THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL AID IN PROMOTING ACCESS TO COMPLETION AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

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Mary G. Parker
DEDICATION

For Gabbie Parker, in recognition of the power of education and the love of learning.
With an education, anything is possible.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The dissertation process is one that is both challenging and rewarding. Throughout this journey, many people have been there to support and guide me to the finish.

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iv
ABSTRACT
THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL AID IN PROMOTING ACCESS AND COMPLETION
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
Mary G. Parker
Joni Finney

Retention and completion have become some of the most salient issues facing higher education institutions. Students’ ability to pay influences both access and completion, and the access agenda in the United States must change to include both of these aspects of college attendance. Eliminating student departures and increasing completion is a priority for many institutions. The higher education community has spent considerable resources on improving access and studying how financial aid influences enrollment decisions. However, most of the research focuses on the front end of the enrollment cycle. This study focuses on how access can move to completion with the use of financial aid. To provide clarity around the complexities of financial aid, the study offers an understanding of the influence of aid from a student’s perspective. Through a qualitative methodology using semi-structured personal interviews with low- and middle-income students, the study allowed the researcher to discover the more personal in-depth experiences of students and the influence of financial aid on their persistence toward a degree. Personal experiences provide an opportunity to comprehend the complex nature of financial aid and its impact on retention and completion from the perspective of these students. Understanding the influence of financial aid on persistence for low-income and middle-class families is important to the higher education community because it will help
financial aid administrators and institutions to develop financial aid awarding policies that will have the greatest effect on retention and graduation rates.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ................................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................. iv

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................................... v

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................................ ix

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................ x

CHAPTER 1 – STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM ........................................................................ 1

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................... 10
  Retention and Financial Aid ........................................................................................................ 10
  Cost and Affordability and the Impact on Retention ................................................................. 11
  Influence of Financial Aid on Retention ................................................................................... 18

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODS ......................................................................................... 25
  Rationale for Qualitative Methodological Approach ............................................................... 25
  Site Selection .............................................................................................................................. 26
  Data Collection .......................................................................................................................... 28
  Data Collection Method: Descriptive Analysis ........................................................................... 29
  Data Collection Method: Personal Interviews ........................................................................ 33
  Data Analysis Procedures ........................................................................................................ 37
  Validity and Ethical Considerations ......................................................................................... 37
  Limitations ................................................................................................................................. 37

CHAPTER 4 – CONTEXT ............................................................................................................... 39
  Context of Utah ........................................................................................................................... 39
  The University of Utah ............................................................................................................... 48
  Research Context ....................................................................................................................... 54

CHAPTER 5 – STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS ................................................. 59
  Overview of Students Interviewed ............................................................................................. 59
  Finding 1: Perceptions About College Affordability ................................................................. 60
  Finding 2: The Student Experience ........................................................................................... 65
    Perception of the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid ..................................................... 65
    Perceptions of the Financial Aid Process ................................................................................ 66
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Tuition/Fees and Ratio of Financial Aid Across Market Sectors ......................13

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis ........................................................................................73
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Utah System of Higher Education student enrollments, 2000-2024 ..........42
Figure 2. Percentage of family income to attend college in Utah full time ..........43
Figure 3. Utah’s overall completion rate broken down by institution ..........44
Figure 4. College completion or certificate program after 8 years by gender, income level, and English proficiency ..........46
Figure 5. The State of Utah’s investment in financial aid programs ..........46
Figure 6. University of Utah retention and graduation rates ..........51
Figure 7. Tuition at the University of Utah compared to peers ..........52
Figure 8. Utilization data for all financial aid programs ..........53
Figure 9. Percentage of gender in sample population ..........56
Figure 10. Percentage of ethnicity in sample population ..........56
Figure 11. Breakdown of income level and enrollment ..........56
Figure 12. Percentage of FAFSA completion of sample population ..........57
Figure 13. Race/ethnicity of students interviewed ..........61
Figure 14. Gender breakdown of students interviewed ..........61
Figure 15. Income levels and enrollment of students interviewed ..........61
Retention and completion have become some of the most salient issues facing higher education institutions. In the last two decades, institutions have struggled with rising costs, demographic shifts, changes in enrollment patterns, families’ inability and unwillingness to pay, and increased public scrutiny (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b). Tuition has increased, in part, due to declines in state funding, resulting in students and families bearing a substantially increased burden of college costs and putting college out of reach for low-income families that need it most to join the middle class (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Financial aid programs have lost purchasing power, and many families have been forced to take out student loans to help pay for increases in tuition (College Board, 2015). As a result, low-income and middle-class students are struggling to attain a college degree. The U.S. Department of Education’s (n.d.-a) report, *College Affordability and Completion*, states, “Half of Americans from high-income families hold a bachelor’s degree by age 25, just 1 in 10 people from low-income families attain that level of education” (p. 2). The U.S. education system must not only broaden college participation, but also must focus on outputs, specifically student completion.

One lens that can be used to explore the role of retention and college completion is human capital theory. Human capital theory (HCT), as applied by economists to higher education costs, focuses on basic economic principles. In the book, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis With Special Reference to Education*, Becker (1964) presented a theory on the investment in education and the economic returns that result from that investment to individuals and society (as cited in Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). For example, economists assume that consumers—the students—seek to improve
their satisfaction by making choices they think will provide them with the best benefit based on their resources and ability to pay. It is an investment in human capital, according to Becker, because the benefit to a college education outweighs the cost (as cited in Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). In addition, Becker stressed the importance of “considering indirect benefits of higher education which came to be known as positive externalities” (as cited in Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016, Loc. 1531).

Students’ ability to pay influences both access and completion. According to HCT, students make decisions about whether or not to go to college based on their perception of cost and benefit they face in doing so. This concept can be applied to student retention and completion as well. The U.S. higher education system needs to produce more degree completers who are able to compete for jobs, thus helping people live the American Dream. James Truslow Adams, in *Epic of America*, first publicly defined the American Dream in 1931. According to Adams, “The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (as cited in Amadeo, 2016, p. 1). Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins (2008) agree, stating, “There is a widely held belief in America that education is the great leveler, and there is evidence that education contributes substantially to earnings and that it can boost the mobility of children from poor and low-income families” (p. 7).

The American Dream is what propels each person forward in hopes of finding a better life than previous generations had. The American Dream has played an important role in advancing the access agenda through conversations about higher education in our nation. Access to education leads to access in the job market. Isaacs et al. (2008) state,
“Since our nation’s founding, the promise of economic opportunity has been a central component of the American Dream” (p. iii). Ultimately, education is the biggest driver of socioeconomic mobility in the United States (Isaacs et al., 2008). As such, education must be within economic reach of low-income and middle-class families. Education provides access and should not have the opposite effect of serving as a barrier. The access agenda needs to end with completion for students, and the higher education community, along with government at every level, shares the responsibility for making this goal a reality.

The current attention to access in higher education is incomplete without equal attention to student completion. Retention and student success in higher education varies across all markets and sectors and by income, age, gender, and race and ethnicity (Perna & Jones, 2013). Addressing issues of equity requires a focus on both access to and completion of postsecondary education. Traditionally, a major public policy focus for higher education has been on access as a way to improve individual opportunity. Bowen and McPherson (2016) share concerns about the emphasis only on access: “We worry that the great emphasis on access and affordability in current public policy discussions may drown out the need for a strong focus on the effectiveness of colleges in educating the students who enroll” (p. 9).

Higher education is one of the factors driving social and economic development in the United States and has stimulated significant change in our society over the last several decades. For low-income and middle-class students, higher education is the engine to social mobility (Issac et al., 2008). Student financial aid helps to ensure access to postsecondary education, and therefore, economic mobility. Ebery and Martin (2012)
write, “Having a college degree means that children born into the middle three income quintiles are more than 75 percent more likely to advance to a higher income quintile as adults than those who do not get a college degree” (para. 6). The advantage of a college degree usually means lower unemployment, higher earnings, and greater job satisfaction. A college degree allows a person to be competitive in today’s global market (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

For the United States to stay competitive in the global market, U.S. education policies must reflect current and ongoing changes in higher education. Today’s competitive global economy requires higher education to change at a pace that is different from that of the past. Historically, changes in higher education have occurred in response to either a national need, such as the Service Members Opportunity Act, or the G.I. Bill, passed in 1944. In recent years, global economic developments fueled by changes in technology have pressured higher education to change at the rate that information is shared globally. Brown et al. (2011) note the surge of the working population in other countries who are highly educated when they state, “There has been an education explosion in the supply of college-educated workers in the affluent and emerging economies” (p. 7). Due to this explosion of college graduates in other countries and the fast pace of this change, the United States is losing its ability to secure jobs and stay competitive. As noted in the Global Auction, many other countries are aggressively graduating their students and competing for jobs that U.S. workers previously held (Brown et al., 2011). Perna and Jones (2013) agree with Brown et al. (2011), stating, “Educational attainment in the United States is lagging behind many other developed nations” (p. 2).
Educational attainment is trailing in the United States as too many students are leaving college without a degree. The U.S. Department of Education (n.d.-a) reports, “Nearly half the students who begin college in this country don’t finish within six years” (para. 1). The most recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse in Spring 2015 paint a more complete picture because it focuses on all students; it shows that the 6-year completion rate for first-time degree-seeking students is 52.9% (as cited in Bowen & McPherson, 2016). Tinto (2012), a leading researcher in retention, acknowledges that completion is something on which higher education must focus. Tinto emphasized “the need for [a] coherent framework for institutional action to reduce student departures” (as cited in Braxton et al., 2014, p. 3).

Eliminating student departures and increasing completion is a priority for many institutions and state lawmakers. Historically, there is a widespread belief that higher education is a public good and that state lawmakers should invest in education because it benefits society (Thelin, 2011). Understanding education as a public good was an example set forth by Justin Morrill from Vermont who championed the legislation known as the 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act (Thelin, 2011). Thelin (2011) describes this legislation as an “influential piece of federal legislation that fostered access to useful public higher education” (p. 75). This historic legislation helped to provide access to public higher education for many middle-income families. The expanded access provided an opportunity to increase enrollment at higher education institutions.

Expanded access was important to families and institutions, but the cost of tuition and fees was a prominent issue during the early 1900s. In the late 1940s, the dominant pattern in higher education was to charge low tuition based, in part, on recommendations
by the Truman Commission. The Truman Commission emphasized the social benefits of an educated workforce. In describing the Truman Commission findings, Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, and Finney (2012) state, “Low tuition was a default policy for student support, since direct aid to students based on income or academic merit had not been developed in either the public or private sector” (p. 1,198). Since the Truman Commission report, education has come to be seen as a public and private good, thus presenting the challenge of who should pay for it. Baum and McPherson (2011) state, “The benefits of higher education are shared by participants and the rest of society; therefore, it is reasonable for the cost to be shared as well” (p. 2). The discussion over who pays was the central focus of the 1973 Carnegie Commission report, Higher Education: Who Pays? Who Benefits? Who Should Pay? (Zumeta et al., 2012). The financing issues that were brought forth by the Truman Commission remained relevant over the next several decades. The 1965 Higher Education Act “became the dominant purpose of federal financing of higher education” (Zumeta et al., 2012, Loc. 1344). The Act was later expanded to provide aid to needy students. The Education Amendment of 1972 “bought sweeping changes, and for a brief moment, greater clarity of purpose to the federal role in financing college (Zumeta et al., 2012, Loc. 1368). According to Zumeta et al. (2012), the Truman Commission questions are still relevant today and remain the focus of central issues related to higher education finance. Determining who has responsibility to fund higher education, between the federal government, state government, students, and families, continues to shift, causing heightened pressure on performance outcomes of institutions.
In the last two decades, there has been growing pressure from policymakers and accrediting boards for higher education to focus on increasing degree completion. The higher education community has focused considerable resources on improving access. There has also been research focusing on how financial aid can remove barriers and entice students to enroll. Institutions have used financial aid as a strategy to lower the sticker price for students. Lowering the price of tuition and fees is proven to increase enrollment, and, “in fact, few other tools at our disposal are as effective in increasing both access and attainment” (Institute for Research on Higher Education [IRHE], 2016, p. 22). The emphasis on access has been primarily on the front end of the admissions cycle to recruit a more diverse population of students who historically have not had access to higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Although there have been strong efforts on some college campuses to improve college completion, the completion rates of enrolled students can be improved. This focus on access is evident through the monies spent by the federal government:

In 2013-14, the federal government spent roughly $31.5 billion on Pell grants, the primary federal aid programs to help low-income students pay for college. This program gave approximately 8.6 million students access to a postsecondary education they might not have otherwise received. (Nichols, 2015, p. 1)

Unfortunately, many students who are able to access higher education by receiving financial support never achieve graduation. Nichols (2015) writes, “More than 40 percent of the total number of students attending four-year institutions do not achieve degree attainment in six years” (p. 1). Furthermore, open access institutions have an even lower completion rate (Nichols, 2015). Unfortunately, most low-income students attend institutions with very low completion rates that do not to have a focus on completion
Rising tuition makes both access and completion a formidable obstacle for low- and middle-income students whose socioeconomic mobility depends on education.

Addressing the dual agendas of access and completion must be done in a very competitive market, particularly for research universities. Universities are dealing with the complex issues of enrolling the ideal students and graduating them on time. The increased competition within the undergraduate market is forcing institutions to seek new and creative strategies to grow and sustain enrollment. Institutions understand “the importance of financial aid and how it is not only paramount for individuals who are enrolling in higher education but also for institutions where students will attend” (Kruse-Crocker, 2008, p. 81). Financial aid not only helps students to attend and complete college, but also it is important to institutions that use it as a strategy to recruit, retain, and graduate all students.

Leading researchers such as Hossler, Ziskin, Gross, Kim, and Cekic (2009) and Spaulding and Olswang (2005, as cited in Hossler et al., 2009) agree that financial aid packages are considered a tool that colleges use to aid in retention. There is a strong relationship between financial aid and access to higher education; however, there is less research on the role of financial aid in keeping students enrolled so they can complete their degree. There has been research on the nonfinancial forces that influence the retention and completion of students, but there is not as much research on the influence of financial aid.

Financial aid (i.e., federal, state, and institutional dollars) is likely an important catalyst to ensure that access leads to completion in the pursuit of higher education. For
the purpose of this study, financial aid is defined as all aid, including federal, state, institutional, and private aid, that is awarded to an undergraduate student. The purpose of this study is to help understand how financial aid packages, the application process, and advising and outreach can remove financial barriers to keep students in postsecondary education to complete their degree. If enrollment managers and financial aid directors have a better understanding of the role of financial aid in improving completion, then they can better communicate to students and parents about college affordability and provide a financial aid package that will positively influence student completion. This is also true for state lawmakers as they consider how to fashion student financial aid.
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section describes the literature that was reviewed related to the role of financial aid in helping low- and middle-income students persist and complete their degree. This section introduces the challenges and complexities of student retention and financial aid; it also reviews the literature related to the influence of financial aid on retention and college completion.

Retention and Financial Aid

Growing public accountability on higher education has put significant pressure on colleges to better understand what strategies promote retention and completion. Tinto (1975), a founding researcher on the retention of college students, concluded, “The fact is that despite our many years of work on [persistence], there is still much we do not know and have yet to explore” (as cited in Bean, 2008, p. 28). Not surprisingly, according to the literature reviewed by Kruse-Crocker (2008), student persistence has been studied from a variety of lenses. Kruse-Crocker wrote that, to appreciate and comprehend this multifaceted challenge facing the higher education community, one must understand the factors that influence it, including student characteristics, academic ability, cost, financial aid, and enrollment patterns. For example, Astin (1993, 1999) and Tinto (1993) both argued that a student’s background influences the decision to stay enrolled in college (as cited in Wohlgemuth et al., 2007).

While it is hard to isolate the factors that influence persistence, such as curriculum, advising, personal characteristics, and family background, the literature reviewed will help to establish what current research exists on financial aid and its influence on persistence and completion. Although there is still much to learn on all of
the factors that influence retention, there is even less known on the influence of financial aid on persistence. However, Braxton et al. (2014) stated, “The greater the student’s belief that they have the ability to pay for the cost of attending the chosen college [and] the greater the student’s degree of social integration . . . [the] higher [the] probability of completion” (p. 94). The literature outlined below will focus on one factor: the role of financial aid in keeping students in college and helping them to complete their degree.

Various factors that influence retention have been identified in previous research (Braxton et al., 2014). Braxton et al. (2014) provided an economic perspective relating retention to college costs, concluding that student departures are based on the cost of attending a particular college or university and an individual’s ability to pay. Tinto (1986) first addressed this economic perspective by stating, “The weighing of cost and benefits of attending a given college or university by the individual student constitutes the crux of an economic perspective on college student persistence” (as cited in Braxton et al., 2014, p. 71). The calculation has become increasingly challenging over time. As noted by Perna and Jones (2013) in *The State of College Access and Completion: Improving College Success for Students*, affordability is one of the factors affecting access and completion for low- to middle-income students as they face tuition increases that are outpacing financial aid programs and what parents can afford to pay. A detailed look at the affordability issue and the role played by financial aid will help to assess how that aid might influence retention.

**Cost and Affordability and the Impact on Retention**

Cost and affordability are at the forefront of students’ enrollment patterns and impact completion, especially for low-income and middle-class students. For families,
the offset of the tuition cost with the different forms of aid is considered the “net price” the student must pay (Perna & Jones, 2013). Even after applying all aid, the net price is sometimes more than the family can afford. Many families in the United States can no longer rely on household income or savings to pay for college because “they are already burdened with living expenses that consume most, if not all, of their annual incomes” (IRHE, 2016, p. 1). Families are relying on financial aid to help supplement the cost.

According to College Board’s (2015) *Trends in Student Aid*, financial aid is a pure subsidy for some students, reducing the price of the educational path they would take even without assistance. For middle-class students, funding helps to determine where they will go to college, not if they will go to college. College Board (2015) stated, “For [middle- to high-income] students, financial aid means the difference between a high tuition private institution and a public university or [for low-income students] between a public four-year institution and a community college” (p. 8). The data in Table 1 illustrate the rising tuition and fees that families paid from 2008 to 2012 in all sectors of higher education. In addition, the chart shows the growing reliance on financial aid to offset the total student costs of college. When looking at the ratio of federal aid to total aid awarded to a student, the data show a significant increase in all market sectors. For example, public universities used 72% of federal aid to make up the award package for a student in 2008. In 2012, that ratio increased to 79% of the award package consisting of all federal aid. This demonstrates that both institutions and families are relying heavily on federal aid to cover the cost of tuition and other mandatory expenses.

In addition to the growing reliance on federal aid, institutions are relying on a combination of federal, state, and institutional dollars to develop an attractive financial
Table 1

**Tuition/Fees and Ratio of Financial Aid Across Market Segments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>2008 Tuition and Fees</th>
<th>2008 Ratio of Federal Aid to Total Aid</th>
<th>2012 Tuition and Fees</th>
<th>2012 Ratio of Federal Aid to Total Aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public 4-Year</td>
<td>$5,395</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>$6,831</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private 4-Year</td>
<td>$17,414</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>$21,902</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private For-Profit</td>
<td>$9,658</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>$8,990</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The majority of state financial aid dollars are targeted at financial need, but financial aid dollars given for reasons other than financial need are growing. When aid is given for other reasons than need (i.e., merit), it is given to students who can usually afford to pay for college. Many states, such as Louisiana and Utah, are trying to keep their high-performing students in the state, thus causing the shift toward merit aid. Unfortunately, low- to middle-income students have seen the smallest increase in state funding:

For low-income students at public four-year institutions, the average amount of state financial aid, adjusted for inflation, barely budged between 1996 and 2012 increasing from $690 to $710. This small increase is during a period where tuition at these institutions nearly doubled. (IRHE, 2016, p. 4)
As noted in Table 1, the reliance on federal aid for families to cover college cost has been growing over the last decade. Some of the increases in families applying for federal aid programs are linked to rising tuition, but others are related to the fact that institutional aid does not meet the full cost of attendance; therefore, both the student and parent are borrowing to pay for college. According to College Board’s (2015) *Trends in Student Aid 2015*, the total annual education borrowing has recently declined; overall, students and parents borrowed 14% less in 2014-2015 than in 2010-2011. However, based on 2008-2012 data adjusted for inflation from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), student debt has increased for students from middle-income families. For example, students had an overall debt of $14,214 in 2008, but that amount had increased to $17,556 by 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.). Student debt is also rising for students whose family income is between $60,000 and $70,000. In 2008, the debt level for these students was $12,710, but it had increased to $15,732 by 2012 (NCES, n.d.). The data indicate that middle-income students are borrowing to help cover the cost of education. Due to family income, these students do not qualify for federal Pell grants; therefore, savings, work, or student loans are their only option if students do not qualify for institutional aid or are not awarded enough to cover all expenses.

The U.S. Department of Education (n.d.-c) defined *cost of education or attendance* as “a statutory term for the estimated full and reasonable cost of completing a full academic year (usually, nine months) as a full-time student” (p. 1). The cost of attendance is defined by each educational institution and includes: (a) tuition and fees payable to the institution; (b) books and supplies; (c) room and board; (d) personal costs
(medical, toiletries, clothing, laundry); and (e) transportation to and from the school (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-c). In addition, institutions are using loans as a part of students’ financial aid package to try to meet students’ total need.

The emphasis of federal financial aid shifted from grants to loans starting in the 1970s (Perna, 1998). The increase in the use of loans by institutions and the increased borrowing by families has caused a growing public concern. Baum (2014) shared, “The total amount of outstanding debt, the total amount students borrow each year, and the average amounts individual students borrow have all risen rather dramatically over the past decade” (p. 31). This increased borrowing phenomena, or “student loan crisis” as the media portrays, has been lost in translation as Baum (2014) stated in her book, *Student Debt: Rhetoric and Realities of Higher Education Financing*. Baum (2014) wrote that student loans “help more people than it hurts” (p. 1). Without borrowing, students would be unable to attend college. This was not the case a decade ago (Baum, 2014). More students are enrolling in higher education than ever before (Baum, 2014). Many of them are borrowing to attend. The perception established by the media is that lower income families of undergraduate students are borrowing the most to attend college. Yet, data from Consumer Finances make it clear that undergraduates from higher income families carry the most debt (Baum, 2014). For example, in 2013, “25% of the households with the highest income held 47% of the outstanding student debt and 25% of the households with the lowest income held 11% of the debt” (Baum, 2014, p. 7). Baum’s (2014) data supports the NCES data presented earlier that shows that it is the middle- to high-income undergraduate families that borrow the most.
Due to significant increases in tuition and fees over time, and the federal loan limits restricting borrowing amounts, low- and middle-income students are not able to borrow enough to cover the full cost of attendance. As a result, many parents are taking out parent loans to subsidize the rest of their student’s college cost. The 2008-2012 NPSAS data indicated that parent borrowing for middle-class families earning $70,000, for instance, had increased. For example, parents had parent loan debt of approximately $17,437 in 2008, and that increased to $19,487 in 2012 (NCES, n.d.). NPSAS data reconcile with Baum’s (2014) research and NCES (n.d.) data in that more middle and higher income students borrow the most to attend college. The alternative to not taking out student loans for middle-income families is to leave a sizeable level of unmet need in students’ award packages, thus possibly affecting students’ ability to pay for college and stay enrolled.

Middle-income families understand the importance of a college education and recognize when their students cannot attend without borrowing. As College Board (2015) notes, “Education loans do not lower the price, but they do make it possible to spread payments out over time” (p. 9). The relief of not having to pay the entire amount up front and spreading out payments is critical to the families that do not have significant cash flow each month once the bills are paid. Middle-class families see borrowing as a form of capital and a necessity for their children to attend a higher education institution. They also understand that “the student aid system is a vital component of efforts to increase economic mobility, the quality of the labor force, and the long-run strength of the economy” (College Board, 2015, p. 7).
Financial aid helps to level the playing field for students with financial need compared to students from high-income families (Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). Even though institutions understand the importance of financial aid to ensure access, many schools struggle with budget constraints, making it difficult to meet students’ unmet need or “the gap between college costs and what students can afford to pay on their own and/or with aid that does not need to be repaid” (Choitz & Reimherr, 2013, para. 2). Unfortunately, institutions have a difficult time meeting students’ unmet need even when awarding student loans. Unmet need is the cost a student must expect to pay to enroll in the institution after taking into account the cost of attendance minus students’ expected family contribution (EFC) and any grants, scholarships, or student loans. Many low- and middle-income students have unmet need, and institutions and the federal and state government expect families to contribute toward paying the cost of college for dependent children. An EFC is calculated through the federal need analysis formula triggered when the student submits the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA; Choitz & Reimherr, 2013, para. 2).

Due to increases in a student’s cost of attendance, institutions are having a hard time meeting the full need of all students, potentially affecting students’ ability to complete their degree. Impacting students’ ability to pay and complete their degree is the very phenomenon that will be reviewed and studied. For example, “In 2012, only 61 out of 1,130 institutional respondents [who] supplied financial aid data to U.S. News & World Report annual survey reported meeting students’ full financial need” (Nguyen, 2016, p. 1). Since 1990, investments in aid have offset the price but have not reduced unmet need, as the “average unmet need has more than doubled according to the Pell Institute”
(Nguyen, 2016, p. 1). Most institutions cannot afford to meet the full need of students without student loans, potentially affecting students’ ability to pay and complete their degree. Nguyen’s study, which consisted of an institutional survey to Education Advisory Board member colleges, confirmed a previous study performed by Murdock, Nix, and Tsui (1995) that found “as students progressed toward graduation, the amount of financial aid and unmet need became more important discriminators than types of financial aid” (as cited in Wohlgemuth et al., 2007, p. 461). Wohlgemuth et al.’s (2007) findings supported the concept that the total amount of financial aid that is awarded matters more than the individual programs (grants, scholarships, loans) that are awarded for students who were persisting and making progress to completion. Institutions must work to meet the full cost of attendance in a student’s award package, even if it means including student loans.

**Influence of Financial Aid on Retention**

There is a tremendous amount of research on how financial aid impacts initial enrollment and choice among students, and a considerable degree of consensus in the findings. DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) stated that due to the significant academic research focused on getting students in the door: “It is widely accepted that financial aid increases enrollment and affects institutional choice” (p. 4). Due to most of the research focusing on access, the primary attention given by state lawmakers has been on access. Desjardins et al. (2002) agreed that financial aid should be evaluated on its effect on enrollment and graduation; however, “this argument has not yet had much success with state legislatures” (p. 655). Bettinger (2004) supported this notion in *How Financial Aid Affects Persistence* when he stated, “Most policy makers have paid more
attention to improving student access to college rather than improving student retention once in college” (p. 209).

There have not been many studies on the impact of financial aid on retention. Much of the early research on retention did not include financial aid as a factor; however, Bean’s (1980, 1982) model suggested that “financial aid concerns can influence student retention” (as cited in Perna & Jones, 2013, p. 144). Since Bean’s research, scholars have focused on financial aid as a factor that influences retention when cost impacts students’ ability to pay. For example, St. John (2000) noted that the award package that attracts a student to a particular university may not be enough to keep them enrolled through to graduation once realities of the total cost of attendance emerge.

With increasing unmet need in students’ financial aid award package, there are greater burdens to stay in college and graduate. Nguyen (2016), a researcher with the Education Advisory Board, substantiated the claim that unmet need influences completion by stating, “The unmet need cliff is a level of unmet need beyond which persistence sharply declines” (p. 1). Nguyen’s claim was supported by Choitz and Reimherr (2013) who stated:

The rapid increase in college cost and flat or reduced funding [or purchasing power] in student aid has resulted in sizable unmet need and has forced students, particularly low-income students, to borrow more, work more hours, and take fewer courses, or in some cases drop out altogether. (p. 150)

Understanding the influence of unmet need within an award package and the effect on persistence is important to the higher education community because it will help in

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1 The Education Advisory Board (EAB) forge best practices to address education’s top challenges with research forums dedicated to key academic and administrative leaders. EAB is a for profit company that was established in 1979 and institutions must pay to become a member of the Board.
developing financial aid award packaging and policies that will have the greatest effect on retention and graduation rates.

Perna’s (1998) national study on the relationship between financial aid and college persistence highlighted the direct and indirect effect financial aid and the amount, types of aid, and nature of the package received have on degree completion. The study’s conceptual framework was a modified version of Tinto’s voluntary student departure theory (Perna, 1998). The participant data were from the National Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study of 1989-1990. Perna’s (1998) findings indicated that the effectiveness of financial aid may depend on the type and package of aid received.

Similarly, Cuccaro-Alamin and Choy (1998) found that increasing student loans within the award package during later years (i.e., junior/senior year) does increase retention and graduation rates (as cited in Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). Wohlgemuth et al.’s (2007) own study was a logistic regression model that was applied to a cohort of undergraduates who entered a Midwest land-grant research institution in Fall 1996. Conclusions from the study suggested that financial aid plays an important role in increasing retention and graduation rates. The impact of gift aid (i.e., aid that does not have to be repaid) is larger than loans or work study; however, since gift aid is limited at most institutions, other aid must be considered (Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). The researchers suggest “front-loading” more gift aid in early years and then loans in later years (Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). However, a more recent study conducted by Kerkvliet and Nowell (2005) found that “the effects of financial aid may differ by institution, sometimes negatively” (as cited in Wohlgemuth et al., 2007, p. 461).
The research shows that financial aid does have an impact on completion (Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). However, some research has also stated that financial aid has no impact on continuous enrollment or completion. For example, DesJardins et al. (2002) discussed these findings in the article, “Simulating the Longitudinal Effects of Changes in Financial Aid on Student Departure From College,” where he disagreed with St. John’s (2000) findings that aid does not affect continuous enrollment. DesJardins et al.’s (2002) study used a hazard model fitted to institutional data to simulate how different packages affect student attrition over time. The study did not focus on net price (tuition minus aid) but on how different types of aid influenced persistence and completion. The rational for this approach was that looking at aid term to term in component parts is important because students respond to a set of prices and subsidies rather than a single net price (DesJardins et al., 2002). They found that not all forms of aid have the same impact and that the impact of a particular form of aid can vary over time. In addition, they found that grants have no impact averting stop-out, while a scholarship of equal value has the largest impact on retention in each year. The importance of the types of financial aid by impact on stop-out did not accord with importance of awards by dollar value (DesJardins et al., 2002). Ultimately, the findings suggested that the dollar value of the award package is more important than the types of aid, including loans. DesJardins et al. (2002) went on to explain these findings, stating, “Some forms of financial aid can establish an ‘exchange relationship’ between the student and the institution leading to a larger impact on retention than may be otherwise expected” (p. 673). The “exchange relationship” creates a bond of mutual benefit between students and the institution, thus impacting completion.
While DesJardins et al.’s (2002) findings show how financial aid impacts persistence, other researchers have reported findings that are in direct contrast and believe the use of financial aid is questionable in its impact on retention (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; DesJardins et al., 2002). Their findings illustrated that, even though financial aid was available to students, they still left due to financial constraints.

Singell’s (2001) study on the effects of need-based aid on student retention suggested an even more complicated picture; one of the reasons for the complexity is that financial aid award packages can change from year to year and may have an impact on persistence. Singell “looked at the effects of the level of financial aid in the first year and found that the higher the student’s level of need-based financial aid, the more likely the student [was] to graduate” (as cited in Bettinger, 2004, p. 106). Based on his own work, Bettinger (2004) shared that a student’s comfort with their college choice and their success at that institution influences their willingness to pay. Bettinger’s study focused on data from the Ohio Board of Regents that included all 1,999 incoming freshmen students from all 2- and 4-year institutions in Ohio. He employed a multistage investment model for his methodology. The findings from his study suggested that aid impacts persistence and that front-loading aid programs may improve student retention in the first year of college.

As noted with the various studies cited, there are different conclusions within the research on the impact of financial aid on completion. Different researchers have found that it is the type of aid that influences persistence, while others have found it is the amount of aid awarded that makes a difference in persistence. The findings in various
studies have been inconclusive and inconsistent related to the influence of financial aid on retention.

Understanding how financial aid influences completion, particularly in low- and middle-income families, is essential to increasing completion rates within higher education. With the increasing cost of higher education and the loss of state and federal financial aid programs in purchasing power, students and families are facing an increasing amount of unmet need within their financial aid award package. It is critical for higher education officials and lawmakers to understand the impact of financial aid on college completion rates.

The result of this study will provide lawmakers and the higher education community with insights on how financial aid influences retention and completion. The hope is to support the creation of financial aid policies in conjunction with financial aid awarding strategies to maximize participation, access, and success. According to Doyle (2016), co-author of the *College Affordability Diagnosis*, states and institutions have drifted away from commitments that ensure students can afford to go to college and graduate. States are focused on completion efforts and “many states have adopted ambitious goals for college completion, but few have addressed the linkages between college affordability and student preparation or the linkages between college affordability and student completion” (IRHE, 2016, p. vii).

Due to the gaps identified in the literature, this discussion seeks to add to the limited knowledge in the field on the influence of financial aid on persistence rates. This discussion will inform the financial aid and enrollment communities on ways to use financial aid to affect persistence and bolster completion rates.
For the United States to be competitive in today's global economy, federal and state lawmakers and institutional leaders will have to work together to increase the share of students attending and graduating from institutions of higher education. The United States and the higher education community must focus not only on access, but also on completion to support student success in the ever-changing global economy. Completion is an integral part of the access agenda, and “every hard working student deserves a real opportunity to earn an affordable, high-quality degree or credential that offers a clear path to civic engagement, economic security, and success” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a, p. 6). Exploring how financial aid influences retention and completion for low-income and middle-class students can help substantiate new or existing efforts on college campuses that aim to help students live better lives, both socially and economically.
CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODS

This section describes the research design and methods used to understand the influence of financial aid on completion rates for low-income and middle-class students. It introduces the rationale for a qualitative method design based on the research questions. In addition, the site selection process is outlined along with the participant selection for personal interviews. The data analysis procedures are included as well, and the description of the validity and ethical considerations are provided by the researcher.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodological Approach

Understanding the influence of financial aid on persistence for low-income and middle-class families is important to the higher education community because it will help financial aid administrators and institutions understand and develop financial aid communication and awarding policies that will have the greatest effect on retention and graduation rates. The research questions addressed in this study were:

1. What is the role of financial aid in helping financially needy students persist in and complete their degree programs?
   a. What role did financial aid play for financially needy students who did not complete their degree programs?

2. What is the role of financial aid in helping middle-income students persist in and complete their degree programs?
   a. What role did financial aid play for middle-income students who did not complete their degree program?

A qualitative research design was used to answer the research questions. Qualitative research allows for many unique characteristics. A qualitative research design obtains many perspectives in understanding the phenomenon being studied by engaging individuals in ways that help the researcher learn how they interpret events related to the research questions. The qualitative design helps the researcher understand people from
their own frames of reference and to experience reality as they experience it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Taylor, Bogdon, & Devault, 2016).

The intent of this qualitative approach was to provide a descriptive analysis that gives insight into the research questions studied. However, to discover the more personal in-depth experiences of students and the influence of financial aid on their persistence toward a degree, sample populations of low- and middle-income students were selected for interviews. One reason for this approach was that the personal interviews allowed the researcher to gather information-rich data through personal engagement. Understanding individual’s personal experiences provided an opportunity to comprehend the complex nature of financial aid and its impact on retention and completion from the perspective of these students. As Creswell (2013) noted, qualitative methods help the researcher listen to the participants’ experiences and how they experienced it. Interviews allow the researcher to “understand and integrate multiple individual perspectives” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 147). Nineteen low- and middle-income students attending The University of Utah were selected for interviews.

Site Selection

The data analyzed and the students selected to interview were from The University of Utah (hereafter referred to as the “University”). The University is the flagship university in the State of Utah and was the focus of this study. The researcher selected the institution because of its challenges with persistence and graduation rates of upperclassmen compared to its PAC 12 and Big 10 peers. The University has a 90% rate from first- to second-year retention, but the second through fourth year have a much lower rate, steadily declining to a 6-year completion rate of 67%, which is near the
bottom compared to those peers. When calculating the persistence rate for Year 1, the University corrects the data for students who have an allowable exclusion based on the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) definition. The IPEDS (2017) definition of allowable exclusions states:

Those students who may be removed (deleted) from a cohort (or sub-cohort). For the Graduation Rates, Outcome Measures, and Fall Enrollment retention rate reporting, students may be removed from a cohort if they left the institution for one of the following reasons: death or total and permanent disability; service in the armed forces (including those called to active duty); service with a foreign aid service of the federal government, such as the Peace Corps; or service on official church missions. (p. 9)

It should be noted that for Year 2 and above, the University does not correct for these allowable exclusions.

Understanding the challenge of retention for upper-class students, the University conducts a nonenrolled survey each semester to students who have not re-enrolled for that upcoming semester. Each semester, approximately 1,000 students are surveyed, and the University gets a 10% response rate. The results of the non-enrolled survey identify financial issues as the leading cause of students leaving the University. According to the University’s graduation survey, over half of the University’s students enroll in less than 12 credit hours per semester, and the majority of students work 25 to 30 hours per week (S. Ackerlind, Graduating Senior Survey Results, 2017). Students are working to help cover the increased cost of an education. Due to cost of tuition and work obligations, students are taking longer to complete their degree or are completely dropping out.

Even though retention among upper-class students is low, and the University’s graduation rates are not at the level of its peers, the institution has not investigated further to see how financial aid awarding strategies may be contributing to students leaving the
University and not completing their degrees. This study provides valuable insights by allowing the institution to understand the influence of financial aid award packages to upper-class students on persistence and completion rates and by providing empirical evidence that could help financial aid administrators develop new financial aid communication and awarding policies.

**Data Collection**

The researcher collected data from multiple sources for the study. The data collected were used to provide a descriptive analysis of the population being studied and to provide a mechanism to select the sample of students interviewed. First, the data for the study were obtained from the University through the student information system, PeopleSoft (the Registrar and Financial Aid modules). The data from PeopleSoft helped to identify 1,565 students who had completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, had some form of financial aid, and either persisted or did not re-enroll at the institution. From the data set, a descriptive analysis of the population provided a mechanism to select the sample of students to personally interview to explore students’ experiences of the influence of aid on completion. The 19 interviews helped to understand the complex phenomena of financial aid awards from a student’s personal perspective.

To understand the terminology used in the descriptive analysis and the personal interviews, definitions of key terms used by the University can be found in Appendix A. The technical definitions of key terms help to explicate the rationale for data collection in the study.
Data Collection Method: Descriptive Analysis

The generation of a descriptive analysis was the first phase of the methodology; however, a data set had to be built, and this was done by selecting a population of students at The University of Utah from the student records system within PeopleSoft. Four groups of students totaling 1,565 were identified. The groups were as follows: (a) financially needy students who persisted between their second and third year, (b) financially needed students who did not persist between their second and third year, (c) middle-income students who persisted between their second and third year, and (d) middle-income students who did not persist between their second and third year. To identify the four groups of students, two different data sets were developed and then merged together to create the different groups.

The first data set queried out of the Registrar’s system selected undergraduate students who began at the University as an entering freshmen (FR) or as an early admit (EA) in Academic Years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. The following groups of students were excluded from the study: (a) international students, (b) transfer students, (c) students with an approved leave of absence, and (d) students not academically eligible to return. The following demographic and academic data were collected on each student in the data set: name; student ID number; address; phone number; residency status; cumulative GPA; academic standing; term last attended; hours attempted by academic year; cumulative hours attempted; hours earned by academic year; cumulative hours earned; class standing (e.g., freshmen, sophomore); race/ethnicity; gender (male, female, other); major or career plan in PeopleSoft; name of college; and enrollment status by term.
In the data set from PeopleSoft, a unique code separates students who left the institution and those who stayed enrolled. The attributes selected for each student and the coding of enrollment assigned allowed the two groups to mirror each other based on income levels and be compared against each other to better isolate the influence of financial aid on their persistence and completion. The code of “not enrolled” was used to identify students who dropped out of the University, specifically within the beginning of the third year, and the code of “enrolled” was used for persisters. Students must have been full-time and those who graduated within the identified academic years were included with the persisters to help with comparisons. Full-time was used because approximately 71% of the undergraduate student body at the university is full-time.

A second data set of students identified are from the financial aid database within PeopleSoft. The group selected were all low-income and middle-class students who completed a FAFSA and received financial aid. Low-income was defined as students who were eligible to receive a Pell Grant. Middle-income was based on the definition used by U.S. Census data for 2015. The middle-income definition was based on the State of Utah’s census data for middle-income families of $62,912 and those not eligible for a Pell Grant (Department of Numbers, n.d.). It is important to note that the income number used was a data high point cutoff for residents at $62,912 or less and not Pell Grant eligible. The years to be examined were 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017. Students who did not file a FAFSA were excluded from the study. Students who were not eligible for Pell Grants still must complete a FAFSA to apply for federal work-study or student loans. At The University of Utah, a student must complete a FAFSA to receive any scholarship based on financial need, including institutional aid. Therefore, the
rationale to exclude students who did not file a FAFSA is the focus of the study on students who have some form of financial aid and its influence on persistence and completion.

In the second data set from the Financial Aid module in PeopleSoft, the following demographic and financial aid data were selected for each student: student ID number, name, address, phone number, residency, cost of attendance for each year awarded aid, EFC for each year awarded aid, total aid awarded for each year, and unmet need for each year awarded aid. Unmet need was defined in two ways for the purpose of the study. To calculate the “U of U Unmet Need Total” for each year, loans and work study were excluded; all other types of aid were included. To calculate the “Fed Unmet Need” for each year, all aid was included. The rationale of calculating unmet need both ways as identified previously was to understand the differences in unmet need in students’ award packages and the influence of this unmet need on persistence and completion. Students in Utah have relatively low student loan debt, and many do not take out loans; therefore, understanding the difference in unmet need and its influence may help the University to understand what changes, if any, need to be made to packaging philosophies.

After each identified data set was selected from PeopleSoft (Registrar and Financial Aid modules), the data from each were combined using Excel by creating a unique identifier on the students who were matched within both cohorts. Once combined, all students who did not have a FAFSA on file were excluded from the study. By combining the two data sets and excluding those students with no FAFSA on file, the descriptive analysis was limited to undergraduate students who had a FAFSA on file and who were awarded some type of financial aid.
The newly combined data set consisted of 1,565 students who received some form of financial aid and either stayed enrolled, completed their degree, or dropped out of the institution. The descriptive analysis provided great insight into the four groups of students studied and enabled the researcher to identify trends within the data. For example, the $n$ for each of the racial categories was so small, all groups were lumped together for comparison. By grouping students of color together, the 1,565 students resembled the University’s overall enrollment by ethnicity; however, gender was not an accurate representation of the University’s overall numbers. In the sample population, 57% of the students were female compared to 42% male and 1% unknown. In the overall undergraduate student population, the overall percentage of male enrollment is 54% compared to female at 45%.

From the data set developed for this study, students were selected to be interviewed to provide a more in-depth approach to understanding the phenomenon of financial aid and the influence on retention and completion. It should be noted that not all factors that were collected were used for purposeful sampling, but they were used in the interview process. For example, the student’s major or career plan in PeopleSoft was collected in the data set, and during the interview process, students were asked about how they interacted with their department or college in pursing institutional scholarships. In addition, enrollment status by term (full-time, part-time) was collected but only used in the interviews when discussing how financial aid influenced their enrollment patterns every semester.

To ensure the data being queried were accurate and complete, a data advisory group was formed to review the data selection protocol and the descriptive analysis. The
advisory group consisted of Dr. Elizabeth Duszak and Dr. Paul Brinkman who worked with the researcher. Both members have expertise in data analysis, and both were familiar with data from The University of Utah. Dr. Duszak currently is responsible for assessing and analyzing all data within the Enrollment Management offices at the university. She was responsible for querying the data used for the study. Dr. Brinkman is currently retired, but prior to retirement, he served as the Associate Vice President for Budget and Planning at The University of Utah. Dr. Brinkman also serves as a member of the dissertation committee overseeing this study. Both individuals are well versed in the data housed in the University’s PeopleSoft system and provided great guidance on its use.

During the committee meeting to review the data protocol and descriptive analysis, several recommendations were made to the researcher to enhance the data collection and descriptive display. The notes from the meeting with the outlined recommendations are included in Appendix C.

**Data Collection Method: Personal Interviews**

A qualitative approach using personal interviews was employed. The rationale was that the interviews would help to understand each student’s full and contextualized experience with financial aid and its impact on their persistence and completion. The intent was to “gain focused insight into individual’s lived experiences; understand how participants make sense of and construct reality in relation to the phenomenon” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 146) being studied.

The study employed the use of *purposeful sampling* where “individuals were purposefully chosen to participate in a research study for specific reasons that stem from the core constructs and context of the research questions” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 128).
Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select students for a comparison-focused study, “which is selecting cases to compare and contrast to learn factors that explain similarities and differences” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 137). Four groups of students were identified to help further explore the identified research questions. The groups included: (a) financially needy students who persisted between their second and third year, (b) financially needed students who did not persist between their second and third year, (c) middle-income students who persisted between their second and third year, and (d) middle-income students who did not persist between their second and third year. To help ensure the purposeful sampling was representative of the population, the researcher looked at the ratio breakdown within each of the four groups and then pulled interview participants based on that breakdown. In addition, a participant demographic matrix was constructed to assure appropriate representation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; see Appendix D).

The research goal was to interview 10 students within each group, for a total of 40 students, to increase the chances of achieving data saturation and an understanding of the insights from the different groups’ perspectives. Fusch and Ness (2015) wrote, “Data saturation will be reached when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible” (p. 1,408). Reaching saturation through purposeful sampling methods was critical to the study because failure to reach saturation has negative implications on the validity of the research.

Once the participants were identified by purposeful sampling, students were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Students who were still enrolled at the University received an email asking them to participate. Students who were no longer
enrolled were emailed and called using the information on file at the institution. Strategies employed in the interview process included: (a) setting a respectful tone, (b) explaining how valuable their input was to the University, (c) ensuring respondents understood that their personal information would be confidential, and (d) demonstrating that the researcher understood the value of their time. Since 45 minutes to 1 hour is a significant amount of time for an interview, a gift card of $20 was given as an incentive to all participants. In addition, for students who were no longer enrolled at the University, a larger gift card of $40 was provided due to the difficulty of motivating these students to participate. During the interview phase, the researcher had a difficult time getting students to participate. The stipend was increased to $40 for all students as a motivation to participate. By increasing the incentive amount, the researcher increased total participation to 19 students and achieved an adequate sample size in each group.

Individual interviews were conducted to provide a clear, comprehensive picture into the influence of financial aid on completion. Interviews for those students who were still enrolled at the University took place on campus in a private setting. For those students no longer enrolled, either an in-person interview was conducted within close proximity to the student’s home or a phone interview was conducted. An interview protocol (see Appendix B) was developed prior to beginning the study. Questions were asked to participants to provide a better understanding of how financial aid influenced their decision to stay in school or drop out of the University. The interviews were semi-structured. During the interview, the students were asked a consistent series of questions; however, a technique of customized replication was used. Ravitch and Carl (2016) define *customized replication* as “interviewers seek the customization of each conversation
through individualizing follow-up questions and probes for specifics within each interview” (p. 146). With permission of the participant, interviews were recorded. Each interviewee signed a consent document allowing for the recording of the interview.

Each participant’s recording was transcribed into an official transcript. A transcript is a way of representing a piece of data that has been collected. Ravitch and Carl (2016) write, “Data refers to materials that have been collected in the course of research, while transcription is the process of rendering that data into a new representational form” (p. 129). Once the researcher created and reviewed the transcripts, a precoding review process began. Precoding is the process of reading, questioning, and engaging with the data before beginning the process of coding. Precoding occurred before data were summarized and included “underlining, circling, highlighting key words or phrases that stand out, or jotting . . . first impressions” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 242). The method of precoding was interpreted from the theoretical framework based on human capital theory. Then, the concepts or themes were expanded as they emerged.

After precoding, the researcher formally coded the data as a way of organizing and labeling to help with the analysis. The intent was that the “coding will allow for the identification of patterns across multiple data points or sources within the data, the establishment of common themes/elements across nonuniform data and for looking across stakeholder groups for shared and divergent patterns” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 242). Based on an understanding of the phenomenon being studied, the researcher used certain concepts or themes to organize the coding.
Data Analysis Procedures

An important part of analyzing the data within a qualitative study is reviewing and engaging with the data from the beginning; “the process is iterative and recursive” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 223). To begin analyzing the data, it was read unconstrained, which is reading uninterrupted by the coded data to get at the overarching context and a sense of the key issues that keep arising (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The data were reviewed multiple times in an effort to support various analytic processes. Each time the information was read, it was done with a different lens and focus. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), each review should build on the preceding reviews to allow one “to see the layers and complexities in [the] data and ultimately critically inform and ground your findings” (p. 223).

Validity and Ethical Considerations

An important aspect of any research study it to make sure of the dependability of the data collected, the findings of the study and a transparent data analysis (Bloomber & Volpe, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This research study followed all standards of qualitative research. The study achieved “analytical data triangulation” through an ongoing process of organizing and viewing the data from different angles and perspectives and across participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For clarity, each step of the process was documented with field notes for future investigations or duplications.

Limitations

This study was developed and completed with the utmost integrity; however, I clearly understood that my 26 years of higher education experience may have had some influence on my research methods and analysis. A limitation of the study was recognizing
that the use of qualitative methods relies on the subjectivity of the participants and the researcher’s positionality (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). My role as the Associate Vice President at The University of Utah and the sole interviewer may have played into the limitations as well. With most studies, there will be certain biases, perspectives, and assumptions made by the researcher, which is referred to as reflexivity (Patton, 2015). Given this notion, I had to examine my educational background, experiences, and current position at the University when completing the study. Being aware of influences on questioning, data analysis, and recommendations was important to remember throughout the process. By being aware of my positionality and the limitations of the study, I was able to understand how the institution could create financial aid strategies and policies to influence the completion agenda.

Another limitation was the small sample size. Although I reached saturation of information collected, it was a limited exploratory sample. A larger study size may be needed to replicate the findings, but it did provide helpful hints on how financial aid can influence retention and completion for low- and middle-income students.
CHAPTER 4 – CONTEXT

To understand how financial aid influences enrollment of low- and middle-income students at The University of Utah, it is important to consider the larger context of the State and the University, particularly the financial aid policies at both the state and institutional levels and the demographics of the students interviewed. This chapter will provide the overall context for each of these areas.

Context of Utah

The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) is composed of eight public institutions. In addition, there are 11 nonprofit schools and 17 for-profit institutions operating in the state. The Utah State Board of Regents is Utah’s higher education governing body for the USHE. The Board is composed of 17 members, and all are appointed by the Governor. The 16 members are appointed for a 6-year term, and one member is a student who serves a 1-year term. The state legislature grants power to the Board of Regents “to control, manage and supervise the Utah System of Higher Education” (USHE, 2017, p. 1). The major responsibilities include “selecting and evaluating institutional presidents [and] setting policy, approving programs, missions, and degrees, and submitting a unified higher education budget request to the Governor” (USHE, 2017, p. 1). The USHE Office, led by the Commissioner of Higher Education, helps to enact and enforce the policies set forth by the governing agency, the Board of Regents.

In addition to these responsibilities, the Board of Regents has authority to approve tuition for all public institutions based on Utah Code R510-1 with the purpose “to
establish a tuition and general fee policy” (USHE, 2017, p. 1). There is a 2-tier tuition system in Utah based on R510-3. General Policy, which states:

3.1. Uniform First Tier Tuition Rate Increases: A first-tier tuition rate increase shall be uniform for all institutions, shall be implemented at the same time, and shall be based on evaluations of current data on inflation and national and regional tuition increases and justified by specific increasing needs in the Utah System of Higher Education.

3.2. Optional Second Tier Tuition Rate Increases: Each institutional President, with the approval of the institutional Board of Trustees, may recommend a second-tier tuition rate increase to meet specific institutional needs. Second tier tuition rate increases may apply to all programs equally or may be different for specific programs.

The higher education budget in Utah totaled $887.8 million in Fiscal Year 2015, which is an 18.6% increase over Fiscal Year 2013 (Ballotpedia, n.d.). The Board of Regents develops the higher education budget for the State and uses the following policy to guide its creation:

In developing its appropriated operating budget recommendations, it is the policy of the Board of Regents to include tuition revenues from projected additional annualized FTE enrollments as a portion of the projected financing for proposed expenditure increases to accommodate the additional students. Revenues from a proposed uniform first tier tuition rate increase pursuant to Section 3.1 will be included as partial financing for other proposed expenditure increases. Revenues from recommended second tier tuition rate increases pursuant to Section 3.2 will not be included as partial financing for other proposed expenditure increases. (USHE, 2017, p. 2)

Even though state funding for higher education has increased, the State of Utah has experienced a decline in funding per student.

According to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, Utah’s appropriations per full-time student declined 17.2% from Fiscal Year 2009 to 2013, while the national average decline was 13.3% during the same time period (Ballotpedia, n.d.). At the same time state funding per student was decreasing, the USHE (2017) system
experienced an increase in enrollment for 3 years. By fall 2016, the system enrolled 175,509 students, and of these, 123,398 were full-time attendees (USHE, 2017). The number of students enrolling at Utah’s public colleges and universities is projected to continue to increase in the near term. According to the report, *Knocking at the College Door*, “the total number of high school graduates is projected to increase by 37.4% between 2011-12 and 2025-26” (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education [WICHE], 2016, p. 4), thus impacting higher education enrollment. Figure 1 shows the projected enrollment increase for Utah through 2024. The *Knocking at the College Door* report shows that, over time, the number of White high school graduates is decreasing, and this downturn will be supplemented with the quick growth of Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students (WICHE, 2016). The expected increase has caused concern across Utah as to how the state will handle the amplified demand in capacity, infrastructure, and information technology to support the surge of students (USHE, 2016).

The projected increase in enrollment is important to the state, but Utah must increase the proportion of its population with a college education to build state prosperity into the future. According to the IRHE (2016), “By 2020, 64 percent of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary education credential” (p. 1). For the state to meet workforce demands, it must ensure higher education remains accessible and affordable for its citizens (USHE, 2016). Today’s students are faced with “unprecedented challenges in financing the cost of completing a meaningful degree or postsecondary credential” (Education Commission of the States [ECS], 2017, p. 3).
Figure 1. Utah System of Higher Education student enrollments, 2000-2024. Adapted from “Utah: A State of Opportunity Strategic Plan,” by the USHE, 2016, p. 3.

The State of Utah has the fourth lowest tuition at public universities compared to the nation (USHE, 2016). Yet, students and their families struggle to afford higher education, and “families in Utah must contribute a greater percentage of income to pay for full-time enrollment at all 4-year public colleges and universities” (USHE, 2016, p. 6). The IRHE (2016) study also indicated that the student’s share of state and net tuition revenue for full-time students has increased over time thus increasing the burden being placed on students and their families: “In 1989 the percentage was 23 percent, 26 percent in 2000, and 47 percent in 2014, adjusted for inflation” (p. 7).

As noted in Figure 2, the burden of the cost of education is increasing for families in Utah and in the nation. Increased tuition is causing concern for students in Utah, particularly when the culture is so fiscally frugal. According to the University’s non-enrolled survey (sent to students who have not registered for the next semester), Utahans are very debt adverse and would rather take off a semester of school to work than take out student loans to help cover the cost. Chapter 5 will explore this phenomenon in
greater detail based on the students’ perceptions of loans and the value of an education. Although the citizens of Utah value education, they do not want to pay more than they have to for a degree. The value of thriftiness seems to permeate in the culture.

Increasing the number of students completing their degree is important to Utahans, the economy, and the workforce. Degree completion has been an explicit goal of the Utah Board of Regents for nearly a decade. In July 2013, the Board passed a College Completion resolution, identifying five specific strategies proven to increase college success and graduation rates. Although Utah has seen an increase in degree productivity, completion is still a priority for all of higher education. Figure 3 indicates that the overall state completion rate is at 40% for all public institutions. The USHE (2016 states that graduation rates are measured by the percentage of first-time, full-time students who graduate within 150% of the published time for the program (6 years for a 4-year baccalaureate degree and 3 years for an associate’s degree). The USHE’s output in student completion has improved over the last decade: In 2004-2005, the USHE’s overall

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Percent of Income 2008</th>
<th>Percent of Income 2013</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public Two-Year (18 percent of enrollment)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Four-Year Nondoctoral (25 percent of enrollment)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Research (22 percent of enrollment)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Four-Year Nondoctoral (20 percent of enrollment)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Research (14 percent of enrollment)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Completion rate was 35%, and institutions awarded 22 degrees and certificates per 100 FTE students; by 2014-2015, the completion rate had increased to 40% and awarded degrees and certificates had increased to 25 per 100 FTE students (USHE, 2016). However, the top states produce 28 to 30 degrees and certificates per 100 FTE students (USHE, 2016). In 2016, the overall completion rate for USHE schools was still 40%. USHE is committed to increasing its efficiency to 28 degrees per FTE (USHE, 2016).
This is a nationally accepted measure recommended by the NCES. According to the USHE’s (2016) Strategic Plan, “There is a stark higher education achievement gap between income groups, and also between majority/minority communities in Utah” (p. 3). The plan further states, “College participation rates among ethnic/racial minority students is approximately half that of white students” (USHE, 2016, p. 5). Even though the Board of Regents has had a continuous focus on completion, students in Utah have low completion rates as noted in Figure 3, and students of color and low-income students have even lower rates as evident in Figure 4. It is important to note that Figure 4 is comparing college completion or certificate programs rather than just college completion.

Financial aid influences the enrollment of students and is critical for low- and middle-income students. Chapter 5 will describe student perceptions of financial aid in more detail. Although access, affordability, and completion are important to the state, as noted by the goals of the USHE, the State of Utah contributes very little to state need-based aid programs. Figure 5 shows that the “state contributes $26 per FTE (full-time equivalent student) in need-based aid to college students attending public institutions despite the fact that they enroll 65 percent of all college attendees. The national average is $474 per FTE” (IRHE, 2016, p. 1). In 2013, the largest amount of state aid given was based on merit and the largest amount was awarded to students who attended private institutions. From 2007 to 2013, the state increased its awarding of merit aid but decreased funding of need-based aid.

Understanding the need to increase access, affordability, and completion, the USHE (2016) unveiled its long-range strategic plan “to provide a strategic and intentional focus on USHE priorities, programs, and initiatives to address the key higher education
Figure 4. College completion or certificate program after 8 years by gender, income level, and English proficiency. Adapted from “College Participation and Completion of Utah High School Graduates: Cohorts 2007-2012,” by D. Ma, 2017, p. 5.

| TOTAL STATE FINANCIAL AID DOLLARS PER STUDENT AT PUBLIC TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Need-Based Aid | 31 | 66 | 26 | 474 |
| Other Aid | 16 | 0 | 27 | 210 |

Figure 5. The State of Utah’s investment in financial aid programs. Adapted from “College Affordability Diagnosis” by the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs and the U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 5.

| TOTAL STATE FINANCIAL AID DOLLARS PER STUDENT AT PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Need-Based Aid | 16 | 17 | 4 | 644 |
| Other Aid | 1 | 0 | 29 | 221 |

issues: Affordable Participation; Timely Completion; and Innovative Discovery” (USHE, 2016, “Introduction”). Currently, two out of five USHE students complete a 4-year degree within 6 years and half complete within 8 years. National data are clear that the longer it takes to complete a degree, the more expensive completion becomes and the less likely the student is to finish (USHE, 2016). The USHE does not perform any adjustments on cohorts, but aggregates all of the reported adjustments from each
institution. The way that each institution approaches the cohort adjustments, as allowed by IPEDS, is unique to each institutional research office at each institution.

College affordability is a critical issue that students and families wrestle with nationally and in Utah. Understanding the importance of affordability, the USHE (2016) listed improving student financial support as one of its objectives. There are several action items listed under the objective: (a) encourage family financial planning and saving for college, especially in taking advantage of the benefits offered by the Utah Educational Savings Plan—one of the top-ranked 529 college savings plans in the nation; (b) increase efforts to inform students and parents of the opportunities for financial aid, including the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); (c) encourage prudent use of student loans to support timely completion and more rapid integration into the workforce at higher wage levels; (d) continue support of effective institutional need-based aid and assistance programs, as well as strategic use of scholarships and tuition waivers; and (e) continue expansion of the Step-Up to Higher Education initiative through programs that improve college preparation among K-12 students. It is noteworthy to mention that the strategic plan for the state does not describe a long-term tuition strategy given the demographic changes and economic needs of the state, nor does it address a statewide strategy for need-based financial aid.

The USHE Strategic Plan is important to the state for economic stability, quality of life, and individual and public health (USHE, 2016). The plan helps Utah set a path for a successful future by “focusing on measurable results, action needed to achieve those results, and necessary investments in higher education to support those strategies” (USHE 2016, p. 9).
The University of Utah

The University of Utah is Utah’s flagship higher education institution with emphasis on both teaching and research. It is located in the capital, Salt Lake City, and currently enrolls more than 32,000 students. It is governed by the Board of Regents and the Board of Trustees. The Board of Regents has system-level oversight over The University of Utah in all fiscal matters and in the hiring and firing of the President of the University. The University works in conjunction with the USHE to meet statewide education objectives. The University’s Board of Trustees has university-level authority and coordinates with the USHE so the University can assist in accomplishing all statewide goals and initiatives. The Board of Trustees consist of 10 people, eight of whom are appointed by the Governor with the consent of the State Senate. The President of the Alumni Association and the President of the student body make up the last two members. The board members serve a 4-year term with the possibility of an extension for a second term. The role of the Trustees is outlined here:

The Board of Trustees may exercise such powers and authorities established by law, policies of the State Board of Regents or their specific delegation, University policies, and such other powers and authorities not specifically denied by the State Board of Regents or by law and as may be necessary and proper to ensure the effective and efficient administration and operation of the University” (The University of Utah, 2017, p. 1).

An example of the difference in roles of the two groups is how admission standards are handled. The USHE (2016 has an established admission policy R312-8 that governs admissions standards. The policy is outlined below:

8.1. Doctorate-granting Universities: Students are admitted on the basis of their projected ability to succeed at the institution. Projected ability to succeed is based primarily on past performance, such as grade point average and standardized test scores. Satisfactory completion of prerequisite courses and work experience may
also be factors, among others. These institutions are selective in admissions. (USHE, 2016)

The policy outlines specific criteria for admissions to be handled by the campus authorities. This is different than other states and with other large public flagship institutions.

The Trustees, along with senior administration, work to make sure the mission statement of the University is the framework from which the campus operates. The mission statement reads:

The University of Utah fosters student success by preparing students from diverse backgrounds for lives of impact as leaders and citizens. We generate and share new knowledge, discoveries, and innovations, and we engage local and global communities to promote education, health, and quality of life. These contributions, in addition to responsible stewardship of our intellectual, physical, and financial resources, ensure the long-term success and viability of the institution. (The University of Utah, 2016, p. 1)

To help fulfill its mission, the University adopted four goals to ensure the long-term success of the institution. The goals are: (a) to promote student success, (b) to generate knowledge, (c) to engage communities, and (d) to ensure long-term viability. To further solidify the focus of the campus, a senior official stated, “We feel a great sense of responsibility to provide the exceptional education expected of a Tier-1 research institution, but also to create transformative experiences that truly change lives.”

In support of the University’s goal to promote student success, the University created the Utah Pledge to assist students in completing their degrees to accomplish the institutional goal of achieving a “75 percent graduation rate within the next five years” (The University of Utah, 2017). The Utah Pledge is given to every student at orientation as the University’s promise: “To help you graduate with the support of a learning
communities, mentors and advisors, a plan to finish, and deeply engaged learning experiences” (The University of Utah, 2017, p. 3).

Currently, the first-year retention rate (fall to fall) of the institution is 91% and the 6-year graduation rate is 67%. It is important to note again that the retention rate at the University has been corrected for students who have an approved exclusion identified by IPEDS. Though the campus has improved the first- to second-year retention rate, the University still struggles with persistence in Years 2 through 6. According to the data produced by the Office of Budget and Institutional Analysis, there is a significant drop in persistence rates, especially when gender and race are introduced (The University of Utah, 2017). For example, in the cohort of students who started in 2013, when looking at Year 2 retention rates, White female students persisted at higher rates than their male counterparts while female students of color had lower retention rates than males of color. Yet, the same cohort of students had different rates when looking at Year 3. Overall, women were not retained at the same level compared to men, even when race was broken out. For example, in Year 3, men were retained at 93% and women were retained at 90%. When introducing race, White students were retained at 91% and students of color were retained at 89% (The University of Utah, 2017).

With a renewed focus on student success, the campus has seen a tremendous change in its first- to second-year retention and graduation rates (see Figure 6); however, not a lot of progress has been made in other years. With an emphasis on undergraduate education and student success, “the university is using new technologies, formative data analysis, and plenty of human interaction” (senior administrator, personal communication, 2017). “We are building a culture across our entire university that puts
students at the center of everything we do, every single day.” The University built predictive models of student success to help better identify students in greatest need of support. These models were used to help increase the institution’s first- to second-year retention and overall completion rates.

In addition to the creation of the predictive models, the campus also began to incentivize colleges to focus on retention and completion (The University of Utah, 2017). The campus budget model has been adapted to encourage colleges to monitor and develop strategies to enhance student success. By aligning a portion of the annual budget to indicators, such as number of majors enrolled, number of degrees awarded, and credit hours offered, “[the campus is] increasing awareness of [its] commitment to student success across the institution” (The University of Utah, 2017, p. 1).

The University is striving to expand success possibilities for more students by unlocking affordability. The University continues to shine as the highest value education among its Pac 12 and Big 10 colleagues (Office of Budget and Institutional Analysis [OBIA], 2017). According to The University of Utah (2017), the University achieves better outcomes at a lower overall cost than their peer group (see Figure 7).
Even though the institution has relatively lower tuition than most of its peers, students still report that finances are the number one obstacle to enrollment and/or persistence (The University of Utah, 2013-17). According to a senior administrator, the University is addressing this challenge “by collaborating for more strategic and optimal use of our financial resources with a holistic view of the student, combining efforts between colleges and central administration.”

From a combination of increased scholarships and helping student’s access federal aid, the University is increasing the total amount of financial aid awarded to all students. The University understands that it has to focus significant attention on student success by increasing access and timely completion with the use of financial aid strategies (Executive Director of Scholarships and Financial Aid, personal communication, 2017). As noted in Figure 8, the Office of Scholarships and Financial
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Federal and State Grants</th>
<th>University Scholarships and Grants</th>
<th>Work Study</th>
<th>Federal Loans</th>
<th>Alternative Loans</th>
<th>Institutional Loans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>$29,444,632</td>
<td>$96,064,978</td>
<td>$1,163,069</td>
<td>$146,764,815</td>
<td>$10,103,687</td>
<td>$512,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>$31,214,118</td>
<td>$89,209,208</td>
<td>$1,196,280</td>
<td>$142,223,650</td>
<td>$8,522,382</td>
<td>$487,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>$34,052,565</td>
<td>$78,162,189</td>
<td>$1,388,181</td>
<td>$138,697,853</td>
<td>$8,779,788</td>
<td>$477,357</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8. Utilization data for all financial aid programs. Adapted by the Office of Financial Aid, The University of Utah, 2016-2017, p. 1.*

Aid increased the amount of scholarships and grant aid awarded to students, while federal and state grant aid declined. However, the biggest increase came in student loans, both in federal and alternative loans, while the amount of federal and state grants declined. In looking at the Financial Aid utilization data based on the percent of students served compared to headcount the story is not all that different. The overall percentage of students served has increased from 68% in 2012 to 70% in 2016.

In 2016, the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid received a state grant to increase communication to students to encourage completion of the FAFSA. With the state grant money and the support of the institution, the Office increased its FAFSA completion. The Executive Director of Scholarships and Financial Aid stated:

> Our FAFSA numbers have increased over the past few years. In the 2016-2017 academic year, we received 25,486 applications. This year to date, we have received 31,570. That’s an increase of over 6000 applications so far and we still have half of the year to finish. We are also trending for increased FAFSA numbers for the upcoming 2018-2019 academic year as well.

The Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid has completed 121 outreach events for current students, prospective students, and campus partners, educating them on the FAFSA application and the benefits of completing the application for maximum financial aid opportunities to cover the cost of attending the University. Data show there was a
higher proportion of students who completed the FAFSA application for the 2016-2017 Academic Year than the previous year, and the office is on its way to increasing FAFSA completions for the current year (Executive Director of Scholarships and Financial Aid, personal communication, December 2, 2017).

During the same time as the campaign to increase FAFSA completion, the University employed a third-party vendor to do a complete analysis of all financial aid (federal, state, and institutional) being awarded and disbursed at the institution. The purpose of the analysis was to ensure that the University was effectively using all aid available to recruit, retain, and graduate students. Per the Executive Director of Scholarships and Financial Aid, the analysis of the third-party vendor “allowed the institution to leverage its dollars more effectively by reaching a larger group of students thus impacting recruitment and retention.”

With the focus on access and completion, the University states that it is dedicated to ensuring student success through developing the Utah Pledge, leveraging financial aid dollars, and investing in student support. As the data have shown, the University is making progress, but there is still more to be done to improve student completion and to close the completion gap with students of color.

**Research Context**

The sample population initially queried 1,565 students who met the study’s criteria as defined in Chapter 3. From the 1,565, students were placed into four groups to help further explore the identified research questions and to select the interview participants. The groups were as follows: (a) financially needy students who persisted between their second and third year, (b) financially needy students who did not persist
between their second and third year, (c) middle-income students who persisted between their second and third year, and (d) middle-income students who did not persist between their second and third year. The research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. What is the role of financial aid in helping financially needy students persist in and complete their degree programs?
   a. What role did financial aid play for financially needy students who did not complete their degree programs?
2. What is the role of financial aid in helping middle-income students persist in and complete their degree programs?
   a. What role did financial aid play for middle-income students who did not complete their degree program?

In addition to addressing the research questions, the descriptive analysis provided the basic features of the data in the study and gave insight into the population sampled by identifying patterns within the data. For example, the end number for each of the racial categories was so small that all groups were lumped together for comparison. By grouping students, the 1,565 students resembled the overall University enrollment as it relates to ethnicity; however, gender was not an accurate representation of overall University numbers. In the sample population, 57% were female students compared to 42% male and 1% unknown. In the overall undergraduate student population, the overall percentage of male enrollment was 54% compared to female enrollment at 45%. Figures 9, 10, and 11 show the percentage of gender, ethnicity, and income levels for the overall sample population (see Appendix F for additional data charts).

Of the entire 1,565 sample student group, 72% of the students completed the FAFSA and the university financial aid process, while 28% did not complete the university financial aid application process (see Figure 12). The FAFSA completion
Figure 9. Percentage of gender in sample population.

Figure 10. Percentage of ethnicity in sample population.

Figure 11. Breakdown of income level and enrollment.
income was based on the definition used by U.S. Census data for 2015. Of the 505 low-income students who dropped out, 72% completed the FAFSA process compared to 79% who stay enrolled. In reviewing the numbers further, both the enrolled and non-enrolled students had similar levels of unmet need. Of the low-income, non-enrolled group who completed the FAFSA and university process, 35% had unmet need levels of $15,000 compared to the 37% of low-income students who stayed enrolled and had unmet need levels of $15,000. The comparison of unmet need between the two groups indicates that the institution did not meet the financial needs of most low-income students, whether they stay enrolled or left the institution. The number of students who completed a FAFSA for middle-income students was much lower than their low-income peers. There was also a difference in middle-income students who stayed enrolled versus those who left the institution. For example, the FAFSA completion rate of students who stayed enrolled was 47% compared to 28% of those students who left the institution.

FAFSA completion was high for the low- and middle-income students in the initial cohort and for those interviewed. However, for both income levels, students who
left the institution had a higher rate of not completing the financial aid process at the institution. For example, 72% of the middle-income students who did not persist after the second year did not complete the financial aid process at the institution. Of the middle-income students who did not stay enrolled, 28% did complete the university financial aid process, but 18% of those students had unmet need levels of $5,000 or more. The overall descriptive analysis of each of the four groups allowed for participants to be selected through purposeful sampling (see Appendix D). The method used for purposeful sampling is explained in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER 5 – STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS

The purpose of this study was to focus on the role of financial aid in helping enrolled students persist and complete their degrees. To provide clarity around the complexities of financial aid, the findings provide insight on students’ perspectives on the role of financial aid in helping them achieve their educational goals. The students’ personal experiences provided an opportunity to comprehend the multifaceted nature of financial aid and its impact on retention and completion.

Overview of Students Interviewed

In-depth, individual interviews were conducted to provide a clear, comprehensive picture of the influence of financial aid on retention and completion. Nineteen students were interviewed. A demographic matrix of the interviewees was produced (see Appendix D). Of the students interviewed, 58% of the population were male compared to 42% who were female. The study had proportionately more male participants who agreed to be interviewed than the overall undergraduate campus population, which is currently at 54% male and 46% female.

Underrepresented minority students were 42% of the interviewed population versus 58% White students. At the University, the percentage of students of color in the undergraduate population is 25% compared to 69% White students. Although there were more students of color who responded to the invitation to interview, the decision was made to interview these additional underrepresented students since demographics in the state are shifting, and understanding the impact of financial aid on students of color is critical.
Gender composition, racial composition, and income levels and enrollment of the students interviewed were reviewed and analyzed (see Figure 13, 14, and 15). The overall interview groups were initially determined to be 10 students per income cluster; however, several attempts were made to increase the number of total interviewees, but the attempts were futile. A larger sample size may be needed to confirm the findings; however, the interviews did provide insight on how financial aid can influence retention and completion of low- and middle-income, traditional-age students.

This chapter explores the findings based on students’ perceptions of financial aid and the impact of financial aid on enrollment. The findings in this section address the students’ perceptions of college affordability, their experiences throughout the financial aid process, and the influence financial aid had on enrollment. The three distinct findings also included several subthemes that emerged from the interviews and are described in the sections that follow.

**Finding 1: Perceptions About College Affordability**

Cost and affordability are at the forefront of student enrollment patterns, and they impact completion, especially for low- and middle-income students. Rising tuition makes both access and completion a formidable obstacle for students whose socioeconomic mobility depends on education. Students’ ability to pay influences both access and completion; yet, most students interviewed had no knowledge of how much college costs or how they would pay for it. It was noted that most low-income students reported not receiving much help from their parents due to their lack of knowledge on the process and college cost. When looking at student responses, some students reported that their parents...
Figure 13. Race/ethnicity of students interviewed.

Figure 14. Gender breakdown of students interviewed.

Figure 15. Income levels and enrollment of students interviewed. LEN = low-income enrolled; LNE = low-income not enrolled; MEN = middle-income enrolled; MNE = middle-income not enrolled.
did not attend college or, in some cases, did not speak English fluently. For example, one low-income student of color stated:

I think it might be because of culture also, because I’m Vietnamese and in the Asian culture, my parents are old-fashioned in the way that they don’t want us to worry about anything besides school, and their first and foremost thing is to get me through school and to get a degree, even if that mean they’re working 6 extra years, unfortunately.

Many of the middle-income students interviewed stated that they deferred questions of college cost and how they would pay to their parents. As one student shared, “My parents handle it for me. I don’t really know how much my schooling cost. It is really sad.” Another student who came from a middle-income family shared that his parents said, “You just focus on school. We're good now for this semester. In the future, we can reevaluate whatever we need to do.” That student went on to explain that his parents did not have a long-term plan on how to cover cost. The plan was short-term, semester-by-semester. Across all student responses, short-term planning for college payment was consistent. A low-income female student of color explained the conversation on cost with her parents:

We don’t usually have that kind of conversation, like, at the dinner table or whatever. It’s pretty much, they would talk with each other about . . . they do map it out. They would talk with each other, and it’s like, “Well, we need to find out how much tuition the kids have this semester.” They will ask us, “You know, check your CIS [student portal]. See what the current tuition bill is.” We'll go there and we'll show them our current tuition bill. Then, they'll tell us, “Give us a couple of weeks to save up, and then now you can take the time and pay off the tuition that way.”

Although the majority of the students acknowledged not participating in the conversation about how to pay for college or even developing a budget, one student was
the outlier. A low-income Asian female student stated this because of her family situation:

I am the person that considers my tuition and my rent. I always calculate how much rent I usually will pay including utilities for at least eight months in advance. I do it every year, well, every semester if I try to, to see how much money I need to save up essentially to pay off tuition and to pay off rent.

This student took full responsibility for estimating college cost and for budgeting her money to cover all costs, which was unusual compared to other students interviewed.

Determining a budget and understanding college cost was not the normal tactic for the students interviewed. One student shared, “Financial aid and paying for college was just sorta something I gave to my parents to handle.” Another student acknowledged that his enrollment decision may have been different if he better understood the cost. He stated:

If we [student and parents] had sat and discussed more in the decision process, like, this school is going to cost this much for 1 year, 4 years, as opposed to some other options, I might have considered going somewhere else.

As noted, most students interviewed did not engage with their parents in the discussion of total cost of college attendance and how it will be paid. Students rely heavily on their parents to pay for tuition and other costs. Many students explained that their only responsibility in the process was to explain the cost that is owed on the fee bill. All students had a hard time explaining the complexities of the fee bill to their parents to determine what is owed. One low-income student of color used the example of “hidden costs” that are hard to understand and explain. He stated:

There is tuition, and then I pay for dorms and everything. So, that number was pretty obvious to me from the start. Then, there was sort of things like hidden costs that include different prices in class costs and books and things like that.
Then, dorm fees and things like that, that I think weren’t totally wrapped up in that, and it was really expensive to go to school at the U.

No matter the income level, gender, or ethnicity, all students perceived that the University’s fee bill was confusing and that families could not understand the details of the total cost that must be paid.

Determining how students’ families would pay for the cost of college was a question posed to students. None of the students indicated they would go to the Financial Aid Office to see what aid was available; in fact, the common action taken by students who were concerned about how they would pay was to reduce the number of hours taken so the amount owed to the institution would be less and easier for the family to cover, or if necessary, to not enroll that semester. This response was consistent within the low-income group; however, it was different by gender. Male students were more likely to reduce the number of hours taken. For example, a low-income male student stated, “I decided to not take too many classes just so that the cost doesn’t have to be that expensive,” compared to a low-income female who stated, “Cost played more of a role in my decision to not go back ‘til later so I could save money because tuition was expensive for me.”

Throughout the interviews, most students stated that going to the Financial Aid Office to ask about how to pay for college was not an option. This was true when looking at the responses of all categories of students (i.e. race, gender, and income levels). Almost all students relied on their parents, and ultimately, their enrollment suffered if the family could not afford to pay. The students’ experiences and their outcomes are noted in the following section.
Finding 2: The Student Experience

This section deals with the students’ experiences and their perceptions of the Financial Aid Office and financial aid process at The University of Utah. The section is broken down into two subsections: (a) Perceptions of the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid, and (b) Perceptions of the Financial Aid Process. Each subsection will provide a detailed view of the students’ experiences and the impact of financial aid on their overall experience.

Perception of the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid

All of the students who were interviewed shared that there is a negative stigma that surrounds the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid at the University. In looking at the interview comments, there was no difference in perceptions of the Office when segmenting results by race, gender, or income level. For example, one male student indicated, “The Financial Aid Office is not fun to go to, no. It’s like, it’s deadlines, there’s a lot of stress, long lines, it’s very difficult. Bureaucracy.” The most common words students used to describe the office were bureaucracy, intimidating, difficult, deadlines, and stressful. Students believed the Office had a vibe of being disorganized and a little intimidating. For example, a female student described the experience of walking into the office:

People are busy doing their work, so I know that sometimes there has been people that just, like, are rushing around and, like, they’ll answer my questions and just go; and other times there's been people that help me and answer my questions, so I think it depends on the day maybe on the person.
The answer that the student received depended on the person who helped them. This was a common theme that came up in the interviews. One low-income female student indicated:

> It just seemed like, and everyone was telling me something different. Like, someone would tell me I need this form, and then, “No, you’re good to go,” and then I’d call back because I almost didn't trust them, and then someone else would tell me otherwise.

Another student detailed a conversation with a financial aid counselor that impacted his enrollment:

> I made an appointment with a counselor, and I was really kind of hoping for some direction, and if I remember correctly, at the time, it just felt like she pointed me to the website that I’d already tried to go on, and I didn’t know where to go, what to do, what to look for, and so just kind of gave up and went, “Well, I got a job. I’m working a lot. I don’t really have time,” and so I just kind of let it go and went back to work.

The perceptions and interactions with the Office confirmed that students believe it is disorganized, disconnected, and intimidating. In addition, students felt isolated and alone with no one to turn to as they navigated the confusing financial aid process.

**Perceptions of the Financial Aid Process**

For many students, the financial aid process is unknown or mysterious. A male student referenced the process, stating, “There is so much uncertainty . . . every time I fill [FAFSA] out, I was like, I hope the money comes through.” Student comments during the interviews varied, but more consistently, they suggested a lack of clarity about the financial aid process and eligibility requirements. One student indicated:

> The process of filling out the FAFSA and turning all the paperwork to their office is kind of tedious. Because there have been a couple times where I had to visit their office like three or four times to even get the process complete. I didn’t want to visit that many times.
Many of the students indicated that the amount of paperwork needed for the application process was unclear and that the terminology used by the staff was just as confusing. For example, a male student indicated:

I think it would be better for them to explain the easiest way for a certain kind of paperwork that's required versus like, “Well, there’s like a verification five form, or for verification four, three, two, one form.”

The use of financial aid vernacular in communicating with students and parents makes the process more confusing. Students do not understand the financial aid acronyms used, and several students said that breaking down words, or just explaining it in a simpler way, would be easier. In particular, a male student suggested:

The office should be clear on what forms I have to do, because it seemed like there was just a disconnect between each person I talked to, and they would tell me something different, and if I had a checklist, that would help.

Students want well-defined direction from the Financial Aid Office. That was consistent among all students when reviewing for gender, race, or income level. However, where the distinction occurred was how the student wanted communication to occur. For example, a middle-income student indicated:

It’d be cool to just have some sort of a video tutorial that would be like, you know, “This is this part of the application,” or “These are what these scholarships are for,” to kind of make it seem a little bit less like just words on a page, and more like, you know, “This is actually how you can get to getting some money from your department,” step-by-step, laid out.

However, in direct contrast, low-income students, regardless of gender, indicated that more personal communication would be great. For example, one low-income male stated:

Have people dedicated to reaching out and contacting me individually because, at times, it feels like you’re just lost in this sea and it doesn’t feel like, even if there is an outreach, you know, like, that I’m an individual with needs.
He went on to say:

If I were to reach out or if I were to say, I don't understand this or anything, it would just be lost because there's so many people, you know. So, if an individual was emailing me, or like reaching out to me, then I know that I could raise questions.

Not understanding the terminology used by the staff and being puzzled on which forms are needed, students indicated they did not realize the amount of time it took to process all of the documents to receive financial aid. Many did not understand the need for deadlines imposed by the Financial Aid Office and felt like it was just more bureaucracy. A low-income student of color indicated his lack of clarity around the financial aid process:

The one thing I've noticed is just the time it takes to do certain things within the financial aid process. I guess, fill out certain applications or stuff like that, process documents, which I understand because there are so many students at the U, to have everybody's financial aid laid out properly and straightened out is quite a task in itself.

None of the students clearly understood the financial aid process. Even upper-class students were perplexed by the process. One female student indicated, “They expect us to already know because we already been here, yet that is not the case.”

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that students do not understand the financial aid process and have inaccurate perceptions of their financial aid eligibility. It was also clear that the communication was not as clear as it needed to be. Individual student communication was discussed in the interviews as a way to better support students throughout the process. However, there was no consensus on how to communicate with students during the process. One male student commented on the best way to reach him:
Email or texting, because I check email a lot sometimes, but I think a lot of people these days, including myself, prefer texting, because, it’s like, I get notifications almost like every day. The minute I see something on the text notification, it’s like, “Oh, there's something I should probably take care of.”

Most of the males who were interviewed preferred communication via text, where most female students preferred either an email or a personal phone call. For example, one female student explained why she liked email messages: “I think email is the best, just because I check my email very often, and then you can actually digest it and read it.” However, it was clear that over-communication with students was generally not perceived positively. One female student summed it up best by saying, “You can’t be sending me things every week because you think it’s important.”

Understanding what is important to students and how best to communicate that information was heavily discussed during the interviews. All students were passionate about how they would like communication from the Financial Aid Office. While students have different preferences on the methods by which they would like to receive communication, the one thing they all agreed upon was the need for personalized communication and financial aid counseling. For example, a low-income female student stated, “The first year was hard because I am a first-generation student, so obviously I didn’t have any support of someone to guide me to start, like, the resources that I needed.” When reviewing the comments by income groups, it was evident that low-income female students prefer a more personalized approach:

Give me a call or reach out to me instead of me reaching out to the people, because sometimes I know I forget or stress about who to go to. It’d really be nice to have a more personalized approach to it and kind of make it better in that way instead of just saying, “Hey, come up to the window, fill out this form online,” and things like that. Even lower income students that maybe don’t have access to a computer or are only getting help through their high school counselors and
things like that. I would much rather have a representative of financial aid from
the university kind of go around and have sessions where they sit down and say,
in small groups, and say, “Hey, this is what we can do before you get into the
institution to do this. This is what you need to set up for,” because in other
classes, they said that they didn’t get information or it wasn’t personalized
enough. I think that would be really great for people coming into the U.

Personal financial aid advising was a common theme discussed, as was students
wanting to have a personal connection with an advisor. One female student indicated that
she would like to have more contact with an advisor, especially at the beginning of every
semester. She stated, “The beginning of school is when students have the most questions
or concerns about their aid and it appears to be the hardiest time to talk with someone.”

Another student suggested:

So, possibly, maybe set out a time where you guys have any walk-in hours
essentially for financial aid or specific scholarships, because I think I have to
make an appointment for every single financial . . . to see a financial aid advisor. I
know the first week of the semester is usually busy. We can’t call the financial aid
office at all, because we’ll probably be put on hold for 15 to 20 minutes. I think
that’s my only thing because I’ve never had a problem, but probably maybe have
a little bit more available representatives during the first week of the semester
because it’s always so, so busy.

All students, no matter what race, gender, enrollment, or income level, wanted some type
of personal counseling. The common statement among students was that having some
sort of dedicated time to understand how to budget properly would have been helpful. An
outline of the paths for applying for financial aid and scholarships would be beneficial.

As one middle-income male noted:

As a student, I’m kind of transitioning from a life of being taken care of by
parents, to a life of living alone and figuring things out for myself. And so, during
this transition phase, I recognize that all these things are out there and I should do
them, but like I am distracted because I have friends and a social life. Between all
of that, I just lose pieces all the time.
A female student indicated that if she could have “[met] with a financial aid advisor and [had] them tell [her] about having divorced parents and how that applies to financial aid and scholarships, that would have been extremely helpful and possibly kept [her] in school.”

When prompted by the researcher to discuss seeking out help, the students indicated they wanted “more personal individual interaction versus preaching to a large mass of students.” For example, one student stated, “At orientation, I got a lot of information in 2 days, and I just didn’t really think it applied to me at that time. I forgot about it.” Students need information at the time it is useful to them. Many of the students indicated they would not seek out help; therefore, trying to understand how to communicate to them at the appropriate time is necessary. A female student stated, “Both my parents don’t speak English really well and they didn’t go to college, so they didn’t know how to deal with this stuff. If there were people to help us, that would have benefited me more.” She went on to state, “Instead of telling students that personal resources are available to support them, force them to use the services very early in their college career.”

Finding 3: The Influence of Aid on Enrollment

Financial aid influences enrollment differently for low- versus middle-income students. Every low-income student interviewed indicated that financial aid influenced their enrollment in some way at the University. However, some middle-income students believed they had other financial alternatives to support enrollment, and therefore said money was not a factor. Of the 19 students who were interviewed, nine stayed enrolled at the University and 10 of the students left. In reviewing the nine students who stayed, six
were from middle-income families versus three who were from low-income families. Of the 10 students who did not persist, six were low-income students and four were middle-income students. The data show that more low-income students leave the institution versus their middle-income peers. The difference in enrollment is a function of students’ perceptions of the process and their ability to pay. In the interviews, the effect of the impact aid had depended on the students and their own situation. For example, some experienced the influence on enrollment during the financial aid process and never completed it, thus leaving the University, while others suggested the amount awarded directly impacted their decision to stay or leave.

Understanding at what point financial aid impacted enrollment was based on each individual student. However, it is important to note that the award package that attracted students to enroll was not always enough to keep them enrolled through graduation. With increasing unmet need in students’ financial aid award package, there are greater burdens to staying in college and graduate. The descriptive analysis based on the students who were interviewed showed the unmet need levels of the students who stay enrolled versus those who left. Table 2 shows the comparison.

As noted in Table 2, of the 10 students who did not stay enrolled at the University, five of them did not complete the financial aid application process. All five filed the FAFSA but never completed the additional information needed to be awarded aid. The other five in the non-enrolled group had unmet need levels of $10,000 and above. When comparing those numbers to the students who stayed enrolled, the numbers were very similar. Of the nine students who stayed enrolled, six had unmet need levels of $10,000 and above, and three of the students did not complete the financial aid process.
Table 2

*Descriptive Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unmet Need Levels</th>
<th>Enrolled Students</th>
<th>Non-enrolled Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 5,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,001 to 10,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001 to 15,000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,001 and above</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete Applications</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
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</table>

Of the students who stayed enrolled and completed the aid process, the following quotes were commonly used when discussing the influence of aid on enrollment:

“Financial aid is a tool to finishing school.”
“Financial aid pretty much played a huge role, because otherwise, I could not afford a semester.”
“It saved me thousands of dollars.”

A single mother of color who was a traditional aged college student explained:

Financial aid has been a huge relief off my shoulders because I haven't had to pay as much out of my own pocket, you know what I mean? I need to finish school to provide a better life for my child and get better jobs.

Another low-income student indicated that, without financial aid, she would have left school. She stated, “I think without financial aid, I would have had to give the burden of paying to my parents and they could not have afforded it, so I would have not enrolled.”

In discussing with students what influenced them the most, either the total amount of the awards received or the makeup of the individual awards, most stated it was the total amount awarded that made the biggest difference, understanding that it may or may not have included loans. For example, a middle-income male student indicated, “I'm extremely grateful for my award package. It’s probably the reason I kept going, so I think it's a great, great thing. I just really struggle with the application. It's a dumb little thing.”
While most students indicated the total package as being the most influential, the few students who received institutional scholarships professed a certain amount of loyalty to the University for offering them the money. A low-income female of color stated:

> My scholarship was so helpful because school is expensive and . . . I could’ve gone to another school cheaper, but, the first year, like I said, the SOMOS Scholarship helped me, so I just wanted to come straight to The U and each year . . . receiving that, it’s really like a blessing because . . . I’m working for my future.

Another student who received an institutional award explained how his scholarship helped him: “This award created a benefit for me and I was able to attend the university of my choice.”

Although the total package was thought to be most helpful, students were happy about receiving money they did not have to pay back. Some of the students who were interviewed were averse to taking out student loans, but most middle-income students were okay with it. For some middle-income students, loans helped them decide between what type of school they would attend. For example, one male student stated, “The loans helped with my decision to attend Utah. It was a combination of being able to enroll right after high school in a 4-year school instead of attending a community college.” Another middle-income student stated:

> Loans were really helpful just because the payments aren’t all at once, and subsidized loans really help. Yeah, it’s kind of like once I got started on the loans, it’s like you’ve got to finish, I had to follow through, I can’t just stop half way through. There’s no way I can pay them off just stopping.

Most low-income students were not amenable to taking out loans. Most of their families discouraged it. For example, a female student of color indicated that her parents and her aunts and uncles discouraged her from taking on any debt. Yet, one low-income
single mother said, if it were her only option to graduate, she would heavily consider it:

“I would do anything to graduate at this point.”

In summary, not only does the financial award amount impact enrollment, but the responses show that the confusing process can lead students to not complete the application and either reduce the number of hours enrolled or drop out of school.
CHAPTER 6 – IMPLICATIONS

The basic question in this study was to consider whether financial aid influences the completion of low- and middle-income students. The goal of the study was to make an isolated impact of the university in hopes that it could be replicated by other universities. The analysis helps to address a systematic approach that is needed to assist the university in achieving institutional policy change and assisting state policymakers in addressing change. Chapter 6 will address the implications of the findings for state lawmakers, the Utah Board of Regents, The University of Utah, and the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid.

Improving completion outcomes is important to both the State and the University. Improved performance is needed to compete in today’s competitive job market. To increase the number of students who graduate, institutional and state leaders must consider developing a new comprehensive holistic enrollment strategy that includes but goes beyond the assessment of academic performance.

Developing and implementing a comprehensive strategic enrollment plan would assist Utah in meeting its 2020 goals for educational attainment and the University in increasing its completion rates. Collaboration between appropriate state and university leaders is necessary to develop a strategic enrollment plan that includes a budget projection, a tuition policy, and a financial aid plan that will meet the needs of the diverse populations served in Utah.

**Strategic Enrollment Management**

Higher education in the United States is trying to be more competitive by producing more graduates. The State of Utah and The University of Utah share in this
goal. Both entities are facing growing enrollment, demographic shifts, reduction in state aid per student, rising tuition cost, and lack of a financial aid strategy. All of these challenges impact completion. There needs to be a common understanding of the challenges and a joint approach to solving them. To address the issues affecting completion, “the institution [and state] must fundamentally change the ways in which they seek to recruit and retain students; and strategic enrollment management offers a paradigm for bringing together the seemingly disparate goals of access and institutional [and state] financial viability” (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers [AACRAO], 2008, p. 30). According to AACRAO (2008), strategic enrollment management offers a model of addressing competing priorities. The AACRAO model focuses on what best serves students in assisting them to achieve their educational goals. Creating a strategic enrollment management plan for the state and the university would allow a review of “the forces that are shaping enrollment, revenue, prestige, and diversity goals” (AACRAO, 2008, p. 3) for the state and the institution in a coordinated manner.

Creating a holistic plan illuminates the challenges to be faced by institutions, including increased competition for students and the changing demographic composition of high school graduates. For example, Utah is projected to see an increase in enrollment in postsecondary education by 2025. According to data from the WICHE (2016), the majority of this increase will be from students of color. Many of these students will come from low-income families where a main concern for college attainment is affordability. The expected increase has caused concern across Utah as to how the state will handle the
amplified demand in capacity, infrastructure, and information technology to support the surge of students (USHE, 2016).

With growing diversity in high school graduates the State and the University must look at achievement gaps between populations and begin to address these issues, or completion rates will continue to suffer. According to AACRAO (2008), “An element in the efficiency equation that aligns strategic enrollment management with financial, individual student, and public policy goals is to increase retention and graduation rates” (p. 53).

Increasing graduation rates is necessary for Utah to be competitive economically. The USHE’s performance on student completion has improved over the last decade: In 2004-2005, USHE institutions awarded 22 degrees and certificates per 100 enrolled students (using an FTE measure); by 2014-2015, the rate had increased to 25. However, the top states produce 28 to 30 degrees and certificates per 100 enrolled students. The USHE is committed to increasing its efficiency to 28 degrees per FTE (USHE, 2016). To achieve these goals, completion rates must be addressed for students of color. According to the USHE (2016), “College participation rates among ethnic/racial minority students is approximately half that of white students” (p. 5). The USHE will need to understand enrollment and retention patterns and determine what additional resources may be needed to support students and provide financial aid strategies for completion that will enable the state to decrease the attainment gap between the various racial categories and increase economic viability.

Utah must continue to align completion priorities with state institutions. At the University, student success has been a focus for the last several years, starting with the
students who are recruited and admitted and the impact that has on retention. The University’s central administration has developed data analytics that focus on early warning signs to increase retention and completion. Other campus partners have created strategies to increase timely completion, and yet all are independent of each other. The University may need to consider how to better coordinate a retention and completion agenda among all campus partners.

One way to coordinate all efforts is to develop a strategic enrollment management plan that includes completion strategies, projects future enrollment, and helps the University understand where efforts need to be addressed. For example, the University may want to shift some of its focus to increasing retention rates of students between Years 2 through 6 to support the increase of graduation rates. The findings in this study showed that low-income females were less likely to stay enrolled between Years 2 to 3 and beyond compared to their male counterparts, with financial need being the primary reason for leaving.

Understanding the challenges of demographic shifts in high school graduates and the achievement gap in various populations helps the State and the University address a comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan that forecasts enrollment and allows tactics to be developed to support recruitment, retention, and completion. During this process of developing a 5- to 10-year strategic enrollment plan for the State and the University, further analysis could be done to provide an evaluation of increased enrollment and to determine what would be needed in a State budget, tuition dollars, and aid to support the state institutions in serving students.
Budget and Tuition Policy

A strategic enrollment management plan that encompasses fiscal planning, budgeting, and a tuition policy should be integrated at the state and institutional levels. Most state and institutional leaders “fail to capture the dynamic interplay between enrollment and institutional finance” (AACRAO, 2008, p. 61). Tactics should be deployed in a holistic manner that accounts for long-term implications. For strategic enrollment management to be effective and “achieve desired outcomes, the approach to budgeting must be employed differently by institutions [and the state]” (AACRAO, 2008, p. 30). A multiyear budgeting plan would provide advantages for the institution and the state to consider tactics in addition to tuition and fee increases and establish a state aid plan to support students.

Throughout higher education, tuition remains the biggest revenue lever to be used to support mission-critical activities (AACRAO, 2008). As tuition becomes more important, “accurate enrollment projection take on further financial significance” (AACRAO, 2008, p. 46); thus, the importance of a strategic enrollment management plan becomes increasingly necessary. As stated in Chapter 4, the State’s current tuition policy is a two-tiered system approved by the USHE. Each institution requests their Tier 2 amount based on what is being proposed by the USHE for Tier 1 and what their campus will need for the upcoming year to cover all expenses. Tuition rates for the upcoming year are approved and announced in late March prior to the fall term. Institutions are not made aware of their final approved tuition level until then. In today’s current competitive market and with the changes to financial aid regulations that allow students to complete
the FAFSA much earlier than in years past, the expectation is that an award letter will be provided as quickly as possible.

Understanding one’s financial aid award letter is critical to determining whether one can stay enrolled for the next year. A Financial Aid Office cannot produce award letters until they are aware of the tuition cost for the upcoming year because it impacts the cost of attendance for every student. The late approval of tuition also impacts the announcement of state aid and how much each institution will receive. For most institutions, being notified late of available state aid delays the awarding of student aid packages. Waiting until late March puts all state institutions, including the University, at a disadvantage in providing an attractive package that will recruit, retain, and graduate students.

If the State of Utah and The University of Utah consider developing a strategic enrollment plan, it would include a projected budget and the tuition rates that are predictable if not stable, for students. This could help state lawmakers and the USHE better plan for state allocations and approve tuition much earlier. This strategic enrollment approach would change the paradigm of late tuition and state financial aid approvals and better address the needs of students so they can meet their educational objectives, which is ultimately the goal of strategic enrollment management.

**Holistic Financial Aid Plan**

As tuition becomes more important in funding campus operations, and as discounting strategies are integrated into the strategic plan, “accurate enrollment projections for specific enrollment funnels take on increasing financial significance” (AACRAO, 2008, p. 53). Having a strategic enrollment plan must be solidified with
leveraging financial aid. However, based on the findings of this study, one would say that the plan must consist of more than just a discounting philosophy. The financial aid plan should contain outreach and education, personalized advising, communication, and a packaging strategy based on data analytics. This was confirmed in the findings of the study which indicated that student persistence can be affected by more than just the amount of the financial aid award or unmet need.

Increases in tuition and college costs are putting an increasing burden on students and families to pay, thus impacting not only access but completion. Understanding at what point the influence of aid impacted enrollment was based on each individual student. The difference in enrollment lies within the students’ perceptions and their ability to pay. Financial aid should be a strategy used by the State and the University to focus on access, retention, and completion. This strategy will be critical if the State wants to meet the 2020 goals set forth by the Governor’s Office. Utah’s job market will require postsecondary education, and if the state wants to have a prosperous economy, the focus must not be on access only, but on access to completion.

USHE developed strategic action plan that focused on increasing student financial support. There were several tactics that the USHE addressed in improving student support; however, there is no mention of bringing together senior leaders, such as Presidents, enrollment managers, and financial aid directors in the State to help address the issue. These individuals understand the needs of their students and can identify and address the gaps in financial aid awarding strategies that will support students through to completion. Using their expertise to develop a statewide financial aid strategy would be
the most effective approach for the USHE to help meet the State’s goals set forth in the USHE’s Strategic Plan.

Another rationale for working with enrollment managers and financial aid officers is that most state leaders “lack information about how state aid dollars interact with institutional aid in the aid packaging process” (ECS, 2016, p. 6). A transparent and consistent definition of the State’s financial aid goals is important to the State, the institution, and the student. According to the ECS (2016):

A clear state goal creates common ground and presents an opportunity for state leaders to set the stage for institutional and student actions. In addition, a clear goal provides a mechanism that establishes transparent outcomes that are easily measured by effective data and systems. (p. 7)

Transparent outcomes make it easier for the Board of Regents to work with universities to monitor and analyze data relevant to financial aid and its impact on persistence and completion. According to the ECS (2016), the Regents should employ “a baseline level of institutional quality and accountability” (p. 10) to ensure that state goals are met.

Utah has a great opportunity with its changing demographic and the public questions on the value of higher education to support attainment goals by redesigning and conceptualizing their financial aid programs to assist with college affordability and completion (ECS, 2016). The ECS (2016) produced a brief that addresses the redesign of state aid that “would result in greater access and success for today’s college student—a necessary precursor to achieving state attainment and workforce goals” (p. 5).

Currently, a majority of the state aid that is provided goes to the private college in the State (IRHE, 2016). If the USHE wants to accomplish its completion goals, the State will need to increase the amount of aid awarded to low- and middle-income families and
focus its resources on public institutions, which is where the largest percentage of
students attend college. Utah needs to understand that “financial aid programs have the
potential to transform the student experience in higher education and the outcomes that
states seek from a credential workforce” (ECS, 2016, p. 16).

Again, to be successful, the State and higher education institutions must
understand enrollment goals and the impact of income levels on student’s ability to pay
because today’s students are faced with challenges that are more than just academic in
nature. Affordability and students’ ability to pay has a tremendous impact on completion.
Financial concerns are a key contributor to students leaving based on the non-enrolled
survey (The University of Utah, 2017) and is confirmed in this study. According to
human capital theory, student’s make decisions about whether or not to go to college or
stay enrolled based on “estimating the cost and benefits from college, and the resulting
utility that would be generated by the decision” (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016, p. 56).
Wohlgemuth et al. (2014) stated, “The greater the student’s belief that they have the
ability to pay for the cost of attending the chosen college [and] the greater the students’
degree of social integration . . . [the] higher [the] probability of completion” (p. 94). The
State and the University must invest in its students by understanding enrollment goals
and the impact of income levels on student’s ability to pay.

The literature on the impact of perceptions of cost on enrollment was supported
by the findings of this study. A male student interviewed stated that having financial aid
allowed him to stay in school, and have certain opportunities afforded to him because of
enrollment. He went on to say that not having to worry about money allowed him to
focus on academics and get involved in campus organizations. Another student noted that
she is a first-generation student and her family could not bear the burden of college tuition; therefore, without financial aid, she could not have attended the university and stayed enrolled. She is expecting to graduate this year. Financial aid definitely impacted the decision of these students to stay enrolled and graduate.

A holistic financial aid strategy is not only critical to institutions but to all students, especially low- and middle-income students. Without aid, many students could not attend or complete college. *The Washington Post* (2018) reports, “Financial aid remains a lifeline for the vast majority of undergraduates, as the percentage of those relying on loans and grants to cover college cost continue to rise” (p. 1). A strategy of financial aid should include outreach to educate prospective and continuing students, their parents or guardians, and campus community partners on what financial aid programs are available and how to apply.

**Outreach and Education**

Persistence can be impacted by the lack of understanding of cost and affordability, by the complex financial aid process, by the lack of financial advising, and communication to students. A way to support the affordability mission of the campus and strengthen completion is to make sure that all entities and personnel who engage with students are educated on financial aid. This training would help to expand the reach of financial aid advising and enable extended campus partners to connect with students in a more holistic support model. In addition to training campus partners, the University may consider increasing the number of outreach programs provided to students and off-campus community partners. This would allow the University to engage more in
educating families on financial aid much earlier in the recruitment process and then to continue its efforts for retaining and graduating students.

An approach the University may also consider is to expand outreach and increase awareness of financial aid by using the Utah Pledge with new and continuing students. The University created the Utah Pledge to holistically support the needs of students at various stages in their enrollment. However, the Pledge seems to be more of a focus on academic matters and less of a focus on financial literacy. In addition, it appears the Utah Pledge is not fully used by all campus entities (academic or nonacademic). With a more aggressive approach to the use of the Utah Pledge, the University may consider expanding how it supports and engages students with financial literacy and financial aid advising.

With affordability challenges impacting students’ ability to pay, financial literacy training and education on aid programs is needed. The education should not just include training on the financial aid process, but also provide guidance to students on how to build a budget, how to determine what the total cost to attend college would be, and how to make decisions on one’s ability to pay. According to the publication, University Business (2018), “student related services and supports like financial literacy will be getting the most attention at institutions in 2018” (p. 2). The student interviews also reinforced the notion that increased financial literacy would be helpful. One student indicated that it is hard to transition from your parents doing everything for you in high school to being responsible for budgeting and paying for college. Another student indicated that, in his second semester, he had $400 dollars in his bank account and he wondered what he should do with it. He stated:
I am going to buy an X-Box because it was the first thing I thought and I was dumb. If someone had told me, why are you buying this XBox because realistically I just watch Netflix on it, I could have saved my money. I did not need to purchase a $400 gaming system to watch Netflix. I would have liked to have some advice on budgeting and some kind of reality check advice from someone.

Throughout the interviews, students commented on the need for financial literacy training and education on the financial aid process. For example, a female student indicated that instead of preaching to the large masses at orientation, a more individualized approach would be better. She went on to state that financial aid is a complex process and having a first-year advising requirement similar to academic advising would better support students. Not all of the students agreed with a mandatory financial aid advising requirement, but all indicated that it should be available and highly encouraged.

**Personalized Advising**

Combining financial literacy with financial aid advising would be a proactive model that the University and the State could consider in support of retention and completion. Currently, the University has a separate financial literacy office called the Money Management Center that operates as a stand-alone office and has very little coordination with the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid. The University could create an effective strategy to support students through to completion by encouraging the two offices to work together on a comprehensive holistic financial strategy that is rolled out to students at various stages within their enrollment. Whether students should be required to attend the trainings would be something the University would need to consider with further analysis.

Combining the two areas to develop a comprehensive strategy would show students that the University is invested in them and would help to address the negative
perception that is haunting the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid. Students perceive the office to be unfriendly, very “rules driven,” and uncaring about the impact of those rules on them. During the interviews, students indicated they did not feel comfortable going to the Office Scholarships and Financial Aid because of the impersonal nature of the contact. Having a holistic approach that meets the needs of the students would help to create an environment where students feel that they have a personal advocate and office to support them to completion.

This new service model of personal advocates for students would encourage the office to adopt a new motto of “students first,” understanding that their actions impact the retention and completion of students. Changing student perceptions so they feel valued and a part of the community is critical to completion. In today’s competitive environment, students and families have high expectations of the academic and nonacademic units provided by the universities in which they enroll. Therefore, it is important for the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid to develop a communication strategy that is comprehensive and clear based on particular segments of the student population. The findings from this study showed the importance of clear and frequent communication between students and financial aid administrators. Over the years, admissions offices have had to adjust their communication to meet the needs of students to be more personalized. However most financial aid offices have not followed Admissions lead in advancing communication strategies. Financial aid is so focused on regulation changes that seem to arise every year and communication does not become a priority due to lack of time. Financial Aid offices need to recognize that communication to students is essential in the process and should be managed more thoroughly by them.
Communication

How the Financial Aid Office communicates with students and families is essential to assisting them in understanding how the financial aid process works, what additional documents are needed, and an overall value statement on why financial aid is important. For example, the students interviewed indicated they wanted more personalized communication that they can understand. Using simple language is important instead of financial aid lingo and acronyms that university staff use. An example provided by a student indicated that he was referred to the Verification #5 worksheet and had no idea what that meant.

Developing communication that is clear and easy to understand supports students through the difficult and complex process of financial aid, especially for low-income students. The low-income students interviewed all indicated more follow-up and personalized communication would be helpful. One student in particular talked about a mentor who constantly reached out to students reminding them of deadlines and asking if they needed help. This student went on to stay that she would have missed many financial deadlines and would not have completed her financial aid process if it were not for this particular person who did not work in the Financial Aid Office.

Based on the findings from the low-income population, the University may consider hiring additional financial aid counselors who could be dedicated to special populations and provide more education, communication, personalized advising, and financial mentorship to students. Having dedicated staff members would allow the students and families to feel like they have an advocate who is there for them. The
personalized service could help an overwhelming process not seem so daunting and also work to change the perception of the Office.

Another strategy in the area of personalized communication with certain populations could be to train student success advocates and academic advisors to be outreach ambassadors for the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid. The student success advocates are individuals who work across campus and help students navigate the University community, and academic advisors meet with students regularly on academic matters. Training these individuals would help with outreach to students so that more university officials have financial aid information to provide to students. In the past, the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid has been reluctant to train others on financial aid due to the complexities of the process. The strategy noted above would not call for student success advocates or advisors to be experts in financial aid, but rather, they could be trained to understand the overall process to help support and direct students.

Having advocates across campus that can speak to students about financial aid would help the University reach a larger audience of students so that information on financial aid is available. Creating a larger network of front-facing individuals who can provide financial guidance to students would allow the office of Scholarships and Financial Aid to spend more time on data analytics to better understand the impact of the current financial aid packaging philosophy (federal, state, and institutional) at the University.

**Packaging Strategy Using Data Analytics**

Better data analytics would allow the University and ultimately the Scholarships and Financial Aid Office to study the different populations of students being served and
how the aid process and the awards provided are crucial to their retention and
completion. According to College Board (2017), “The effectiveness of student aid in
increasing educational opportunities depends to a great extent on how the funds are
distributed to students in different financial circumstances” (p. 7). The packaging strategy
imposed by the institution for federal, state, and institutional aid has an impact on
students’ ability to pay.

Currently, the University packages a significant number of its grant awards on a
first-come, first-served basis. Understanding how this strategy impacts low-income
students and their ability to pay is important to better meet their needs. For example, all
the low-income students who were interviewed did not meet the financial aid priority
deadline for the University. Many of these students applied for financial aid right before
classes began and ultimately missed out on additional grant aid other than Pell. The
impact the packaging strategy has on individual students is essential to understand
because these families are relying heavily on federal aid to cover the cost of tuition and
other mandatory expenses, and they are missing out on the full grants they are eligible to
receive.

The University may consider a more strategic approach to packaging other than a
first-come, first-served approach, which would allow needy students to receive the aid
needed even if they applied after the priority deadline. In addition to the analytics
enhancing the packaging philosophy, it could also be used to develop outreach
communication. For example, The University must “organize the efforts of segmented
state [and university] programs that target similar populations of potential postsecondary
students may improve the student application process and increase awareness of aid
availability. However, institutions must not commit all available aid to students who meet the certain deadline dates because doing so may leave little money on the table for students who seek aid later” (ECS, 2017, p. 12).

In determining the packaging methods, the institution’s Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid should use data analytics more thoroughly to determine the effectiveness of its aid strategies. The University must optimize its financial aid programs so they set prices strategically and not lose certain students due to their inability to pay. Solutions must be innovative. Braxton et al. (2014) provided an economic perspective relating retention to college costs and concluded that student departure is based on the cost of attending a particular college or university and an individual’s ability to pay.

Developing a packaging philosophy that is strategic and data-driven allows the University to meet the needs of students and help to reduce the unmet need of students attending the institution. Choitz and Reimherr (2013) stated:

The rapid increase in college cost and flat or reduced funding [or purchasing power] in student aid has resulted in sizeable unmet need and has forced students, particularly low-income students, to borrow more, work more hours, and take fewer courses, or in some cases drop out altogether. (p. 150)

The University is having a hard time meeting the full need of all students, potentially affecting students’ ability to complete their degree.

Currently, at The University of Utah, the Scholarships and Financial Aid Office meets 64.5% of need of students (common data set). The University has increased the amount of need being met for students. For example, in 2013, the University was meeting 59.7% of student’s financial need compared to 64.7% in 2016. It is important to note that the percent of need has declined from 2016 to 2017. This is an area of concern and one
that should require further analysis to understand what is happening, especially at a time when families are expecting to bear the burden of increased college cost.

Meeting the full need of students is something for the University to continue to consider. According to Wohlgemuth et al.’s (2007) study, the concept that the total amount of financial aid that is awarded matters more than the individual programs (grants, scholarships, loans) that are awarded for students who were persisting and making progress to completion. Based on Wohlgemuth et al.’s (2007) and Desjardins et al.’s (2002) studies, the institutions must work to meet the full cost of attendance in a student’s award package, even if it means including student loans. Wohlgemuth et al.’s findings were supported based on the student interviews completed in this study. Students were more concerned with the amount of the aid package than the individual awards. One student stated that he would just look at his award package to make sure he had enough money to cover all his costs and not worry about the rest. As noted with the various studies cited in Chapter 2, there are different conclusions within the research on the impact of financial aid on completion. Different researchers have found that it is the type of aid that influences persistence, while others have found that it is the amount of aid awarded that makes a difference in persistence. The findings in various studies have been inconclusive and inconsistent as it relates to the influence of financial aid on retention. Researchers should continue to pursue these questions about the packaging of student aid and its influence on student enrollment and completion.

While Wohlgemuth et al.’s (2007) concept was supported by most students in the study, it was evident that low-income students were concerned about individual awards if it included loans. For example, one low-income student indicated that his parents did not
believe in loans, because they do not like paying back borrowed money—they like free money. Another student stated that he had a strong aversion to debt because both his parents were in massive debt, and he would reduce his enrollment or not attend if he had to take out a loan. Low-income students were more debt adverse than their middle-income counterparts.

Middle-income students seemed to view loans as a way to spread out the cost of tuition and other fees that had to be paid. A College Board (2015) report helped to address how middle-income students think about loans: “Education loans do not lower the price, but they do make it possible to spread payments out over time” (p. 9). The relief of not having to pay the entire amount up front and spreading out payments is critical to the families that do not have significant cash flow each month once bills are paid. The makeup of the financial aid package, which includes student loans, also has an impact on retention. For example, Cuccaro-Alamin and Choy (1998) found that increasing student loans within the award package during later years (i.e., junior/senior year) does increase retention and graduation rates (as cited in Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). This notion was solidified by several of the students who indicated that they would consider taking out loans in their junior and senior years if doing so would get them to graduation. Students seem to value their education the closer they get to completion, therefore not letting anything stand in their way of finishing, and if that means taking out loans, they were inclined to do so.

Understanding the total award package is critical for students, the University needs to provide training and resources for colleges and departments to understand how their awarding process impacts student’s completion. According to a senior administrator,
the University is addressing this challenge “by collaborating for more strategic and optimal use of our financial resources with a holistic view of the student, combining efforts between colleges and central administration.” In looking at the financial aid utilization data based on the percentage of students served compared to headcount, the story is not all that different. The overall percentage of students served has increased from 68% in 2012 to 70% in 2016. The question to be asked is how strategic is the awarding process and are the programs meeting the needs of low- and middle-income students. As noted by Perna and Jones (2013) in *The State of College Access and Completion: Improving College Success for Students*, affordability is one of the factors affecting access and completion for low- to middle-income students as they face increases in tuition that are outpacing financial aid programs and what parents can afford to pay. Clearly, the University and the State play a significant role in developing a strategic financial aid plan to meets the needs of students, especially low- and middle-income students.

Affordability impacts one’s ability to pay and is a factor that could affect retention, specifically with low- and middle-income students. Despite The University of Utah having one of the lowest tuition rates of all PAC 12 schools, students are leaving for reasons other than academic. With students having financial challenges to stay enrolled, the University should consider a financial aid strategy to support completion. It is important to note that the financial aid strategy must be data-informed and developed in a holistic manner that incorporates education and outreach, communication, and a packaging philosophy that meet the needs of students, specifically low- and middle-income students, and should be a part of a larger strategic enrollment management plan.
for the State. Outreach is important to persistence because as noted in the findings students are making short term decisions of whether to complete the financial aid process or not which has an impact on their long term thinking of the cost benefit analysis of human capital theory.

Issues related to retention and completion are at the forefront of challenges for most institutions. In the 2018 Outlook survey produced by *University Business*, 86% of campus leaders indicated that their top overall priority is student success initiatives, and 72% said that enrollment declines would produce the greatest potential for causing institutional harm. The State and the University find [themselves] not only with the same imperative to address access and equity issues, but now [they] must do so in an even more complex environment, punctuated by greater socio-economic gaps in American populations, mission overlap, continued financial constraints and a muddled public policy landscape. (AACRAO, 2008, p. 87)

Increasing retention to sustain enrollment and increase completion rates must be the focus of the University and the State. The study can assist in targeting resources to best meet the mission of the State and the University and the goals of its students. State and institutional leaders must come together to create this holistic strategic enrollment plan that encompasses a budgeting and tuition policy, as well as a comprehensive financial aid plan for higher education to be successful in Utah.

**Implications for Future Studies**

The findings of this study are incredibly important for enrollment managers to play a pivotal role in assuring every state and university has a satisfactory number of new students and currently enrolled students to provide sufficient net revenue, that the characteristics of the enrolled student body help to advance prestige and rankings of
institutions, and the ethnic a socioeconomic diversity of enrolled students (AACRAO, 2008). An implication for future research could be that public institutions in the State replicate this study and then use the findings to develop a statewide strategic financial aid plan that supports access to completion for low- and middle-income students.

This study could also be replicated by other institutions to gain a better understanding of the needs of their students, how to educate and communicate with them on financial aid matters, and how to develop a strategic awarding philosophy that will benefit all students.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Definitions of Terms

**Departure**: Refers only to institutional departure

**Entering Freshmen (FR)**: A high school graduate who has not matriculated at another university before entering the university

**Early Admit (EA)**: A high school student who completes their high school degree prior to their original high school graduation date

**Degree-Seeking**: A matriculated student seeking a degree

**Low-Income**: Students who are eligible to receive a Pell Grant

**Middle-Income**: Based on the census data nationally and for Utah for 2015 (defined at $55,775 nationally and 62,912 for Utah)

**Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)**: A form that can be prepared annually by current and prospective college students in the United States to determine their eligibility for student financial aid (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FAFSA)

**Cost of Attendance**: In the discussion of cost of college in the United States, the cost of attendance (COA) is a statutory term for the estimated full and reasonable cost of completing a full academic year (usually 9 months) as a full-time student. The cost of attendance is published by each educational institution and includes: (a) tuition and fees, (b) books and supplies, (c) room and board, (d) personal cost, and (e) transportation to and from school.

**Expected Family Contribution (EFC)**: A measure of a family’s financial strength and is calculated according to a formula established by law. A family’s taxed and untaxed income, assets, and benefits (such as unemployment or Social Security) are all considered in the formula. Also considered is family size and the number of family members who will attend college during the year (U.S. Department of Education)

**Financial Aid**: There are three basic forms of financial aid: gift aid (grants and scholarships), work-study, and loans.

**Unmet Need**: Calculated as the COA minus the EFC minus any financial aid received equals unmet need
**Undergraduate Student:** A degree-seeking student who is not classified as a graduate or professional student

**International Students:** Students who must seek a visa to study in the United States

**Transfer Students:** Students who have previously completed and/or attempted at least one transferable course from an accredited institution before entering the university

**Leave of Absence:** Degree seeking students who are in good academic standing and have an approved leave of absence from the institution for a period of time not to exceed seven consecutive semesters

**Student Not Academically Eligible to Return:** Persons who, for a period of time are not allowed to enroll in college or university courses due to academic nonperformance, behavioral, or professional misconduct.

**Drop-Outs:** Those who leave the institution and do not return for additional study at any time

**Retention Rates:** Report for the cohort of all full-time, first-time bachelor’s degree-seeking undergraduate who entered in the fall or preceding summer term. The initial cohort may be adjusted for students who departed for the following reasons: death, permanent disability, service in armed forces, foreign aid service, of the federal government or official church mission. Retention is used interchangeably with persistence

**Persistence Rates:** Same definition as retention and will be used interchangeably.

**Graduation Rate:** The percentage of students in a cohort of first-time freshmen who complete their baccalaureate degree in 6 years

**Part-Time Status:** Designated when a student registers and enrolls for less than 12 credit hours per semester

**Full-Time Status:** Designated when a student registers and enrolls for 12 credit hours or more per semester

**Persister:** Defined as a student who enrolls in college and remains enrolled until degree completion
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Questions for Groups 1 and 2:

• What has been your experience at The University of Utah?
• What has been your experience with the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid?
• Were you the primary person to complete the financial aid process? If not who did the process for you?
• What is your perception of using financial aid?
• How important was receiving financial aid in influencing your decision to stay enrolled at The University of Utah?
• Specifically, what part of the financial aid award package had the most influence in you staying enrolled? Was it the type of awards within the package such as grants, loans, etc.? Was it the total amount of the awards given that made the difference?
• Did you or do you have loans as a part of your award package? What is your perception of loans? Did receiving loans have a positive or negative influence on your decision to stay enrolled?
• Is there anything I have not asked you that you want to add regarding how financial aid influenced your decision to stay enrolled?

Questions for Groups 1a and 2a:

• What has been your experience at The University of Utah?
• What was your reasoning for leaving the University?
• To what extent, if at all, did financial aid play in your decision to depart? Specifically, what part of the financial aid award package had the most influence in you leaving the University? Was it the type of awards within the package such as grants, loans, etc.? Was it the total amount of the awards given that made the difference?
• Were you the primary person to complete the financial aid process? If not who did the process for you?
• What is your perception of using financial aid?
• Each year that you applied for financial aid and received an award letter, did you understand how the awards would impact your ability to pay either in a positive or negative way?
• How important was receiving financial aid in influencing your decision to depart from The University of Utah?
• Did you have loans as a part of your award package? What is your perception of loans? Did receiving loans have a positive or negative influence on your decision to depart from the University?
• Did you discuss your situation with a financial aid counselor or academic counselor prior to leaving the institution? Results of that meeting? If not why?
• Is there anything that I have not asked you that you want to add regarding how financial aid influenced your decision to stay enrolled?
Appendix C

Notes From Dissertation Data Committee

9-19-17

Research Questions:
• Change questions to reflect all four groups. Add a question for 1A: What role did financial aid play for financially needy students who did persist? 2A. What role did financial aid play for middle-income student who did persist?

Under student records data:
• Add Fall to 2013-14 and Fall 2014
• Add under bullet of enrollment data…Coding that was used looked at enrolled versus not enrolled and specifically looked to see if the student was enrolled in the fall of the third year. Then the student was coded enrolled or not enrolled and placed in the buckets based on that information. Student were all full time.
• Demographic Data….Need to look at this to determine what would be a confounding variable? Would it make a difference? Recommendation to add that not all factors that were collected would be used for purposeful sampling but could possibly be used in the interview process. For example, use the college /major information. Also use enrollment status by term in questions being asked in protocol.
• Look at when a student must declare a major…could use that for interview question. Does aid that a department gives based on a student major impact influence of aid on persistence. Are students who do not have a major more at risk in dropping out and what is the impact that aid has on this decision.

Financial Aid
• Change the statement to say those who completed a FAFSA “for” instead of within their first year of study.
• Middle-Income Students….Note that the income numbers are not a range but a Data High point cut offs for resident 62 or less and not pell eligible and if they were nonresident the high cut off point was 52 or less and not pell eligible. Need to clarify this in this section.
• Income data need to change from AGI to wages plus untaxed income…..need better explanation in the data.
• Question using federal unmet need or the U of U unmet need…..committee believed using both. Also a good interview questions….difference in what was awarded versus what the student accepted. Understanding if being awarded loans versus other aid would have made a difference in persistence rates. Understanding in the interviews if the student could have taken out loans but did not want to
• If the student did not fill out a fafsa they were excluded… however need to clarify that the student would have had to complete the fafsa within the first year to be included in the study.

• Those who did not fill out FAFSA for the first year and then completed in the second year, those students were not included. If the student did not have income for the first year then they were excluded. Understanding why this is important.

• Once the both data sets were completed, they were combined and the students were divided into four groups. Add that under the combining of files section.

Descriptive analysis:
• Change ethnic groups to all underrepresented ethnic categories

• Concern with combining all ethnic groups because in two of the charts, Asian and Hispanic students have significant numbers. Agreed that when picking students make sure that there is a good representation of Asian and Hispanic students…..especially in groups where there are higher numbers.

• Tease out the unmet need zero level to include those who actually had a true 0 unmet need and those who have a zero because the financial aid process was not completed therefore the COA is 0 and the unmet need is 0. (Add to chart)

Rationale By doing this can ask a question in the protocol if this was a place that the Financial Aid Office could have intervened especially when the student did not complete the process. Most of the students who did not complete the process are disproportionally middle-income students. Was the communication effective…how could it be changed…..

• Any other data that should be included: Paul…LDS played into this…excluded Leave of Absence (LOA) people. If they did not fill out a loa and stopped coming then the student would have been included…is this a limitation…more women in the study than men…. This could possibly could come up in the interview if they did not fill out the LOA.

• How to deal with living on campus versus off campus….Coa data will reflect if the student lived on campus, off campus with parents….also can ask this question in the interview

Purposeful Sampling
• Discussion occurred regarding if I should use the representation of the freshmen class as a whole or the representation of each of the four groups being studied when selecting interviewees. Recommendation…look at the ratio break down within each of the four groups and then pull interview sample for each based on this. Look at the percentages of each group instead of entire class. Will have to round up and down.

• Take out residency since I will be only looking at resident students.
Appendix D
Descriptive Analysis

Total Population of Students Queried
FAFSA Completion

- Completed: 1,152 (74%)
- Incomplete/Blank: 413 (26%)

Students by Admit Term

- Fall 2013: 776 (50%)
- Fall 2014: 789 (50%)
Total Population of Students Queried

Gender
- Male: 660 (42%)
- Female: 884 (57%)
- Unknown: 21 (1%)

Residency
- Non-Residents: 97 (6%)
- Residents: 1468 (94%)
Total Population of Students Queried
All Underrepresented Ethnic Categories

- White: 647, 41%
- Unknown: 3, 0%
- Students of Color: 915, 59%

Total Population of Students Queried
Income Level and Enrollment

- Low Income Enrolled (LEN): 53, 4%
- Low Income Not Enrolled (LNE): 129, 8%
- Middle Income Enrolled (MEN): 878, 56%
- Middle Income Not Enrolled (MNE): 505, 32%
TOTAL POPULATION OF STUDENTS QUERIED INCOME LEVEL AND ENROLLMENT

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<tr>
<td>Middle Income Not Enrolled (MNE)</td>
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Appendix E

Participant Demographic Matrix

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110


