friendship to extend past the class, unless students meet each other again in another class or in another setting such as a student organization meeting. Mike was pretty sure that if he “saw them again [he] would remember their names.” At this point, the friendship might develop into a higher level friendship, or the extremely casual nature of the friendship might continue.
**Academic, social, and emotional benefits.** Even these casual, almost nonexistent friendships had some benefits to students. Working together in class may have increased student knowledge or skill level. Lolly, for example, found sympathy for her fear of mathematics from a woman sitting near her in class, although the friendship did not extend beyond that. In addition, simply recognizing someone to say hello to, or being recognized and greeted by others, gave students a feeling of camaraderie. Kevin was one excellent example of this; he clearly derived some satisfaction just from having people to greet as he walked down the hall. This was evident from the expression on his face and the tone of his voice as he described the number of people (the “twenty people who know who I am” that he passed in the cafeteria area who greeted him). Kevin clearly derived some social benefit just from these greetings, although he did not indicate that he expected these friendships to ever deepen into more serious friendships.

**In-Class Friends**

The category of In-Class Friends described those friendships that developed in an academic class but that did not extend past the time students spent together in class. These relationships arose because students had class together and perhaps sat near each other in class. Friendships at this level did not extend outside of the time of class and perhaps associated study or group work time. The friendships took place at the location of the class and associated study time and ended with the academic term.

Rhonda described In-Class Friends when she said, “They’re more on-campus friends because I just see them going into the classrooms.” Dale helped coin the term In-Class Friendships when he described his relationship with another student as “not a major friendship, just a class friendship. . . a friend in the class.”
**Familiarity.** In-Class Friends knew each other better than Friends Whose Names Are Unknown. Students knew the names and perhaps some life details of their In-Class Friends. Additionally, students could always describe these friends more clearly than Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, showing that they had learned at least a little about these friends’ lives. In-class friend relationships were friendly enough for small courtesies like chatting in class. Faith described the difference between In-Class Friendships and friendships that carry over outside of class:

> In Psychology we had group work. . . . You would learn a little bit about their background in classes like that, but normally you just learn about their style of learning. . . . Until you take it to the next level outside of class, you don’t really get to know the person as well.

Relationships that stayed in the classroom were destined to remain lower-level friendships.

**Activities done together.** In-Class Friendships were limited to primarily in-class work, although it was possible that In-Class Friends might also study together or be assigned to group projects that were completed outside of class. The relationship was limited to the context of being classmates, however. Group work provided a major venue for interaction among In-Class Friends, although Lisa noted that this interaction usually ended when the group work ended. “I don’t recall anyone being friends out[side] of group work,” she said.

**Territorial and temporal limits of the friendship.** In-Class Friendships lasted only for the duration of the class. Participants defined these friendships as people they felt close to while the class was going on, but not after the semester was over.

In-Class Friendships take place mainly in the classroom, but they can exist outside of the classroom as well. Dale, for example, recounted meeting up with someone from his
developmental courses to study after class. Mike also described how students may discuss other topics than coursework with their In-Class Friends, even though the friendship itself was based on having class together and would end when the class ended.

Brittany, too, had some close friends in class last semester, but said, “I met a lot of new people this semester. The people I met last semester I don’t even see anymore.” Mike said, “I’ve met so many people that I don’t see when I come back . . . they’re gone . . . a whole new flow of people [is] coming in as well.”

**Greeting behaviors.** Like the lowest level of friendship, Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends were greeted primarily in class. More chatting may occur, though, and of course one of the main differences was that students know the names of their In-Class Friends. Outside of the classroom, though, aside from minimal greetings, these friendships do not play a role in students’ lives. Dale said, “If the friendship stays in the classroom mainly . . . outside of class you say, ‘hi,’ you know, and just go about your business.”

**How the friendship started.** These friendships started in class. Proximity may play a role, as friends get to know each other by sitting near each other or by being put into group assignment teams. Participants who described themselves as outgoing often made friends in class but then found those friendships did not extend past the classroom door. For example, Kevin said,

I kind of stand out in class because I’m loud. . . . I make myself known. If there’s somebody quiet in the classroom I say hello to them. But outside of the classroom, they just get up and grab their books and they leave and then I’ll never see them again.
Maria also finds it easy to meet people in class. If “we don’t have nothing to say, just start saying ‘oh yeah, I like the classes’ . . . or just dumb jokes,” she said. “Sometimes I can’t stop talking!”

In-class meetings seemed to largely depend on proximity. Students often became In-Class Friends with the people who sat near them. “Normally the people that just happen to sit next to you” become your In-Class Friends, said Faith. Small classes made it particularly easy to meet people, Kevin said. One of his classes had only four people in it!

Like other friendships, In-Class Friendships began with introductions and were then built into slightly deeper friendships. Meghan felt tentative about speaking to her classmates at first. After the first few hesitant days, though, Meghan said, “I definitely broadened out . . . I talked to, by the end of that class, I talked to everybody in that class.” Students eventually found their niche in the classroom and decided who in the class to be friends with. As In-Class Friendships developed, students sometimes moved around to sit next to new friends. “She used to sit on the way end of things and now she sits over in the back by me,” said Pam of a friendship she built up during a class.

**Potential future of the friendship.** These friendships ended when the class was over, at the end of the academic term. “There was a girl who sat next to me, she was one of those people that’s extremely close to you until the semester is over,” Kevin said, describing a friendship that seemed close but ended abruptly with the academic term. Richard said that he was not still friends with the people from his original classes, either.

Scheduling and logistical issues often prevent In-Class Friendships from developing into anything more in subsequent semesters. “If we had completely different schedules, and all we had [together] was that class, it usually means, usually they just become a friend, you know, a
friend in the class,” explained Dale. Brittany, too, found that many of her friends from one semester did not carry over to the next, as they had a Monday-Wednesday class schedule while she had a Tuesday-Thursday schedule.

In-Class Friendships could persevere if students find themselves in the same classes again the following semester. “Sometimes we’ll sit together and do our work, like if we’re in the same class now still,” Beth said, when I asked her if any of her friendships from her first semester had carried over into her second semester. This type of re-meeting had the potential to lead to friendships changing from In-Class Friendships to higher-level friendships.

**Academic, social, and emotional benefits.** In-Class Friends could be an important source of academic support, as friends at this level often reminded each other about homework and tests. Beth talked to her friends from class to ensure that she did not “skip or mess up,” she said. Bethany said that proximity increased accountability, because “if they weren’t there, it would be like ‘oh, where were they?’”

In-Class Friends provided support through difficult coursework, as well as a crowd to celebrate or commiserate with. Friendships would “basically start off with me asking them how do you do something or they [would] ask me how to do something . . . like that,” said Dale. Leigh remembers checking out her course grades with a group of classmates. “We did go check out the scores at the end of the semester together. We all passed. We were happy.” Pam quickly became comfortable with a couple of people in her foreign language class and would always pair up with one of them for conversation practice. “I can’t get up in front of people usually,” she explained, so she paired up with people who “knew each other and we would be more comfortable.” She also enjoyed the camaraderie that ensued in her 8:00 a.m. class, where her friends would help keep each other awake. In addition, even though these friendships took
place only in the classroom, outside events were still discussed, and support was sometimes obtained. “I don’t really hang out with a lot of them outside of class,” Mike said of his In-Class Friends, but we still talk about our lives outside of class.”

Brittany said,

I’ve gotten to know people through group work . . . not like really well. Because we don’t meet on the weekends or anything. It’s just mainly in class. . . . I don’t recall anyone being friends . . . out[side] of group work.

Lisa’s friendship was also limited to the duration of the class, although she speaks of it fondly: “She was sitting off on her own and I just said, ‘come over and sit by me.’ So we started talking.”

**Acquaintance Friends**

Acquaintance Friendships, the next highest level of friendship identified, extended outside of the classroom but not too far into the out-of-school lives of participants. Unlike In-Class Friendships, they spilled over into the free-time realm, and certainly included friendly greetings on campus outside of the classroom. These were people that one would greet in the hallway, but not someone with whom participants would spend a great deal of social time. Meghan describes an Acquaintance Friend whom she met in a class by saying, “I don’t see him that often, but when I do, it’s just casual . . . we didn’t become best friends.”

Unlike an In-Class Friend, this level of friendship, although not deep or particularly meaningful, continued after the end of the semester. Participants talked to their Acquaintance Friends more regularly and in more diverse locations than their In-Class Friends, but still did not consider them close friends. “You talk to them on a regular basis and you’re not really close to them, but you talk to them,” explained Rhonda.
Although this study was about friendship, it was important to acknowledge that close friendships were not the goal of every college student at every minute. For some students, Acquaintance Friendships fulfill a need for social interaction without becoming burdensome. Some participants discussed how open or not open they were to new friendships. Maria exemplified the idea of being not very open to new friendships, not from any misanthropy but from a desire to focus on academics:

I don’t have [a] social life because I’m just focused right now on academics, trying to do my academic classes as fast as I can. If we hang out it’s because they help me with homework. . . . Like . . . “Let’s just go eat . . . go hang out at the mall” . . . I’m not like that right now because I want to finish with [my developmental classes].

Similarly, Mike felt that only truly special friends should be allowed into his life, because otherwise they might have distracted him from his schoolwork. “Unless something really stands out about the person . . . especially in a class where I need to excel academically . . . I was focused more on the class itself and me doing well in the class.”

Age and corresponding stage in life also played a role here. Richard, for example, was a nontraditional student and felt that he derived most of his friendship benefits from friends in his personal, off-campus, nonstudent life. He was married, as well, and said that he gets a lot of the nurturing from that relationship that students might seek out from their peers. Of his fellow students, Richard said,

We’re more on an academic and social responsibility relationship, sharing that. Some of the younger students, I consider my friends, in a sense that they were appreciating something in me and I’m also appreciating them, seeing the journey ahead of them.
Some participants felt that other students were not open to forming strong friendships, which resulted in they themselves not forming the kind of deeper relationships they wanted. Kevin said of his younger classmates, “They’re not really looking to make that long-term friend. . . they’re just out of high school. I’ve noticed, in this area at least, most people were very sheltered here.” Lolly also met one person in a class whom she describes as not being “very friendly, very open.” Others noticed that various areas of the student center in particular became the property of various cliques. Brittany described one area as being for “nerds,” and other areas that seated predominantly preppy people and Hispanic/Latino students, respectively. Faith noted that in such a large social arena, cliques were inevitable, since people would gravitate towards others who enjoyed the same things or shared similar experiences, but that cliques in college were not as “profound” as in her high school experience.

**Familiarity.** More familiarity exists among Acquaintance Friends than among friends at the lower two levels of friendship. Relationships here were more formalized than the lower-levels of friendship, in that they existed outside of class and provided a slight social outlet to students. They were also more formal in a different sense, in that they did not possess the relaxed easiness of higher-level friendships. Lolly described this when she said, “[My] acquaintance friend . . . we haven’t really . . . crossed that line yet,” into higher level, more permanent friendships.

**Activities done together.** Acquaintance Friendships extended outside of the classroom and occasionally extended into nonacademic activities. Dale, for example, describes an acquaintance by saying “we would just talk on the campus, not having dinner at his house or anything like that.” This friendship began in class, extended into study sessions, and eventually extended into visiting the campus game room after a study session. Acquaintance Friends
definitely stop and talk to each other outside the classroom. Faith defined her Acquaintance Friends by saying, “We don’t have the same circle of friends, but I consider them, not necessarily a friend but a good associate or acquaintance.”

Club meetings also provided space for Acquaintance Friends to encounter one another, or for Acquaintance Friendships to be formed. “Some of them I’m still not fully friends with,” said Pam of her club. “But I pretty much hang out with them and talk and we watch anime and eat pizza, so it’s cool.” Bethany said that the free food at many club meetings encourages people who do not know each other well to interact. “Pizza starts so many conversations . . . pizza and parking. . . . If there’s pizza there’s a conversation,” she laughed. Likewise, campus events sponsored by clubs offered friends at this level fodder for conversations. When asked if events on campus gave her the chance to develop friendships, Beth said, “Yes, and it’s even brought up new things, new topics to talk about with them.”

Acquaintance Friends also took advantage of social networking sites like Facebook. Rhonda said that as soon as she meets someone and has a good conversation with them, she asks them to add her as a friend on Facebook. This was a way to decide what friendships will develop past the acquaintance stage, she said.

You can read what they’re interested in and then you can know if your views and different things were compatible. I mean, if someone is very, very right wing, and they don’t believe in any of the same things I believe in, don’t even like the same artists’ music, I’m like, “be realistic,” because really we’re not going to be that close.

**Territorial and temporal limits of the friendship.** Interestingly, participants described these friends as people they may not have even wanted to see all that often. This did not seem to be a negative thing, but rather an acknowledgement that sometimes some people were interesting
to talk to, but that did not make them into people with whom one would want to spend a lot of
time. Acquaintance friendships did not always have the strict territorial and temporal limits of
lower-level friendships. For example, they sometimes continued beyond the end of a term or
outside of a given class, and they may not have even developed inside a classroom at all.

**Greeting behaviors.** Again, friends at this level did not limit their greetings to inside the
classroom. One participant defined these friends as “People you say ‘hey’ to in the hallway, but
not “let’s go hang out.” “I won’t even speak to them other than to say hello, if I’m passing, you
know, that kind of thing,” said Lolly. Greetings, then, did not lead to further interaction, but
rather were a matter of courtesy. Faith, for example, said she always greets her Acquaintance
Friends when she sees them at a club meeting or elsewhere. Dale, who described greeting
behaviors for In-Class Friends by saying that one just said ‘hi’ and goes on about one’s business,
contrasted that with how he greets his Acquaintance Friends: “If you’re more involved with them
outside the classroom you might stop and talk, you know, something like that.”

**How the friendship started.** Again, these friendships were not limited to having begun
in a classroom. Their origins vary, and often include in-class meetings and student organization
meetings. Faith, for example, made several Acquaintance Friendships in various student
organizations. Acquaintance Friendships were often begun through the process of re-meeting, in
which students see the same people in several locations, creating increased familiarity which
may lead to the development of a friendship. Faith said

If you have someone that’s in one class and then you see them in three other classes . . .
I had this one guy the first day of class , I was like, “Are you following me around?”
because we had already had four classes together . . . we ended up sitting beside each
other in two of them . . . and that’s how we became friends, just talking that way.
**Potential future of the friendship.** This was a vaguely-defined area for Acquaintance Friends, with less data supporting students’ ideas about the future of these friendships. It did not appear to be something most participants considered, at least not until I asked them to speculate on the topic. “I might not see them again,” Lolly speculated, showing that because there was no high-level connection, the friendships may easily die out if students stop encountering their Acquaintance Friends. However, they may just as easily persist if students do see each other again. Lolly continued to speculate that she might meet her acquaintance friends in “two to three months in another class.”

**Academic, social, and emotional benefits.** Some students who kept their friendships at the Acquaintance Level may have deprived themselves of a source of support, inadvertently or purposefully. Bethany worried that she might be too open with her new friends, and closed herself off accordingly. “They’re going to get tired of me and they’re going to find someone else,” she said, if she was too much of an “emotional case” in front of them. Richard did not feel like being burdened with other people’s emotions, and was not looking for such high-pressure friendships. Contrastingly, Kevin sought to “offer support” to others without seeking it for himself. “I don’t really want anything from anybody,” he said. Pam described obtaining support from an Acquaintance Friend when she talked about the president of a student organization she joined showing her around campus, so that she could learn “where everything was.”

Mike said that even though relationships with Acquaintance Friends were not close friendships, they still provide important emotional support. We just kind of make a support system. . . . Even though we’re not exactly complete strangers, but it’s not like we know much about each other. We spend so much time together, it seems like, as college students, because most of us were on campus quite a
bit . . . I’ve met a lot of people here that I’m just on a name basis with, but they’ll tell me things that they probably don’t tell their family just because we’re all college students and we’re all here together.

**During-College Friends**

During-College Friends represented higher-level friendships, but still not enduring ones. These friends were school friends; the friendships ended when school ended for one party or the other. Participants described these friendships as temporary and passing. Richard and Lolly both used the word “buddy” to describe this level of friendship. These friendships might also develop as a result of meeting your significant other’s friends, Pam notes. She had friends who she was friends with because they know her boyfriend, not out of any other connection she personally feels with them. These friends were “just friends . . . not a great friendship,” Dale said. Dale predicted he would see this type of friend at class reunions, perhaps, but did not foresee making any effort to keep in touch with them in between such formal events.

**Familiarity.** These friendships were defined as “buddy” relationships. They have an increased level of familiarity over the other types of friendships. Friends at this level knew each other’s habits and abilities, and were comfortable enough with each other to offer gentle criticism. Mike, who considered many of his friendships to be During-College Friendships, related how he told a friend he had failed a test, and she said, “That’s not like you.” These types of conversations did not happen at the lower levels of friendship.

**Activities done together.** Friendships in these categories definitely extended their activities beyond the academic. Social activities entered the picture here, as friends “hung out” together during their college years. Online socializing, mainly through Facebook, was also important here, although more for communication than for getting to know each other. Rhonda
said that was how most of her college friends communicate. “We even sit beside each other with laptops and talk on Facebook. We’ll be sitting in a meeting with each other and we’ll be Facebooking each other or texting each other.”

As was the case with Acquaintance Friendships, During-College Friendships also began and developed in student organizations. Mike said that among his friends on the student activities board, “Mainly it’s talking about upcoming events, or our club, or something, or a different club, or what we’ve got going on outside of school.” He went on to describe a friend’s parent’s illness, and said that developing his friendship with that friend in a student organization helped him be there for her during a difficult time in her life.

**Territorial and temporal limits of the friendship.** These were friendships that ended when one party’s student experience ended. Graduation, transfer to another institution, or simply leaving college may end the friendship. In addition, friends at this level may not speak over semester breaks or at times when they were not enrolled at the college.

However, these friendships were not limited by the physical space of a classroom or even the college. “I’ve seen a difference between friends that I hang out with out of school, and friends that were just school friends. He’s one of those people who were out of school” friends, Bethany said. In addition, During-College Friends have more in common than In-Class Friends, leading to more lasting friendships that do not end the way In-Class Friendships end. During-College Friendships have a strong enough base to overcome territorial and temporal issues, such as having a schedule that puts one friend on campus totally different days from the other friend.

**Greeting behaviors.** During-College Friends were certainly close enough to be greeted both in and out of class.
There’s not a building that I go into that there is not, at least, two or three people that I know and that either I don’t sit there and talk to for a minute or just smile and wave at and say, “Hi!” said Meghan, describing how her friendships from developmental math classes have become more permanent relationships.

**How the friendship started.** These friendships may start in class or in student organizations, or by pursuing common social interests, such as playing pool in the student center. Mike met his During-College Friends through student organizations and in the school’s fitness center:

I know with friendships like everybody I’ve met through [campus governance organizations], a lot of guys that were in the gym and stuff, these were complete strangers that I didn’t know before I started here. I know for a fact I’m going to be friends with those people for a couple of years or more.

Mike did feel, however, that his friendships on campus were only temporary and therefore not as permanent as the ones he would develop in the future. “Once I transfer out and get settled in a university . . . then I feel like I’ll probably reach that level of secure friendship with, probably, numerous amounts of new people.” He did anticipate that if he stayed at Hartwell State College long enough, it could happen there as well, although with his plans to transfer out quickly he believed he would not reach that level of friendship until he arrived at his final institution.

During-College Friends was the first level of friendship out of what I consider to be the three higher levels of friendship. These levels of friendship were marked by increased commitment to the friendship. For friendships to be established at this level requires some kind of foundation for the friendship other than mere proximity. This foundation might range from
enjoying the same activities to having some beliefs in common. Mike, for example, met his
During-College friends in a student organization, while Richard tended to meet his friends in
more academic settings. Different participants defined what they wanted to have in common
with their friends differently, depending on their own likes, dislikes, hobbies, and habits, but the
overall theme was that there had to be some kind of commonality for friendships to be classified
at the higher levels. Lisa mentioned that she wanted her friends to have similar interests, but
more importantly, to have altruistic motivations for the friendship. Describing one friend, she
said, “She doesn’t ask for anything other than friendship in return. That’s why I like her so
much.” Brittany took her cues from the music and fashion tastes of her friends. These were just
a few examples of the types of commonality sought by students as they grew their friendships.

**Potential future of the friendship.** Lisa described a During-College Friendship as “one
of those passing things,” indicating that the friendship did not have the potential to carry on after
college. During-College Friends may imagine themselves reconnecting at reunions or alumni
events, but not maintaining permanent connections. Dale in particular mentioned the idea of
meeting his college friends again at reunions, and his voice and face both indicated satisfaction
with the idea that he would lose touch with some friends but would enjoy catching up and
sharing memories at future encounters.

**Academic, social, and emotional benefits.** At this level, students derived many types of
support from their friends, even though students in these friendships did not expect them to last a
lifetime. Dale said that while his friends haven’t offered him “deep emotion,” they still “calm
his nerves.”
Friends at this level provided much-needed academic support. Participants relied on friends as a checking system. “I need to check with certain people,” said Dale, “I check with certain people every day now” to make sure that he was not missing something important.

One interesting benefit that several participants discussed was the result of becoming friends with their professors. Participants characterized these relationships as During-College Friendships. Participants did not see these relationships as being limited by the classes in which they were enrolled, but neither did they predict that these relationships would persist past their time in college.

During-College Friendships with teachers led to social and emotional benefits for some participants. Kevin spoke of coming back to school and immediately befriending a teacher who, like himself, was going through a divorce. The emotional support Kevin derived from his talks with this teacher contributed to his staying in school. These relationships can enhance students’ academic success through difficult times. “I found that if you communicate with your teachers, especially first thing, and start building relationships with them, they’ll actually . . . be willing to work with you if there’s something going on with you,” said Meghan. Likewise, Maria felt like her teachers really cared about her, which was important to her.

The stories told by Meghan, Kevin, and Maria about how they formed their friendships with teachers and how those continued after class, provided evidence that being friends with teachers was not a temporary state; rather, they believed that these friendships could be categorized as higher-level friendships. Friendships with teachers were categorized just like any other friendship, and they fell into the During-College level of friendship.
Friendships with Lasting Potential

Friendships with Lasting Potential identifies the penultimate level of friendship. These friendships might possibly last past graduation day. One participant defined them as “people who have been in your house but not in your room.” These were friends that students see every day, on purpose. These were developing friendships. They had great potential to grow. For two of the participants, friendships at these levels also represented professional networking. They were friendships that might benefit the participants in the future, not only for personal, social goals but also in their professional lives.

Friendships at this level developed because one party took the time to approach the other and because both parties have chosen to seek out more connection opportunities. They have exchanged phone numbers, for example, said Bethany.

**Familiarity.** Friends at this level enjoy a fairly high level of familiarity, as they may visit each other’s houses or socialize outside the college. Meghan discussed commuting with friends and says, “I generated some lasting relationships.” In addition, these were the friends with whom students hoped or planned to transfer to other universities with, and they foresee friendships continuing past graduation from their current institutions and on into their new lives at their transfer institutions. Rhonda described telling a friend of her transfer plans: “He’s going to see me and you know, still talk to me. I was like, “Well, that’s good. I wouldn’t hope you would just stop talking to me after I left.”

However, Bethany did indicate that these friendships were still more “formal,” in her words than the one remaining higher category, Friends Forever. Brittany described the familiarity level of her friends in this category when she said, “I think we’ll always be friends, probably not as good as friends [as we are now] but we’ll always still, like, have each other’s
backs.” This small uncertainty about the status of the future relationships differentiated Friendships with Lasting Potential from the more certain level of Friends Forever.

**Activities done together.** Two participants, Richard and Kevin, defined the activities carried on between friends at this level as networking, something that would benefit their future professional lives. They enjoyed meeting up with their friends in the student center and through clubs and organizations.

Academics still provide the focus of many friendships at this level. Describing his closer friendships, Kevin said, “Sometimes we go back to somebody’s house, because a lot of people live right near here. We’ll order a pizza or something, watch a movie and study at the same time.” This indicated a closer level of friendship than students who described studying together on campus after class but not extending their friendships to the kind of after-hours socializing and studying Kevin described. Lolly and Brittany also said they studied and socialized at the homes of friends.

Purely social interactions also occurred at this level of friendship. “You’ll play with them, and you’ll go out with them, and talk about things, and get serious about stuff,” Lolly said, in an example of both the activities done with her friends, and, as discussed below, of the social and emotional benefits she derived from such friendships.

Friends at this level also spend a great deal of time communicating with each other, although not necessarily in person. Text messages, Facebook, MySpace, and other cyber-communication methods were all popular among participants for communicating even with the closest of friends. “We text message each other about 85 billion times a day,” laughed Faith.

**Territorial and temporal limits of the friendship.** These were friends that students see every day. Their encounters were not limited to the classroom or other chance meetings. Rather,
friends at this level saw each other purposefully. Leigh, for example, shared how much it improved her day when she came out of class to find her friends waiting for her.

These were friends whose friendship might last past college. They were differentiated from During-College Friends because those relationships were predicted to certainly end with students’ college years, and they were differentiated from Friends Forever, whose friendships were predicted to certainly last past graduation. These friends occupied a level of friendship with the potential, but not the certainty, to last past graduation into the future. The uncertainty of the future of the relationship was part of its definition.

**Greeting behaviors.** Friends at this level always stopped and spoke to each other. At this level, it seems that greeting behaviors were less important and more of a given. After all, most people greet their good friends whenever they see them. At the higher levels of friendship, greeting behaviors become less important and actions taken to maintain the friendship become more important. Seeking out each other’s company, offering emotional support at difficult times, and making sure to spend recreational time together to nurture the friendship were all examples given by participants.

Friends at this level see each other purposefully to enjoy whatever activities or interests they have in common. For most participants, these activities took place on campus, because that was perceived as easier and safer than venturing off-campus. Rhonda felt that the social situation on campus was unique. “It’s easier to hang out on campus and go to the Game Room or just sit around and play in your laptop, or watch a movie in one of the study rooms than it is getting in trouble sitting in some parking lot,” she said. Pam gave examples of activities she and her friends enjoyed. “Sometimes we’ll play cards . . . . Sometime we’ll bring out our guitars
and just sit and play.” Other friends attend on-campus events together and mentioned various
dances, festivals and other activities recently held on the campus.

**How the friendship started.** These friendships, in addition to being conducted
purposefully, also started purposefully. One party approached the other and made the effort to
become friends. Friends may have exchanged contact information during this time. Bethany
talked about her theories about these interactions and friendships with potential to last beyond
the college experience.

I came up with the conclusion that you can always tell when someone is going to be a
school friend [In-Class or During-College Friend] when they walk up to you. When they
walk up to you, you know they are interested in hanging out more . . . if it’s an out-of-
school thing [indicating lasting potential to the friendship], I think, like I said, they’ll
walk up to you, ask for your phone number . . . you can just tell.

This effort made at the beginning signified to Bethany that these friendships had lasting
potential.

These friendships were closer friendships than any other lower levels, and had a higher
level of trust. Some students met these friends through their other friends, meaning that the new
friends came with the old friends’ seal of approval. Of one such friend, Mike said,

My friend . . . introduced him to me. . . . If we both end up . . . going to the same
school later on, I’m sure I’ll still hang out with him. . . . He was friends with [my other
friend] and [my other friend] was friends with me, it was kind of like, already brought
him up to the pretty-good-friend status. . . . That happens a lot.

**Potential future of the friendship.** As the name indicates, friendships at this level had
lasting potential. These were relationships that students hope to see continued after college.
They were still developing, so students were not totally sure that the friendships will last, but they hoped they will.

There were several challenges to long-term friendship discussed by the participants. One was the nature of Hartwell State College, which is primarily a two-year college. “It’s such a short time a lot of people were here,” said Kevin. “A lot of people weren’t looking for” long term friendships, “unless they actually get lucky enough to get transferred to the same college as somebody else,” or, even better, transfer into “the same degree program.”

These friendships may also become what Richard called “long-term professional relationships,” as students continue to encounter each other after college in the working world. For Richard, the teachers at the college were every bit as important as his peers, and provided further networking opportunities. He saw them as friends with lasting potential, perhaps even more so than he saw his peers that way. Students also spoke of teachers’ willingness to engage with them, often naming favorite teachers by name. Meghan said that one of her teachers “still loves her,” indicating that these friendships continue past the class.

**Academic, social, and emotional benefits.** Social support in the form of out-of-class interactions was available from friends at this level, as was greater emotional support than was available at the levels below it. “It’s the ones you see every day,” Lolly said, “the ones you’ll meet up with and have lunch with . . . you’ll go out with them and talk about things and get serious about stuff.”

At this level, the emotional support available from friends was important for participants. For Pam, the existence of her close-knit social group was important, because it does not allow her to “lose touch with everything,” which she believes she was prone to do in times of stress.
Lisa also discussed how her good friends would not let her isolate herself in times of stress, and the emotional support she drew from their companionship at a difficult time.

College was also a chance for some participants to choose their friends, and especially to form relationships with lasting potential, much more deliberately than they have in the past. “I choose not to foster those things that make me feel like I really want to do that again, or start some new thing that I’m really not interested in,” said Richard. For Bethany, college was a chance to start over again. She really hoped that “no one from that school [her high school] would come here, and since I’ve been here I’ve made so many friends.” She also felt her friends were more diverse and also more open to being friends with her, since the college was closer to a city than the school from which she came.

**Friends Forever**

One of the first questions I asked the participants, after asking them to tell me their story of how they came to be in college at the research site, was to define the word friend. Almost every participant said something like, “A friend is someone who is always there for you.” Their answers described the highest level of friendship the final category of friendships, Friends Forever. This category was made up of the most durable friendships made by participants. These friendships were defined as “really good” by participants. They were said to be secure friendships that will last a lifetime. A friend in this category was “someone that loves you and is always going to be there for you no matter what is going on in your life or theirs,” said Faith. Lolly defined these friendships as “blood sisters,” and “best buds.” Maria said, “They support me and I support them too,” when she described her closest friends.

Participants described different kinds of “always being there;” this idea means different things for different students. Actions that these friends might take were important signifiers of
being there; these were friends who would rush back into town for you if you needed them, Lolly and Faith each said. For Bethany, the state of “always being there for you” was emotional, rather than physical; a true friend, she said, accepts you for who you are. Likewise, Pam’s definition of always being there included not having “to worry. You know . . . put on a mask about who you were.” For Brittany, it carried over into action; a true friend would always “stick up for you, hang out with you,” she said. For Meghan, it included being relentlessly truthful. Her example was that a friend who was “there for you” would tell you if you were wearing a terrible outfit.

Familiarity.  Friends at this level were the most familiar with each other. They sometimes described each other as siblings and their relationships as familial. Participants also used the designation “best friends” to describe friendships at this level. A friend in this category was “the one person who will be there for you no matter what.” Pam described her friendship in this category as a big brother/little sister relationship, from which she derives protection and mentorship as well as friendship. These friends were people with whom participants share knowledge of each other’s personal lives and even their secrets.

Activities done together. Activities done together by friends at this level included both academic activities and social activities, and were not necessarily limited to the college setting. Groups of friends sometimes left campus or got together outside of normal school hours. “We eat at the Waffle House every night and just talk,” said Kevin, while Meghan spent time with her good friends shopping and eating off-campus whenever she needed a break from school work. However, Faith did note that even among her best friends, getting together outside of the school day or off campus was difficult, due to varying schedules and family demands.

Territorial and temporal limits of the friendship. These friendships were not limited by time or space. These were the “old friends who would rush into town for you,” or “the one
friend who would be there no matter what,” in the words of participants. The status of “being there” for a friend does not depend on geography; Faith’s best friend lives several hours away from her. Rather, it was a state of knowing the person would drop everything to support you, or to “help you if you needed it,” as Rhonda said. While Friends with Lasting Potential might endure past college, Friends Forever certainly will.

**Greeting behaviors.** As in the During-College Friends and Friends with Lasting Potential categories, these friends were always spoken to. Similarly, the greeting became more of a given and less of a signifier of level; rather, it was the actions taken to demonstrate and maintain the friendship that were now important. Less data existed that described the greeting behaviors of Friends Forever; as I noted under Friendships with Lasting Potential, this may be because greetings at this level are simply expected as part of the friendship, rather than as an important indicator of the level friendship. True indicators of the friendship were found in other behaviors such as providing support, or spending time together online, on the phone, or in person. After all, someone who is “always there for you,” as nearly every participant said, would not be someone whose greeting would be a matter for special consideration or reflection.

**How the friendship started.** Friendships in this category may start anywhere. Participants talked about meeting friends in classes and in student organizations, and also just through encountering each other in the student center or other social location. Faith credited most of her friendships in this category as “starting with the academic basis.” Her friend group was primarily in the same or similar major field as her, so studying together was a natural way to begin the friendship.

These friendships may also be the ones that students carry into college with them, rather than friendships that started in college. For participants in this study, there was not necessarily a
clear line or separateness between friends outside the campus and friends inside the campus, although they did note that often the relationships were different, with different topics being discussed with each group. There were also different levels of comfortability around discussing the college experience; both Leigh and Dale, for example, felt that work friends did not understand the college experience the way their college friends did.

**Potential future of the friendship.** Participants were certain that friendships in this category would carry on far into the future. Mike termed these friendships “secure,” meaning that they were no longer potential life-long friendships, but the real thing. The idea that these friends would be present in one’s life “no matter what,” as Lolly phrased it, was mentioned by many participants. “You know they’re going to be there,” Rhonda said, showing that she believed the future of this type of friendship was not merely a potential future, but a definite one. There was no question in her mind that her Friends Forever would be permanent relationships.

**Academic, social, and emotional benefits.** At the highest level of friendship, friends derived academic, social, and emotional benefits from their relationships. Often, the support derived was difficult to categorize. For example, Faith described being emotionally upset over an academic matter, so she derived both academic and emotional support from a friend who encouraged her to persevere in her studies. Her friends, she said, were “always there. They were very supportive and we motivate each other to do well in school and in life. Those were things [attributes of friendship] that count the most to me.”

Friends were safe people to whom to reveal emotions, said Faith. “You can cry in front of them or over the phone to them and they won’t be like, ‘What the heck were you calling me for?’ ” Friends don’t judge you, said Meghan. “They tell you the truth.” Lisa also obtained a great deal of emotional support from her Friends Forever, and said that without them she would
be “very quiet. It would just be school, work, home, that would be it. I’m bad about doing that. . . They don’t let me . . . They won’t let me curl up” and withdraw from the world.

Students also said that friends at this level were “someone you can talk to.” Human contact was important, said Lolly, “It’s so important just to have contact. I don’t know that I’d do very well on a deserted island by myself.” Lisa remembered her first few months at the college, to which she moved from several states away, and said that a friend was “someone to talk to. That’s a big deal, because the six months I had no one to talk to down here . . . that was pretty tough.” Rhonda said, “Some things you just don’t want your family to hear, or you just don’t want to talk about it in front of your family. You can talk to your friends here . . . You just talk about everything.”

This definition encompassed not only how easy it was to have a conversation with someone, but also the existence of a level of trust, a sense that the conversation will be protected. A friend was “someone that you can talk to about things that were bothering you or good things that happen to you without being at risk of them telling someone else,” explained Faith. Communication was essential, said Maria, and Dale said that being able to trust a friend not to make fun of you was important. Pam said that it was important to be able to be yourself with a friend.

Pam noted that having close friends made her life easier. “Because if I don’t, then I think I would lose touch with everything and then I don’t like that. I really hate it.” In addition to just talking over problems, a good friend helped you solve them, said Beth. Dale elaborated that a Friend Forever would be “someone that’s going to help you if you need it.” From these data, it can be seen that the emotional and social support participants derived from their “close-knit social network,” as Pam described friends at this level, improved their quality of life.
Growth and Development of Friendships

This study indicates that friendships were not static entities, but rather relationships with the ability to grow and change. For example, Lolly called her friendship with a classmate whose name she does not know “a developing friendship.” The interview data support the idea of three stages of friendship: Forming Friendships, Building Friendships, and Maintaining Friendships. Friendships in the different levels described above may also fall into one of these three stages, and decisions students make about building and maintaining friendships affected whether or not their friendships would change categories or whether they would stay static.

The Beginning Stage of Friendship Development

Friendships began for various reasons. For Maria, it was easier to begin friendships in her native language. “At first I just talked with people who speak Spanish,” she said. When she wanted to join a club, she then took her friends with her until she realized that no one in the club meeting was going to make fun of her English pronunciation and grammar. Her friends gave her the courage to not worry about these things. For Kevin, a major friendship began when he became friends with a teacher who, like himself, was going through a divorce. For most students, though, friendships of all levels began in one of two places: in class, or in a student organization.

Class time provided students with a major portion of their friend-making opportunities. Lolly made friends in her math class when the teacher divided up the classes into work groups, and those who sat at her table with her became her acquaintances, particularly one student who “even if he came in late, he would always tap me on the shoulders and say hello to me, that kind of thing.” This “broke the ice” for her in a class that was otherwise overwhelming and difficult. Lisa remembered meeting a friend at the start of the semester: “we started talking in class.”
Classes provided a low-threat way for shy new students to meet people. “Mainly . . . I became friends with people who were within the class, not out of it,” said Beth. Beth felt she could more easily get used to, and talk to, the people in her classes. Brittany met someone who “sat right next to me and she just leaned over and asked me a question.” The “first days were pretty quiet,” said Dale, “but of course after a while you meet some friends.”

Tentative, beginning friendships marked the transition from high school or from previous lives into college. For Maria, college classes put her on an equal footing with her peers. “They don’t call, “yo, yo, yo you’re a freshman or you’re a sophomore,” she said, which for her was different than high school – a pleasant aspect of her transition to college. Lisa remembered one acquaintance last semester when she would “sit and talk to her a little bit before class.” During breaks, Pam said, “we’d walk around and exchange numbers and talk.”

Lolly also started making friends in her math class by talking to people who sat behind and beside her, and discovered they had more in common than just proximity. One of her nearest classmates was also a parent, which has formed a basis for continued friendship. The other two people nearest her were the same age as her children, which has led to lots of funny and enlightening conversations, as they have several times explained her daughter’s behavior to her from their own perspective. Lisa said she found her “niche” in her classes. “We all pretty much sat in the same spot” each time the class met.

The transitory nature of the college lends itself to In-Class or During-College Friendships, said Kevin, but not all friendships that begin in class were doomed to be only In-Class Friendships. Kevin himself has remained friends with several students he met early in the semester or in past semesters. Lisa has one friend from her foreign language class in the current semester who she was hoping will remain a “really good friend.” Mike did enjoy re-meeting the
students from his first learning support math class who coincidentally took the same section of the next higher level of math that he did.

Some participants took classes from teachers who specifically tried to get them to interact. “My teacher actually made us introduce ourselves,” said Bethany. Mike said one of his teachers did seek to “break the ice,” as did one of Maria’s teachers who made the group divide into pairs, interview each other, and then introduce each other to the class. Group work, though it seems to be universally loathed, was also a means by which students in the class got to know each other.

Finally, group work was one way students expanded their social networks past the people they met in class. Faith met some friends through her group project work, and also then met their friends. I termed this method of making friends “meeting through,” and it occurred repeatedly in the stories told by most of the participants. Therefore, friends were important not only in and of themselves, but also because having friends was a good way for participants to forge even more social connections.

Classes in different departments provided participants with different levels of opportunities for interaction and friend-making. Participants reported that a lot of student interaction took place in foreign language classes, due to the need for conversational practice – so the activities in these classes automatically helped students get to know each other better. They noted that classes with less interaction, like some science and math classes, did not provide them with as many opportunities to meet potential friends.

Joining clubs was another main way that participants met their friends. Faith was brought, by a friend, to a club meeting that she did not originally want to attend, and went on to become a leader in that club. “I went and I enjoyed it, and I met so many people working on
different projects . . . That’s the main way to meet people is through clubs.” Mike also was taken to a club meeting by a friend who thought he’d fit in. “Those were probably the first people that I talked to” at college, he said.

The phenomenon of “meeting through” also occurred for students in clubs. Mike was brought to a club meeting by a friend, then met that friend’s boyfriend and their extended social network. Faith met people in school clubs and student organizations. Then, through going to activities with her friends in one group, she met other people in other groups. This happened numerous times, she said, “meeting their friends and then meeting the other person’s friends” and so on, until a large social network was formed. Pam met people through her first college boyfriend. Leigh also met many of her friends through first forming one friendship, and then having that friend introduce her to others at a club meeting.

Clubs provide opportunities for social interactions and for broadening social networks. “It’s just a good place to hang out,” said Leigh of her club. “Since I started the club, I’ve made a lot more friends,” said Richard, who initiated a brand-new club in the past year. “This year I’ve been getting really involved . . . and I’m starting to make a lot of new friends on campus,” said Mike. For Bethany, walking up to people has not always worked for her in terms of generating friendships, so joining a club provided a more substantial connection to other students for her. Meghan felt that her primary friends were the friends she has made through her involvement in student organizations.

Clubs also provided places for students to re-meet people from their classes and elsewhere at the college. “I still hang out with him, we go to anime club together,” said Pam of one friend she met elsewhere. Kevin said his club friendships have extended past the boundaries
of the club as well, offering another kind of re-meeting, one that starts in clubs and reoccurs in the college community.

Sometimes students have to try more than one club before they find their perfect fit. “I tried the anime club,” said Leigh, “but that was just sitting around and not really doing anything. That was boring. I didn’t make any friends.” Rhonda also had to try a couple of political clubs before finding the one that fit her beliefs and viewpoints. Some students tried numerous clubs and found that they all fit. Maria, for example, discussed three or four clubs when describing her involvement.

As in the rest of their lives, participants described various levels of friends in the clubs. “Some of them I’m still not fully friends with,” said Pam of her club. “But I pretty much hang out with them and talk and we watch anime and eat pizza, so it’s cool.” Rhonda found, she said, “a close-knit little family” in her club. Participants joined clubs to find students who feel an affinity for the same culture they do, who enjoy the same entertainment they do, and who enjoy similar tasks and projects. Even when the friendships developed were not terribly close, they were still fed by common interests, meaning that they were somewhat closer than In-Class or Acquaintance Friends.

Clubs also modeled society for some participants. By joining and creating clubs, Richard said he has created for himself “more of a real-life community” in which he and other students practiced the skills they needed to be professionals. They were able to try new ideas in managing their clubs, and to risk failure in a safe environment.

Joining clubs had a positive effect on many of the female participants in particular. Meghan’s involvement taught her that she can “make the difference. That I can, that my voice does matter.” Being her club’s representative to club fairs at student orientation sessions has
made Leigh a more outgoing person, she said. “You have to introduce yourself to brand new people coming into the school, and it has made it so much easier” to interact with people.

For a few of the participants, friendships began very early on in their college careers. “After the first week we became friends,” said Beth. Additionally, personal information may be divulged quite early on, leading to friendships forming. Meghan, for example, became friends with someone who told her that he shared a learning disability with her, which they were then able to both bond over and to offer each other academic help.

For many other participants, however, friendships did not occur quickly, and their first weeks or even months on campus were lonely. Some students felt they had not yet begun enough friendships, or remembered feeling that way. Lolly was extremely frustrated in one class when no one would engage in conversation with her, and Bethany said, “I actually feel like I need to make more friends. I feel that I haven’t met enough people or experienced enough things . . . I know there were things out there . . . I can join, I can do.” The difficulties in the social transition to college experienced by those who do not form large friendship groups right away was discussed more fully below in the Social Transitions to College section.

Friendships may be organized around various impetuses. Dale suggests that “what we like to do in our free time” may provide common ground for friendships to begin, and believes that finding that initial common ground was necessary for a friendship to start. Pam was more specific, and said that if she saw someone drawing (an activity she also enjoyed), that gave her the push she needed to walk up and introduce herself. Academic experiences also spurred friendships. Faith first met people when she worked with a group on a project for a class. Friendships also started when people realized they went to high schools that may have interacted. Maria, for example, found common ground for a conversation with someone when they realized
they went to rival high schools and could discuss athletic competitions. Lisa found it easier to talk to people who approach her once they figured out what they have in common.

Social cues also indicated that someone may be a good friend, said participants. Brittany said that how someone was dressed may give her clues to their personality or let her know she has something in common with the person – for example if they were wearing a t-shirt from a band she likes, that has encouraged her to start up a conversation. Rhonda also felt that someone’s dress would let her know if they were a potential friend or not, based on if they seemed to have anything in common with her (quotes on shirts from books she had read, or the names of bands she liked) or not (students dressed in athletic fan gear did not suggest themselves to her as friends). Brittany also looked for evidence of a sense of humor in potential friends’ comments. Lisa offered the advice, “Just find someone who looks interesting and start talking to them.” Interestingly, Leigh said that she initially judged all her friends wrong, though, and was now friends with people she would not have anticipated, and warns against too much judging from social surface clues.

Participants felt that someone just had to reach out a little to form friendships. “It’s been, if you just see someone and you just smile at them or nod your head or be like hi or just say good morning . . . that’s how a relationship” starts, said Faith. This can also happen in class from the introductory activities teachers conduct, such as making everyone introduce themselves to the class, and other opening-day activities. Leigh favors a little more aggressive approach, and was never afraid to approach someone new and introduce them to her friends, and Lisa said the same thing. At club meetings, her approach was to “plop down” beside a shy-seeming person and talk to them. It was the more outgoing people who Lisa finds intimidating. Megan has started friendships when she sees people who look lonely and approaches them. Bethany tells about
how she finally got up the courage to tell someone she wanted to be their friend, with a positive outcome. Mike said that finding friends was easier in college than in high school; he feels more comfortable initiating conversations now. Participants noted that while this doesn’t always work, the experience can still be positive. If someone doesn’t want to be friends, Rhonda said, “they’ll tell me . . . ‘I don’t really want to talk.’ I’ll be like ‘oh, that’s cool.’ But there’s always a chance you can make a new friend!”

Participants also met through simple proximity. Beth met people whom she sat next to in class because she knew she could bring up topics like the class homework and have something in common automatically. Other participants also mentioned this. Meghan has a good friend who she met because the girl sat beside her in class and looked lonely.

Students also meet at random when they begin talking. She was “in the cafeteria just sitting and he just randomly came up and talked to me,” said Pam of one friend with whom she became quite close. Going the same direction on the sidewalk was also how you meet people, said Dale. If you were often going in the same direction or to the same place as others, conversations became easier to start.

Nevertheless, starting friendships can take courage. “I would never just walk up to a big group of people that I had never seen in my life and be like ‘hey!’ That would be very awkward for me,” said Faith. Dale said that asking academic questions of a potential friend was a way to break the ice, as was asking to play next on a video game in the student center’s recreational facility. The customs and culture of the video-gaming area at the college demand that someone who asks to play be allowed in, so this provided a structured way for him to meet people with whom he shared a common interest.
It was important to note that students do not instantly decide what level of friendship a new relationship will become. Rather, students realized that after they first made a friend, there would be progress. “The friendship proceeded from there,” said Faith, indicating an awareness of growth, of process. Dale talked about how a friendship of his grew, saying the person would “start getting friendlier and friendlier eventually, you know. Eventually over time we became friends.” His language indicated an awareness of becoming, not just instantly being, friends. Brittany described the process as “growing our relationship.” Classifying friends, then, was a more reflective process rather than a planning process. Therefore, the second stage of friendship growth and development was the building stage, in which friendships develop into one level or another.

**The Building Stage of Friendship Development**

Participants realized that building friendships was a necessary phase because it let them become more fully themselves in front of their friends. “Once you get to know me, I don’t shut up,” laughs Lisa. Similarly, Bethany describes getting more comfortable with her new friends, until she could “do crazy things and all they’re going to do is laugh at me. Not laugh at, but more, laugh with.” Faith said that building a friendship involves “personal learning about their different stories” and said “until you take it to outside of class you don’t really get to know the person as well.” Likewise, Dale said that conversations that start in class may begin to take place outside of class, until they discovered that they “liked the same things, so we started talking about those things” as a friendship of his developed.

Brittany built friendships because of re-meeting the same people. “We would just start meeting from there and walking to classes together. Eventually started hanging out together after school.” Dale built some friendships as a result of meeting through, an idea explored under
“beginning stages of friendships.” Bethany also said that it was important to have memories with friends, to be able to say “Remember that time?” That helped develop friendships, too.

Building friendships, or getting to know friends better, was not without its pitfalls. Bethany discussed a time when she went to a friend’s Bible study and was appalled to find out what her acquaintance truly believed about religion; her beliefs were very different from Bethany’s own and had led the friend into what Bethany considered a risky romantic relationship. “That just kind of made me take a step backward and say, ‘Do I really want this type of person in my life?’” she said. Lolly was not sure if her friendships will enter the building stage. “I would like to form a closer bond [with someone she has recently met],” she said. “But I’m OK. If I don’t, I’m okay with it because I do have a lot of friends anyway.”

During the building phase, friendships were classified. Some classifications of friendships naturally end once a class or academic term ends. However, higher-level friendships, the During-College Friends, Friends with Lasting Potential, and Friends Forever, must be maintained. This indicates the existence of a third phase of friendship development, which focused on maintaining friendships.

**The Maintenance Stage of Friendship Development**

Maintaining friendships that have been begun and built up was the third stage of friendship growth and development, and it was a challenge for participants. Maintaining can refer to keeping friendships going during college and after students transfer to other schools or graduate.

Maintaining friendships was challenging in such a transitory environment as a two-year college. Faith foresaw most of her friends leaving her behind, as they will be ready to transfer or graduate before she will. “Most of them were actually leaving this year. I’m hanging around
another year and only one of my really close group of friends was actually staying . . . .

Everyone is leaving . . . it’s kind of sad.” Although Mike enjoyed his current friends, he also foresaw them leaving the college before he will. “They’re going to graduate and I’ll probably be here another semester,” he predicted. Although he was anxious not to use this as an “excuse” it was clear that he did not see the friendships continuing past the time when his friends would depart Hartwell State College.

Some students were successfully maintaining friendships. “For the most part, the friends that I have now, were from that first semester,” said Kevin, while Meghan said of her first semester, “I guess you could say that I generated some lasting relationships.” Brittany, too, has managed to keep one friendship going; as she said, “It drifted along and never stopped.” Maria has also kept in touch with some friends, despite their current lack of classes together. Leigh’s “first friend” she made at the college was now her “best friend.” Kevin described college as a rare time for networking and building friendships, because he anticipates that once he gets out into the real world, it will be “too competitive,” he said. “Here, everyone needs you . . . I think networking in school is probably the most important thing you could ever do.”

Friendships that were built up in a class were hard to maintain once the class was over, although many participants certainly tried to maintain ties. When asked about her current relationship with some friends from a previous semester, Beth said, “Don’t see ‘em as much, although we’re still close, and we actually don’t talk about anything other, most of the time, than classwork.” Although she was maintaining some ties, the relationship seemed limited. Faith, although she had a close core group of friends, also had developed some friendships she initially thought would be In-Class Friendships during her first semester at college. Later, a few of these
friendships developed into During-College Friends. Faith was still connected to about four of the original group of In-Class Friends this way.

Rhonda also saw her old friends slipping away, although she worked to keep up the relationships.

I did, up until this semester. I don’t see the other girl anymore. I think she might have left school. . . . Then the other girl I talked to who was in one of my music classes, she moved to California. I still talk to her sometimes, but it’s not as often.

Rhonda said that she was leaving the college herself after the term in which our interview took place, and she was happy that at least one of her friends had already committed to staying in touch.

It was sometimes easier to maintain friendships that participants brought with them to college. Dale, for example, anticipated that he would still see some of his college friends because they were his friends even before college. Meghan also still had friends from her life before college, although she said, “I love meeting new people.”

Some participants, while not anticipating that they would necessarily see their college friends after college, anticipated the memories they were making. “It may end up being that I remember their expertise at school and then draw on that pleasure. It may be like that,” said Richard. Dale referred to his college years as time when he was “making memories,” while Mike predicted that once he gets to his final college, he will create some lasting relationships.

Brittany said of one friendship that was currently being maintained, “So I guess, it’s like, you know, drifted along and never stopped.” It seemed that this friendship was happening to Brittany, rather than her doing anything on purpose to maintain it. This lack of worry was characteristic of many participants. Students who have kept their friendships going were happy
about it, and students with close friends do not look forward to those friends graduating or moving on. Students who did not keep their friends from first semester, though, did not seem too worried about it – they were not upset, but rather foresaw new friendships occurring in their current and future classes.

**Transition to College**

College students’ friendships, and their process of classifying friends into levels, also affected their transition to college. The transition to college was both academic and social. The presence of friends eased both types of transition, while the absence of friends may have made these transitions more difficult. This section examines both aspects of the transition to college and how it was affected by students’ experiences with friendships.

**Academic Transitions to College**

The academic work of college proved challenging to some participants. Faith talked about spending hours trying to get the right answer on a computer homework problem only to discover that a tiny rounding error resulted in her calculation being dismissed by the computer program. Lolly talked about getting questions wrong on a test and said “it made me feel about that tall,” while Pam recounted a math class in which she felt she could not keep up. The type of class students took also contributed to difficulties or discouragement; Meghan’s hybrid class was very difficult for her, particularly settling down to the discipline of the online portion of the class. “It’s sometimes hard for me to make myself say, alright, you’re going to sit down and do this . . . it was [a] difficult pass.”

Some students’ difficulties stemmed from changing teachers – for example, Meghan’s Math 099 (the second level of developmental math) teacher was very different from her Math 097 (the first level of developmental math) teacher, leading her to feel discouraged. “I don’t feel
that I’m learning as adequately as I was in math 097. . . . The homework is completely different. . . . I’m a little confused sometimes about where I’m even supposed to start.” For Leigh, though, getting a different teacher her second time through a learning support class she had failed made all the difference in the world, and she happily shared with me that she earned a B in the class, which she considers to be a highly satisfactory outcome.

For academically underprepared students, looking forward to a challenging academic experience was especially daunting. Leigh found college to be “intimidating” at first, since she had not done well in high school. Kevin, quite far away from his high school days in terms of his age, worried that his “brain wasn’t working as well as it did back then” and that he would not be able to keep up with other students. Dale felt some apprehension about starting classes because he had read about his professors on a website that said they gave difficult tests.

Adjusting to college expectations, another aspect of the academic transition to college, was also a source of discouragement and difficulty for students. Many found that college classes were much harder than they had expected, with tests ranging over a large amount of material that was presented much differently than in high school. Lolly’s first semester was characterized by “just . . . meeting the teachers and learning how to deal with the teachers and learning what they were expecting from us.” Leigh said her transition to college felt “like hitting a brick wall.”

On his first day in Math 099, Richard encountered a diagnostic math test that would verify that students were placed in the correct level of developmental math. Although he passed the test, indicating he should remain in Math 099, Richard actually asked to be moved down to Math 097 after realizing he was uncomfortable with much of the material on the diagnostic test. “The very first day was a bit of a shock,” he said. Lolly had the same experience, and said “I
was a little lonely, a little scared. I was in the wrong math class and . . . I couldn’t even do the work. . . . I was already one class behind . . . people just weren’t friendly.”

For other students, the transition to college was compounded by a feeling of being in the wrong place, academically. Hartwell State College was not everyone’s first choice of school. Brittany admitted to being waitlisted at her first-choice school and that she chose to attend Hartwell State College because she’d heard “the classes were really easy.” To her, it seemed like a good way to earn a good GPA and increase her chances of being admitted to her first-choice school a year later as a transfer student. Dale did not want to be in a learning support class and felt uncomfortable being there, although he also eventually realized he needed to be there.

Different points throughout the first semester also proved challenging for students. The first test of the semester was a point at which students started to feel discouraged or realized they were having difficulties. Dale said, “You start getting the first test and all that, a little different story!” Lolly said, “The first test was horrible in both [of my] classes!” Other participants struggled with self-discipline throughout the semester, having difficulty recovering from early mistakes. Mike said that in high school, he’d never had to be disciplined, so in college repeated this behavior, skipping classes. In college, however, his grade suffered for it. Leigh, too, had to tell herself to “just buckle down and do better.”

Transition issues did not only arise when the student first arrives on campus or even only during the first semester. Participants who had been attending Hartwell State College for over a year also had their own transitions, as they had seen the school’s enrollment grow by over 10% in that time. “Now when you walk through the hallways you get bumped into walls!” said Rhonda. They had also undergone transitions themselves, changing majors and career paths. Kevin started out as a pre-med major and was, at the time of our interview, a film/media studies
major who hoped to “earn a Ph. D., to teach at a college level.” Students leaving learning support classes and entering the college-level curriculum also experienced a transition. “Work is thrown at me!” Bethany said, describing her first day in a nondevelopmental course. That day, she thought, “Oh, wow, this is different.”

**Social Transitions to College**

In addition to transitioning to a more challenging academic environment, coming to college also meant starting over socially. This transition was daunting for participants, yet the literature shows that negotiating it successfully is every bit as important for college student success as was the academic transition (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, the support received from friends during this transition was particularly important.

“Scared” was one general word students used to describe their feelings upon starting college. Meghan was scared of what people would think of her. Maria was scared in general, particularly that students would laugh at her accent and her ESL status. Like Maria, Pam also told her mother she was scared to come to college, scared that she would not make any friends. Most of the participants reported feeling generally uncomfortable at some point during the transition to college.

The social transition was challenging for a variety of reasons. The first reason was students’ apprehension about the college experience. Participants listed a variety of emotions when asked to think back to their first day and week at the college. “I was nervous and excited,” said Brittany. Lolly worried, “I didn’t know what to do to make friends with people . . . Plus I’m 42 and they’re, what, 18, 19, 20 at most?” Rhonda, too, worried more about the social aspect of her transition to college than about her academic transition, convinced she was going to be “stuffed in a locker,” which seemed to be related to an urban legend from her high school days.
The logistics of getting to and around campus also worried students. Pam was worried about walking to school from her apartment, since she did not have a car. Finding their way around once they were on campus was also a source of stress. Mike approached the campus with a map; Rhonda got lost.

Hesitant was another word that describes how students feel about starting college. Faith said it took her “a month and a half before [she] joined clubs or started study groups or anything. I really didn’t have any friends at all.” Because of this, she did not want to go into the student center food court area at all. This was a bad cycle to get into, since students reported that they often met and spent time with friends in this location. Students who felt hesitant risked depriving themselves of the chance to meet people, which would have, in turn, helped them feel less hesitant. Dale described his hesitant approaches to joining in activities in the game room. “Usually I’ll watch them for a little bit, watch them play, and they have their friends with them... I’ll watch for a bit if no one is showing any signs of leaving. Usually, they’ve been very nice.”

Many students had difficulty making friends, at least initially. Faith reported that she did not really have any friends for the first six weeks of the semester and went home every day complaining to her husband that she had no friends. Lisa attended the college because she moved to the area for family reasons; unlike most of the participants who grew up near Hartwell State College, she was transitioning to an entirely new environment at home and at school, and having to make an entirely new set of friends. Students’ first encounters with peers also helped frame their feelings about starting school, and in some cases led to negative feelings. Pam encountered several “preppie” students and was convinced she’d never find people with whom she had anything in common.
Even later in the semester, after the first-day-of-school jitters, some everyday interactions continued to make students feel uncomfortable. Meghan looked back on a day when she tried to get her class woken up in the morning, and squirmed a little as she told the story. “I walked in the other morning, the teacher hadn’t gotten in there yet . . . I was like “Good morning everybody!” [yelled and waved arms]. . . . Everybody just looks at me, like ‘Weirdo!’”

To remedy this lack of friends, students began to employ the social tactics that characterize the beginning stages of friendship. Mike said that he would make friends by talking about the past – positioning himself and his new acquaintances by asking where they went to high school, where they’re from, did they play sports.

However, making friends was not a “quick fix” for all the participants. Obtaining the social support that students need to stop feeling uncomfortable sometimes took a while. “The first week, you’re shy, you don’t talk to people,” said Beth. Bethany wondered, “How do you walk up to people in an activity and be like, I’m lonely, let’s hang out?” She had a hard time initiating social situations. “That was kind of intimidating, meeting new people,” reflected Brittany. Bethany remembered being very lonely at the beginning of the school year and calling her boyfriend or her mother “crying. I was so alone.”

Scheduling and logistical issues also affect participants’ social participation in college events. Bethany talks about being on campus at a time none of her friends were there, and wanting to join in a large carnival event. She felt uncomfortable participating without friends, though, so she did not join in this annual school tradition.

Finally, it is important to remember that not only were students transitioning into a new social environment; they were also transitioning out of their old social environment. They maintained ties to home, to varying degrees. Mike was still friends with his cross country team,
while Dale said he has a few friends from high school. “I don’t see [them] very often, but still know them, I still talk to them, just not as much as I used to,” he said, indicating that these relationships were also undergoing a transition. Beth felt that she had lost her friends from high school, though.

**Resolving Transition Issues: Feeling More Positive**

Students employed various techniques to deal with their academic and social transition issues, and these actions resulted in their feeling more positive about their college experiences. The academic transition to college has been positive for some participants. “It’s nothing like high school, it’s actually better,” said Beth. “You actually learn something.” Maria said, “I come to college and make many friends . . . I’ve been growing and learning and having friends, and that’s why I think it’s the best experience, being in college.” Dale enjoyed the freedom to create his own schedule, to have free time other than at lunchtime, which he said was the only time he could call his own in high school.

Many classes also provoked positive responses from students. Meghan, for example, enjoyed her art class so much she began to consider becoming a graphic designer. Foreign language classes also received positive comments from Meghan, Leigh, Lisa and Pam. Richard spoke highly of his math class and his math professor, who proved to be a professional role model and a friend as well. Kevin found his professors to be available as well, and this contributed to his positive feelings about his college experience. Leigh, who was worried about a class she expected to be difficult, soon found out that she was capable of doing the work. She found herself having a good time and said the teacher was “very nice.” Mike and Dale both initially had negative experiences regarding their placement into learning support classes, but came to believe that was where they belonged. “If they didn’t have that system [of placing
students in developmental classes], then kids like me, I don’t know where we would start,” said Mike.

Some positive feelings about the academic transition seem to come from the increased self-efficacy that college demanded. Mike mentioned how much he enjoyed the feeling that this was his responsibility. Similarly, Lolly said, “I was excited because even though I have to take math and stuff, this is it, this is my decision and I’m going to do it this time.”

The social and academic experiences resulting from these classes were positive factors in students’ adjustment to college. Mike said, “I was kind of shy in my first classes, but then I realized . . . especially in college . . . you’re going to have to make friends, especially in the harder classes, just to get by.” In-class friendships, or longer-lasting friendships that start in class, improved the college experience. “It’s gone nowhere but up since I’ve started talking to people in my classes,” said Mike. Pam said that after she “met a couple of people in [class] . . . I knew people, I had . . . connections.” Maria’s coursework continued to get more difficult as she moved into courses in her major, but she said, “I have my friends here so we can help each other. The college is the greatest experience of my life.”

Faith discussed how much her friends motivated her to stay in school, even when she felt that she would never accomplish her goals. When she felt that “I won’t be able to do this, I just need to quit school and go back to doing what I was doing before, they were like ‘no, you’re not quitting, you can do this.’” Pam thought that without her friends, she would have long since dropped out of college. Mike also said that college would be “a lot harder” without his friends, and that he would not enjoy it as much. Since, as he pointed out, college was not mandatory but a choice, his friends have made making that choice [to stay in school] easier.
Friends also made college a more stable experience, which may contribute to persistence. “Everybody here has no idea what’s going to happen next semester, this semester. The only thing they have to rely on, or to latch onto, is friends they make in the beginning,” said Kevin. Friendship, he said, “can be your lifeline to continue.” Friends provided positive competition, he thinks, pushing you on to do better and better. Additionally, he said, they provided accountability, someone who would call you if you didn’t show up for a study group, for example. Mike termed this “an academic emotional support system” and said that when he felt better he “perform[ed] better in school, academically.”

In addition to just improving the whole overall college experience, friends offered specific academic help as well. “They’ll be able to explain it much better than the book,” said Leigh, particularly friends who have had the same classes she was currently enrolled in. This kind of ad hoc tutoring was important. Faith mentioned it when discussing the diversity of her friend group, saying that what she cannot do, one of her friends probably can teach her how to do. Rhonda’s friend would message her for help with her homework and they would meet up and work on it together.

Friends helped you achieve academic success, some participants said, by being motivating and encouraging. “They were very supportive and we motivate each other to do well in school and in life.” For Faith, this was inextricably related to her friends being there for her. The support of her friends was not just an emotional benefit but an academic necessity as well. Mike also said his friends boost his self-esteem, while Maria’s friends keep her encouraged on a difficult journey through college.

For others, it was the social transition outside the classroom that ultimately ended up being a positive experience. “I didn’t have any friends in high school,” said Leigh, “so this was
good, coming here.” For Meghan, college means starting over, with people who do not know about her seemingly troubled past. The idea of a fresh start was attractive to her. Faith also said, “There were people from everywhere, you were forced to break outside your box and meet new people.” For Pam, college was a time to meet people who enjoy her somewhat esoteric hobbies, which was a nice change from high school for her.

The same students who had so many social misgivings and fears at the beginning of their college careers also reported positive aspects of their current social lives. “I’ve made a lot of friends. People here were cool,” said Brittany. Bethany added, “I don’t feel like I have to prove myself to anyone, they just accept me.” Leigh reflected, when speaking of her initial fears, “I’ve gotten around that, I’m doing fine now.” Bethany has also gotten over some social anxieties. “When I went to that other school, I thought it was me, I thought I had a problem, but I don’t think [that] anymore. . . . This school has helped me feel better.”

For Mike, coming to college was laced with positive feelings in addition to his apprehension. “It was intimidating, but I was excited for something different. . . . I was just happy to have made it this far at that point in time.” Coming to college was a time to grow socially. Meghan spoke of learning to forgive and forget, “getting to know people . . . opening yourself up to new things and realizing that these people weren’t smarter than you.” To Lisa, coming to college meant “actually start[ing] to talk to people.”

College life itself provides positive feelings for some students. Mike said, “The first year I enjoyed being here just because it was so vastly different from high school. . . . I really enjoyed that, like the first year of just getting used to college life itself.” Meghan said,
There was a point last semester, me and my friends were taking pictures, and I ended up labeling it [the file] “the true college experience” because it was like, when you’re 13, that’s what you would expect, and that’s what it is, and it’s awesome. Meghan was finally having the college experience she’d dreamed of as a young teenager.

Rhonda and Leigh both spoke highly of their college experience. “It’s a great school,” said Leigh. “I enjoy it more than high school,” said Rhonda. For Leigh, liking the school was connected to her achievement of academic success. “The next semester [after her first] I managed to get off academic probation,” she said. Bethany said that she has been talking to a friend in high school about how much better college was and encouraging him to look forward to it.

As students become more socially adapted, they find college easier to manage, even when academic difficulties present themselves. “I’m getting better as it goes along,” said Leigh. “You have to learn to adapt and you have to learn to deal with different situations,” said Faith. Additionally, Leigh posits that having friends makes you feel more positive about the college in general. Clearly, both inside and outside the classroom, social interactions were key to students’ transition to college.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand academically-underprepared college students’ social connection strategies: the formation and content of their friendships, the effect of their social interactions on their college experiences, and how they utilize their social connections to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs. Grounded theory analysis revealed that college students make meaning of their social connections by categorizing friendships into levels. Each level was defined by the degree of familiarity experienced by
friends at that level, the activities in which friends at each level engaged, the territorial and
temporal limitations of the friendship, the greeting behaviors expected at that level of friendship,
how the friendship started, and the potential future of the friendship. Additionally, each level of
friendship was characterized by the types of academic, social, and emotional support derived
from friends at that level.

This process of categorizing friendships into levels was also affected by the growth and
development stages of friendship shown by the data in this study. Whether or not friendships
progress through these three stages helps determine into which of the six levels of friendship the
relationship may eventually be categorized. The growth and development of friendships was
both an active and a passive process. Decisions students make about building and maintaining
friendship also affect how far through the three stages friendships were allowed to progress.
However, friendship growth and development were also affected by things outside the control of
individual students, such as the scheduling and logistical issues that students reported had such a
large effect on their friendships.

Participants’ friendships at every level affected their transition to college. As students
entered college, they experienced both academic and social transitions. The academic transition
was characterized by students’ experiences of academic difficulty, while the social transition was
characterized by students feeling uncomfortable. Both sets of transition issues were remedied as
students began to feel more positive about their academic and social experiences, a shift in
feeling that was partially brought about by the presence of friends. The academic, social, and
emotional support they received from friends was important to students as they navigated their
transitions into and through the college experience.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the social connection strategies of academically underprepared college students. The study addressed several research questions including how academically underprepared college students described the formation and content of their social interactions in college, how they described the effects of their social interactions on their college experiences, and how they utilized those social connections to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs.

The previous chapter discussed the findings of this study, describing the friendships of academically underprepared college students, how they made meaning of those relationships, and how their social connections helped them in their academic and social transitions to college. This chapter will discuss those findings in relationship to current theory and research about college students, their friendships, and their academic and social transition to college. It also includes a discussion of this study’s implications for current student affairs practice and suggestions for future research on this topic.

This qualitative study included fifteen participants, each of whom participated in an interview and had the opportunity to review both a transcript of that interview and, later, a summary of my findings. I analyzed the data from the interviews using grounded theory methods, including open, focused, axial, and theoretical coding, and generated a model of college student social connection strategies that included six levels of friendship defined by various attributes. The process of categorizing friends into levels, and the levels of friendship present in participants’ lives, affected how their friendships grew and developed, and also affected their transition to college.
The six levels of friendship present in students’ lives included Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, Acquaintance Friends, During-College Friends, Friendships with Lasting Potential, and Friends Forever. These levels of friendship were characterized by the amount of familiarity present in the relationships, activities done with friends at each level, the territorial and temporal limits of the friendship, the greeting behaviors expected at each level, how the friendship began, and the potential future for the friendship.

Friendships between college students progressed (or did not progress, depending on the level of the friendship) through three stages: the beginning stage, the building stage, and the maintenance stage. Lower-level friendships, including Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, and Acquaintance Friends, did not progress through the building stage to the maintaining stage, instead stalling out somewhere during the building stage. Higher-level friendships, including During-College Friends, Friendships with Lasting Potential, and Friends Forever, progressed through all three stages of friendship growth and development.

Additionally, friendships at each level affected students’ transition to college. Students experienced both academic and social transitions. Academic transitions included adjusting to higher expectations in college, dealing with college coursework and tests, and feeling discouraged. Social transitions centered largely upon feeling uncomfortable in a new setting and the need to make new friends. Developing friendships helped participants address both sets of issues. Friends were able to provide academic support, ranging from information to tutoring, and social support in the form of new friendships that helped students feel less uncomfortable. Both areas of support also contributed to meeting students’ needs for emotional support, as their emotional support needs largely reflected their academic and social issues.
Researchers and practitioners should be aware of the limitations of this study. First, the study participants were primarily Caucasian, meaning that their experiences may differ from members of other racial and ethnic groups. Readers should therefore hesitate before assuming that the experiences of participants mirror those of their own students. Second, the study took place at an access institution, one that was specifically designed to offer developmental education as well as high-quality coursework that prepares students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Readers should consider the environment in which this study took place before generalizing to their own students. Third, this study used a specific definition of academically underprepared, which was based on placement test scores. Students may also be underprepared for college in a variety of other ways, such as socially, or have satisfactory test scores yet still deal with adjustment issues when faced with college-level work. Because the study limits the definition of unpreparedness, the viewpoints of students who passed their college placement tests but who still do not feel prepared for college may be overlooked. Finally, I did have a connection with some students due to my own position at the research site, where my work involves me in student life and social programming. I did not seek out participants whom I knew, but several participants were nonetheless familiar to me through their participation in clubs and organizations and their jobs in the building in which I work.

In the traditions of qualitative research, I have taken care to address issues of trustworthiness and authenticity, leaving the reader able to choose his or her own level of transferability. Steps taken to address potential issues of trustworthiness and authenticity include member checking, the use of rich description, quotations from participants, and an audit trail. Additionally, the rigorous data analysis methods demanded by grounded theory enhance the trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of this study.
This research provides important information useful for scholars and practitioners who study or work with academically underprepared college students. Practitioners at similar institutions who work with underprepared students may find that this study enhances their understanding of their students. Scholars may find that this study contributes to the current literature about academically underprepared college students and provides an agenda for future research.

**Discussion of the Findings**

This chapter links the findings of this study with the theoretical underpinnings and existing literature regarding academically underprepared college students. The results of this study both relate to existing literature and explore new territory in the understanding of college students’ friendships and transition issues.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are four major theories regarding student development and academic success. Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss the importance of interpersonal relationships to student development, and posit that being able to develop mature interpersonal relationships is a competency that can be enhanced by the college experience. Astin (1993) held that peer group interaction was the single-most important determining factor in college student success. Tinto’s (1993) work on student retention showed that isolation and nonintegration with a peer group was a major factor in students’ decisions to withdraw from school. Finally, Kegan (1994) discussed the process of developing a view of oneself as part of a larger community, the ability to perceive the external world as subject rather than object, and form relationships while also understanding individual identity. These developmental tasks are all likely to be undertaken by college students in their attempts to form and make meaning of their friendships, and offer readers various ways to understand the friendship classification.
system, friendship growth and development, and the academic and social transition issues experienced by participants.

In addition to existing theories and models about college students’ interpersonal relationships, Chapter Two of this study offers a substantial overview of current knowledge about academically underprepared college students. Research has identified demographic predictor factors, the usefulness of various types of interventions that may be proposed for academically underprepared college students, coping mechanisms employed by students during the transition to college and at other times of academic or social difficulty, the importance of social factors in the transition to college and to academic outcomes, and the importance of college students’ expectations for themselves and of their estimation of their own ability.

**Categorizing Friendships into Levels**

This study showed that students made meaning out of their friendships through a complex system of classifying them into levels. There were six levels of friendship (Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, Acquaintance Friends, During-College Friends, Friendships with Lasting Potential, and Friends Forever), each characterized by the amount of familiarity present in the relationships, activities done with friends at each level, the territorial and temporal limits of the friendship, the greeting behaviors expected at each level, how the friendship began, and the potential future for the friendship. Although this system of classification was unique to this study, the findings of the study relate to and are supported by other current literature in the field, and provide a new way of understanding college student friendships that was firmly grounded in existing knowledge.

Students discussed managing their friendships, which consisted of dealing with issues of friendship formation, growth, and development. As their friendships developed, students
recognized that some had to be left behind, whether at the end of an academic term or, looking ahead, to when the student leaves college in the future. Additionally, students made decisions about how close to allow their friendships to grow, choosing to keep some friends as merely Acquaintance Friends, for example, while others developed into higher-level friendships. Students also alluded to managing issues of conflict with their friends. Thus, students were managing their interpersonal relationships, as Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggest is an important task during the college years.

Some levels of friendship were examples of true peer groups; others were not. Only the higher levels of friendship truly generate a peer group that fits Astin’s (1993) definition of an individual’s peer group in terms of reciprocal relationships: the student must be considered an equal to those in their potential peer group and desire acceptance and approval from the group. The lower-level friend group would not make up a true peer group, based on the limited or nonexistent amount of acceptance and approval the student seeks from Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, and Acquaintance Friends. Students described differences among the three higher levels of friendship. Some friendships were destined to end with college, some had lasting potential, and some were certain to last a lifetime, supporting Astin’s idea of levels of closeness in the peer group.

This study demonstrated that even lower-level friendships were important to students, even if these friendships did not make up a Peer Group as defined by Astin (1993). Mike and Rhonda in particular said that simply sharing the college experience meant that students have something in common and could therefore share information, feelings, and experiences that were not shared with outsiders such as family members. More importantly, participants derived
support from simply being with fellow students, indicating that support benefits were not merely available from higher-level friendships but from lower-level friendships as well.

Some participants generated the idea of categorizing friends into levels themselves, while some did not reflect upon it until prompted. No one disagreed with the idea that there were different kinds of friends, but the way in which they developed the idea (prompted or unprompted) relates to Kegan’s orders of consciousness. Students who were able to assign roles to their friends, especially when prompted, or to discuss unprompted the characteristics of their friendships, exemplified Kegan’s (1994) third order of consciousness. Generating, unprompted, a series of roles and relationships in which one positions oneself, was a fourth-order task. Only in the fourth order of consciousness would students have the “relationship to their relationships” (Kegan, 1994, p. 97) necessary for this process of categorization to be totally conscious and purposeful. Third-order thinkers are able to describe their relationships; fourth-order thinkers are able to consciously make sense of their relationships through describing the categorization system. Students who remain in the third order of consciousness, an entirely appropriate developmental place for college students, may lack the complexity of understanding to generate such categories entirely on their own and to position themselves within those categories (Kegan, 1994), even when those categories undoubtedly exist.

In addition, students described their friendships mainly as things that happened to them, rather than things they intentionally created. Relationships “drifted along,” for example, to become higher-level friends; students did not, for the most part, recount efforts made to maintain friendships. Rather, a spirit of “what will be, will be,” prevailed. This may be characteristic of second- and third-order thinking among students. Because the friendships are subject, not object (Kegan, 1994), students view them as beyond their control. Additionally, this attitude towards
friendships reveals that students are dealing with the developmental task of Forming Mature Interpersonal Relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students who “are” their relationships, as Kegan would define them, are still working on balancing their separation with and connection to others. Because they are so intensely defined by their peer relationships, they view these relationships as something happening to them, not something in which they play an active role (Kegan, 1994). Students who “have” relationships, in Kegan’s parlance, are more able to balance this separation and connection and have made more progress in Chickering and Reisser’s developmental vector. To these students, relationships are another aspect of life to be managed and participated in, rather than something imposed upon them by forces they cannot control.

The Three Stages of Friendship Growth and Development

This study found that college students’ friendships progressed through three stages of development: Beginning, Building, and Maintenance. Lower-level friendships, including Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, and Acquaintance Friends, do not progress through the Building stage to the Maintenance stage. Higher-level friendships, including During-College Friends, Friends with Lasting Potential, and Friends Forever, do progress through the Maintenance stage.

The first stage was the Beginning stage, in which students meet, re-meet, and get to know each other. This took place in class or in student organizations, and during this time students decided how far each friendship was going to progress. If the only thing the friends had in common was being in the same class, friendships may never have left this first stage. Instead, they were classified as Friends Whose Names Are Unknown, In-Class Friends, or Acquaintance Friends. If students found other commonalities, friendships may have proceeded to the Building
stage, at which point they were categorized as During-College, Friends with Lasting Potential, or Friends Forever friendships. In order to do this, during the Building stage, students found out more about each other, explored shared interests, and just enjoyed the blossoming friendships.

The idea that friendships grow and develop based on the degree of commonalities found by the friends was supported in the literature. Astin (1993) considers that the student’s peer group must be equal to the student, and that the student seeks approval and acceptance from that peer group. This idea relates, as noted above, to the existence of the levels of friendship, but it also relates to how higher-level friendships develop. Additionally, the more students have in common with their peer group, the stronger the influence of that peer group over the students in it (Astin, 1993). Therefore, as commonalities are discovered, students may decide that certain friendships are higher-level than others.

Commonalities may also be important for other reasons. Students may make friends, as did Maria in this study, with those with whom they share language or other cultural bonds. This was consistent with the idea that ethnic minority students must identify on-campus individuals with whom they can form a family-style bond in order to succeed (Padilla, et al., 1997).

The third stage of friendship development was the Maintenance stage. Here, maintaining a friendship was a choice. In this stage, students may also find themselves reflecting about how to maintain their individuality within the continuing friendship. This was consistent with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) assertion that part of developing mature interpersonal relationships was to develop the ability to maintain individuality while also being part of a group.

The Relationship between Friendship and Academic Success in College

The classification system discussed in this study does more than explain levels of friendship. It also explains the academic, social, and emotional support available to students at
each level of friendship. This support helped students manage the academic transitions of coming to college and helped them achieve academic success while in college. The findings of this study support the interdependence of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993). For participants, developing their relationships with their peer group, particularly developing higher-level friendships, influenced their academic success in college. This section of the report will examine various academic transition issues for students and how the development of friendships helped students manage those issues.

Students in this study entered college with a variety of fears, apprehensions, and pre-existing ideas of their own academic abilities. Many feared they would not be able to handle college-level work, and some had been invalidated as learners during high school. Maria’s moving stories of feeling marginalized in high school due to her status as an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner certainly exemplified this, as did Mike’s story of his high school years, in which he was directed into the state’s Tech Prep diploma program instead of the College Preparatory program. This study supports the existing literature that asserts many academically underprepared college students have been invalidated as learners during high school (Terenzini, et al., 1994).

Students often credited their friends with their own academic success. Friends, particularly higher-level friends, offered motivation and encouragement through difficult classes and assignments. Participants took advantage of their social support networks, which help individuals confront such difficult situations (Phinney & Haas, 2003). The validation and reassurance of academic ability offered by participants’ friends in the present study have been shown in other studies to be important to college students, especially those whose previous interactions with others have devalued them as learners (Terenzini, et al., 1994; Zhao, 1999).
Students in this study also credited their lower-level friendships with their academic persistence. In addition to the support and encouragement offered by close friends, participants also sought encouragement from those they knew less well. Simply visiting the mathematics lab, the tutoring center, or utilizing other academically focused space on campus also allowed students to feel supported by others, even if they did not know the names of anyone else in the room with them. Participants credited the social benefits of such helping locations in addition to the actual tutoring or other help provided; seeking out such academic help is known to affect student success in college (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Additionally, students in this study all developed a sense of belonging to at least one sub-community of the larger college community, which Tinto (1993) suggests is necessary for persistence.

Students who utilized the mathematics lab, for example, did not need to form close friendships there in order to feel that they were members of the community. Simply feeling that membership was important to their academic success, which is supported by Tinto’s idea that membership in, not total integration into, the college community was enough to influence academic success. Membership, Tinto wrote, “allows for greater diversity of participation,” (p. 106), certainly important at a two-year, commuter access institution in which students have varying needs and demands on their time.

Membership in student clubs was another way in which social activities may pay off academically. Students in this study indicated that clubs were important to their social transition, and such membership has been shown to be related to increases in critical thinking skills (Bauer & Liang, 2003). Student friendships have a positive influence on academic progress (Knight, 1994); interaction between students was also an important predictor of eventual academic persistence, perhaps the ultimate measure of student success in college (Astin, 1993) so it makes
sense that students who had academically focused interactions with their peers found those to be helpful.

Diversity may also play a role in student success. A few participants noted that having a diverse group of friends increased the likelihood that friends could help each other with difficult assignments and contribute knowledge not held by other members of the group. In Astin’s (1993) study, socializing with members of a different racial or ethnic group than one’s own did have a correlation, although not a strong one, with self-reported growth in subject-matter expertise, so students’ assertions that their diverse friends have enhanced their learning experience have been borne out in formal studies. Additionally, students in this study discussed their appreciation for their diverse friends, a subtask in Chickering and Reisser’s vector, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships.

This study found that students gained some knowledge of academic rules and policies at the college from each other, although not to the degree that I initially expected to find. Students shared information about faculty members, testing policies, required classes, and transfer information. This relates to the findings of Padilla, et al., (1997) that students must acquire informal, practical knowledge in order to succeed in college. However, participants did not identify other students as their major sources of information for matters of academic policy and practice to the degree I had expected based on the findings of Padilla, et al. Many participants said they only depended on their peers somewhat for information about academic rules and policies. Instead, they depended on their friends much more as sources of academic knowledge. They described their study sessions and ad hoc tutoring arrangements with friends who were proficient in areas where participants themselves were weak. These informal academic interventions parallel the more formal academic interventions such as supplementary instruction,
tutoring centers, and peer advising that have been demonstrated to positively affect academically underprepared college students (Cruce, et al., 2006).

Additionally, these cooperative learning strategies allow students to validate each other as learners. Participants all devoted significant amounts of time during their interviews to discussing the importance of cooperative learning. Higher-level friends studied together, offering each other subject-matter expertise as well as motivation and encouragement. Even lower-level friends were important to cooperative learning experiences, as students in classes shared notes, helped each other work problems, and held each other accountable for absences or sleeping in class. Such cooperative learning strategies are often employed by academically at-risk students so that they can assist each other while validating each other as learners (Terenzini, et al., 1994).

Faculty who encouraged formal collaborative learning were also discussed. Students held widely varying opinions about forced group work, although many told positive stories of enduring friendships and learning that occurred during group work. Existing literature shows that classes that encourage collaborative learning positively affect student development (Cruce, et al., 2006), which was borne out by this study.

Some participants also found their friendships with teachers to be important. A few students merely felt that the teachers at Hartwell State College cared about them in a general way. Other students developed relatively close friendships with faculty members; these friendships were mostly classified as During-College Friendships because they extended past the semester’s class in which they began. Richard predicted that his friendship with one of his major division faculty members would last past graduation, that it was a Friendship with Lasting Potential, as they would eventually become colleagues in their common field. All these views
are consistent with Astin’s (2003) findings that after the peer group, an institution’s faculty held the most influence over students. It makes sense that a group considered to be influential with students would yield prized relationships, and for the students in this study who had friendships with teachers, these relationships were indeed prized.

Participants felt that their faculty valued them and helped them transition to college, confirming the importance of these relationships. Participants discussed both formal and informal interactions with their teachers. They valued both types of interaction; both formal and informal interactions are major factors in student integration into the college community as well as potentially improving academic performance (Tinto, 1993). It has been shown that students who interacted with faculty held their own academic abilities in higher esteem than students who did not interact with faculty (Astin, 1993) and had greater critical thinking abilities (Bauer & Liang, 2003), so participants in this study were correct to seek out and value interactions with their faculty.

While participants considered friendships with peers and with teachers to be important, many were also concerned with relationships off campus. Nontraditional students with partners or families, for example, drew more sustenance and nurturing from these relationships and said that off-campus relationships were very important to them. Other students in the study maintained relationships with work friends or high school friends as well. The fact that academically underprepared college students in this study valued these relationships is consistent with existing research. According to Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) model, finding appropriate distance from while still maintaining close relationships with people from previous stages of life is entirely appropriate for college students. However, this should not be used to undervalue the importance of on-campus relationships even on a commuter campus. Tinto (1993) found that
even at two-year colleges, friendships and other relationships on campus were still important factors in student retention and were even more important for traditional-aged students considered to be at-risk. It is important to encourage students with existing off-campus support structures to remember to develop on-campus support structures as well.

Participants did not discuss the type of academic transitions described by Kegan (1994). Kegan’s discussion of academic transition is mainly occupied with the expectation of fourth-order thinking at colleges and universities populated by second- and third-order undergraduate thinkers, and the challenge of helping students move to higher orders of thinking. Because many of the participants were still enrolled in developmental education or had just finished their developmental coursework and moved on to the very lowest levels of actual college-level coursework, they did not seem to be grappling with the kinds of transitions Kegan describes. Rather, their academic transitions were made up of learning to handle the amount of work that they faced, rather than the content of the work or the structure of the thinking expected of them in college.

Finally, demographic issues also played a role in students’ academic transitions. In this study, socioeconomic status was the demographic characteristic most often discussed by the participants. Socioeconomic status and other financial concerns were a factor in why they chose to attend college at Hartwell State College as well as a factor in their friendships and the activities in which they engaged. Ethnic minority first-generation college students face many challenges when coming to campus, including financial burdens that often require them to work in addition to attending college (Phinney and Haas, 2003). This was true for Maria in this study, but also for many Caucasian participants as well. This probably reflects the socioeconomic
makeup of Hartwell State College, rather than offering any insight into any unique needs of either Hispanic or Caucasian students in the study.

**The Relationship between Friendship and Social Transitions in College**

Because the classification system discussed in this study explains the social and emotional benefits of friendship at each level of friendship, it also helps explain how students’ social connections help them manage the social transitions involved in entering college and in managing social relationships while in college. All of the participants discussed their social transition to college and credited the social support they received in college with contributing to both their academic success and their successful social transition to college. This is consistent with Tinto’s (1993) assertion that supportive communities reduce the stress of any transition. Participants received social support and developed social networks both in class and in student organizations.

Participants, despite having experienced academic difficulty and transition issues, were notably satisfied with their college experience. This may be related to the presence of social support that they all described in their lives (Weir & Okun, 1989), and the presence of their social networks may also be credited with how well adjusted socially the participants were (Zea, Jarama, & Bianchi, 1996). Even when students reported not having many friends, they asserted that it was their choice not to form close relationships in order to focus on academics, demonstrating the internal locus of control found to be important to students’ academic success (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004).

Several participants discussed the importance of clubs and organizations in their social transitions to college. While students who discussed this were both male and female, the literature shows that becoming involved in nonacademic pursuits that develop self-confidence
may be particularly important for women. Meghan, Maria, and Faith are all excellent examples of this in this study. For all three women, student organizations were a place to make social connections and to feel more comfortable in the college environment. Taking on leadership roles was important to all three women as well, as they learned to use their voices in college. Meghan, Maria, and Faith are particularly good examples of the idea that women’s development is significantly affected by the degree to which women find their individual voices (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).

It may be of some concern to practitioners who read this study to find that students had difficulty forming social relationships at first and often reported periods of loneliness at the beginning of college. They also reported that their social difficulties eased as they found friends, and that they became, for the most part, much more comfortable at college after they found friends. Tinto (1993) asserted that forming social relationships may be a necessary precursor to academic achievement, and his work cites numerous studies that show that students at two-year and commuter colleges generally relate their social connections to their academic success.

The need for attachment may not be so pronounced for nontraditional students. Older students in the study sometimes reported that developing friendships on campus was not so important for them; their other relationships, such as with spouses and families, provided them with the same benefits more traditional-aged students derived from friendships. This is to be expected and is consistent with other research findings that external groups sometimes offer nontraditional students the encouragement to succeed in college that traditional-aged students are more likely to derive from their on-campus social group. Feeling socially integrated into college social networks is more important for younger students than for their nontraditional-aged classmates (Tinto, 1993). Nontraditional students in the study sometimes perceived the
As discussed above, having diverse friends was academically helpful to some students. For even more students, though, having a diverse group of friends was also for social reasons. Having diverse friends contributed to students’ nonacademic growth; as students gained knowledge of diverse cultures and backgrounds, they gained understanding that they felt would benefit them in the future. Increasing one’s ability to form relationships across cultural boundaries is an important part of managing interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Additionally, having diverse friends can also be thought of as belonging to a number of different communities, defined by age groups, racial or ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, or interest groups. Students who created diverse friend groups were, whether they knew it or not, increasing their chances for academic success and completing important developmental tasks as well as creating an interesting social life for themselves. Having a feeling of belonging to multiple communities is linked to academic success and to having one’s social needs fulfilled (Tinto, 1993). Decreasing one’s ethnocentrism and forming relationships with a diverse friends group are also related to developing empathy, wrote Chickering and Reisser (1993).

**Implications for Practice**

In addition to adding to the existing body of knowledge about academically underprepared college students, this study has several implications for student affairs practice. Student affairs practitioners who work with academically underprepared college students may
utilize these findings as they seek to understand their students and help them to be more successful.

First, practitioners whose job it is to enhance the social experience of college students would do well to remember how most of the friendships described in this study began: through proximity. Practitioners can purposefully create such proximity by offering students more chances to encounter each other and spend time together, particularly at the beginning of the academic year, when students in this study reported being the loneliest. Quick attachment to a social group at the beginning of a student’s college years is important to retention (Tinto, 1993). This is particularly true for traditional-aged college students and also for minorities for whom affiliating with ethnic affinity groups may make the world of college smaller and more manageable (Padilla, et al., 1997; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, interventions designed to help students form friendships with supportive peers at the beginning of the academic year may be particularly appropriate.

One way to increase students’ proximity with theirs peer groups is to offer as many students as possible the chance to join student organizations. Ensuring that information about existing students is widely distributed through club and organization fairs and that the process for creating new student organizations is not overly arduous may be ways that practitioners can encourage students to experience proximity with one another. In addition, providing a diverse range of social programming for students to experience may also offer students increased chances to meet, and re-meet, other students and to develop friendships. Practitioners may also use this research to make decisions about physical spaces in which students encounter each other. For example, creating smaller spaces within large student centers where students can meet and arranging furniture to make conversation easier are ways in which practitioners can make it
easier for students to experience proximity. Practitioners may also use this research as evidence in their requests for funding for such student organizations, social programs, facilities, and other programs that offer students the chance to get to know others on campus.

Second, practitioners should keep in mind the importance of diverse friends to students’ social and academic transitions. Programs that enhance students’ understanding of diverse cultures are important; perhaps even more important are programs that encourage students of diverse races, ethnicities, genders, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds to encounter each other and begin to form friendships. Offering such programs both early in students’ first semester on campus and encouraging students to participate in such programs throughout their college years may enhance both their transition to college and their ongoing academic success.

Third, practitioners can use this information to help students make sense of their social relationships. Knowing the importance of peer relationships to academically underprepared college students’ academic and social transitions, practitioners can encourage students to spend time and energy developing these relationships. Also, knowing both the importance of forming peer relationships at the beginning of the student’s college career (Tinto, 1993) and that participants reported difficulties forming those relationships right away, practitioners may be encouraged by this study to create programs and advocate for learning situations that encourage the development of relationships at the beginning of each school term.

Additionally, practitioners can then encourage students to reflect on those relationships to increase their self-awareness and awareness of others. Whether in one-on-one consultations with student leaders, discussions with larger student groups, or during programmatic interventions, encouraging students to think about their relationships with others may enhance their academic and social success. Encouraging students to engage in reflection about their social connections
may bring about increased personal development as described by Chickering and Reisser (1993),
increase their likelihood of academic success as described by Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993), and
help encourage the higher-order thinking described by Kegan (1994).

For example, this study indicates that two-year institutions may lend themselves to
students’ establishing temporary, lower-level friendships. The transitory nature of the college
also affects the nature of students’ friendships. Students enter and leave the college quickly,
graduating, transferring, or simply disappearing back into private lives that demand they drop out
of college, at least temporarily. Students’ scheduled days on campus change with every
semester, meaning students who encounter their friends every day they come to campus one
semester may find themselves the next semester coming to campus on an entirely different set of
days than their friends. Friendships may wane in the face of such scheduling and logistical
issues. Encouraging students to keep up those friendships and providing social programming
that draws students to campus may help students develop the crucial social support that will
increase their likelihood of academic success.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers a rich picture of how academically underprepared college students’
friendships affect their lives, particularly in the area of academic and social transition, and of
how students develop those friendships and make meaning of them by categorizing them into
levels. These findings offer several opportunities for future research.

First, the present research focused on students at an access institution, a primarily two-
year college with some four-year programs, with admissions standards that are lower than state
universities and with developmental education programs that are designed to help less prepared
students achieve parity with their counterparts at other schools. It would be interesting to repeat
this study with academically underprepared students at other schools that are not access institutions to see if those students also make meaning of friendship through the same complex categorization system found in this study, if friendships among these students grow and develop along similar lines to students in this study, and if friendships provide the same assistance with academic and social transition issues for the new population. To carry out such a study would also mean finding a new definition of academically underprepared, since institutions in the same system as the research site that are not access institutions do not offer developmental coursework. Failing grades in introductory coursework such as freshman-level English or mathematics classes could provide one such indicator.

Second, the research could be repeated at Hartwell State College or at similar institutions with students who are not classified as academically underprepared, to see if these students’ friends contributed to their academic transition or provided social support in the same way as described by the academically underprepared students in this study. This research could also show if students who are not academically underprepared make meaning of their friendships through a similar categorization system as described in this study.

Third, future research could address a limitation of this study, its predominantly Caucasian sample. This research should be repeated with a more ethnically diverse sample or with a number of other samples made up of students from different ethnic backgrounds. For example, it could be repeated with a series of samples, each made up entirely of African American, Hispanic, or Asian students. Interpreting these results in light of current knowledge about differences in transition issues and coping mechanisms between ethnic groups could shed light on the needs of diverse students in terms of academic and social support and transition
issues. Additionally, it would be interesting to see if the friendship classification system
described in this study holds true with more ethnically diverse samples.

Finally, this study described both a classification system for friendships and a series of
stages through which friendships grow and develop. This study also notes that lower-level
friendships do not progress through these stages, while higher-level friendships do. It would be
interesting research, and would expand understanding of college student friendships, to pursue
more detailed research that considers whether friendships may change levels, and how the stages
of friendship growth and development affect that. For example, research questions might
examine the conditions under which lower-level friendships might become “upgraded” to higher
level friendships. Since higher-level friendships demonstrate increased academic and social
support and transition benefits, understanding how to help students “upgrade” their friendships
might have great significance for practitioners who seek to help students adjust to college.

Conclusion

This study puts forth a grounded theory regarding friendships among academically
underprepared college students. After interviewing fifteen such students and analyzing the
interview data according to grounded theory methods, I developed a model of how students
make meaning of their friendships through a complex system of categorization. The model also
includes how those friendships grow and develop, and how they affect students’ academic and
social transitions to college. Practitioners can use this information to help students make
meaning, at increasingly complex levels, of their friendships, and to encourage the growth and
development of friendships among students. Future research directions should focus on
including more diverse samples, repeating the research at other institutions, and repeating the
research with academically better-prepared students to see if the friendship classification system,
the stages of friendship development, and the helpfulness of friendships in academic and social transitions hold true among other populations, and on expanding and exploring the present theory.
REFERENCES


Students' Worldviews and Identities into the Learning Process. (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 82, pp. 5-14.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.


Nashville, TN: Author.


APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

The following text was posted on Hartwell State College’s Intranet Noticeboard and emailed to faculty who teach developmental coursework or advise clubs and organizations:

“I am conducting research, for my dissertation, into social connection strategies for students who are or who have been enrolled in Learning Support classes. I am searching for students who have been enrolled in the college both last semester and the current semester and who are willing to spend an hour with me being interviewed about their college experiences and friendships here. Each student who participates will receive a $10.00 gift card from a gas station near the College. If you interact with students who might be interested in participating in this study, please have them contact me at cray@gsc.edu or 678-717-3899 (my direct line). If you have classes or club meetings where you think it would be appropriate to announce this study, I would appreciate that as well.”
LIKE TO TALK?

WANT TO HELP A PHD STUDENT?

DO YOU FIT THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA?

Have you been enrolled at GSC for 2 or more semesters, counting this one? Did you test into Learning Support Classes?

If so, you may be qualified to participate.

What would you have to do?
Participate in a 1-hour interview about your college experience, particularly about your friendships and how you’ve connected to others
Review a transcript of the interview
Review a summary of my conclusions and offer any comments

How long would this take?
About two hours total

And what do I get?
$10 Gift Card to the GSC Bookstore or Gas Station of your choice!

HOW DO I JOIN IN?

Call Cara Ray in the Office of Student Life at 678-717-3899 (direct line)
or email cray@gsc.edu.
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Main questions are numbered; possible probe questions are lettered under each main question.

1. Tell me about how you go about getting to know people here at college.
2. If you are interested in getting to know someone, how do you approach that?
3. Tell me about your social life here at college.
   a. What activities do you do with friends?
   b. Where do friends hang out here?
4. Tell me about the first real friendship you made here at college.
   a. Where did you meet the person?
   b. How did the friendship start?
   c. How long have you been friends?
5. What do you talk about with your friends here?
   a. i.e. social, academic, emotional issues re Research Question 3
6. Think about your friendships with people who aren’t in school here. How are they different or similar to your friendships here?
7. Would you say you depend on friends at school for anything? What or how?
8. Tell me about a time your friends supported you here at college.
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in a research study titled *Social Connection Strategies of Underprepared College Students*, which is being conducted by Cara Ray, Department of Education, Counseling, and Human Development at the University of Georgia, Phone number 404-272-0542, under the direction of Dr. Richard Mullendore, Department of Education, Counseling, and Human Development at the University of Georgia, Phone number 706-542-6478. My participation is voluntary; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have information related to me or that can be identified as mine returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed. Up to 16 participants will be sought for this study. All participants must be 18 years of age or older.

**REASON/PURPOSE FOR THE STUDY**
The purpose of this study is to examine the formation, content, and effect of social interactions for academically underprepared college students.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION**
The benefits that I may expect from participating in this study are:
- Better understanding of my own friendships and experiences at college

This study also benefits society in that it may enable higher education professionals to better understand and facilitate social relationships between students.

**INCENTIVES**
- Participants who complete the interview will receive a $10.00 gift certificate to either the college bookstore or a nearby gas station, whichever you prefer.

**PROCEDURES**
If I agree to participate in the study, I will be asked to do the following things:
- Complete an interview about my friendships in college. This audiotaped interview will last about one hour and will take place at a time and location agreeable to the researcher and to me.
- Review a transcript of my interview and offer further thoughts or clarifications, or corrections, as needed. This will take about thirty minutes.

**DISCOMFORTS OR STRESS**
Minimal or no discomfort or stress can be anticipated as a result of participating in this study. However, if at any time I feel discomfort or stress, I can take a break or stop participating without penalty. At any time I may refuse to answer any question that makes me uncomfortable.

**RISKS**
No risks are expected.
CONFIDENTIALITY OF THIS STUDY
Participation in this study is confidential. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym in the final report, and no uniquely identifying traits will be revealed. The researcher will keep a list of which pseudonym is assigned to which participant for organizational purposes, and that list will be destroyed when the research is completed. The only person who will know that I am a participant is the researcher. No individually-identifiable information about me will be reported.

Interviews will be audiotaped, and the recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. I understand that I have the right to review the recordings. The researcher will be the only person who has access to the recordings during the study.

FURTHER QUESTIONS
The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at 404-272-0542.

FINAL AGREEMENT AND CONSENT FORM COPY
My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for the study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Cara S. Ray
Name of Researcher Signature Date
Telephone 404-272-0542
Email Cara21@uga.edu

Name of Participant Signature Date

Additional questions or problems regarding my rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone 706-542-3199; Email Address IRB@uga.edu.
APPENDIX E: SAMPLE INITIAL CODING MEMO

This memo summarizes one of the first initial codes I recognized. I called the code, “A friend is someone who is always there.”

One of the first questions I asked participants, after asking them to tell me their story of how they came to be at the college, is to define the word friend. Most participants said something like, “A friend is someone who is always there for you.”

Faith says, “someone that’s always there for you no matter what. I mean I think that’s the most important thing is that someone that loves you and is always going to be there for you no matter what is going on in your life or theirs.” This status of being there does not depend on geography; Faith’s best friend lives a couple of hours away. Rather, it is a state of knowing the person would drop everything to support you or “help you if you need it,” as Rhonda puts it.

Not all participants used these exact words. Maria defines friend as “they support me and I support them too.” For Bethany, the state of “always being there for you” is emotional, rather than physical: she says that a true friend accepts you for who you are. Likewise, Pam’s definition of always being there includes not having “to worry. You know . . . put on a mask about who you are.” For Brittany, it carries over into action; a true friend would always “stick up for you, hang out with you,” she says. For Meghan, it includes being relentlessly truthful. Her example is that a friend who is “there for you” would tell you if you were wearing a terrible outfit.

These types of “being there” are all offered by the participants, and show a wide variety even in this simple definition of friendship. Nevertheless, they all support the highest level of friendship discussed in the categorizing memo. When students were asked to define friend, their definitions almost all fell into the highest category. However, they used the word “friend” to
describe a wide range of social interactions, from a casual “what’s up” in the hallway to the lifelong best friendship of someone who is like a sibling to one.