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IDENTIFYING REASONS FOR ATTRITION AT THE CLEMENTE COURSE IN THE HUMANITIES, WORCESTER, MA

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**IDENTIFYING REASONS FOR ATTRITION AT THE CLEMENTE COURSE IN THE
HUMANITIES, WORCESTER, MA**

MOLLIE RAYNER-HASELKORN

Degree will be conferred May 2018

A Master's Paper

**Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, in partial
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International Development, Community and Environment**

And accepted on the recommendation of

Ramon Borges-Mendez, Chief Instructor

ABSTRACT

IDENTIFYING REASONS FOR ATTRITION AT THE CLEMENTE COURSE IN THE HUMANITIES, WORCESTER, MA

MOLLIE RAYNER-HASELKORN

This paper identifies reasons for attrition and possible solutions to higher retention at the Clemente Course in the Humanities, Worcester (Clemente). Over the last four years, since the re-launch of the Clemente, the retention rate of students completing the program has remained around 50%. Clemente is an alternative, adult education program that provides college level humanities classes to majority low-income, minority adults. In this paper qualitative research methods are used to interview students, professors and an administrator at Clemente. Based upon qualitative research, supported by retention theory, three main reasons for attrition are identified: student academic self-esteem, diversity of student learners and challenges personal student challenges. Possible solutions are provided based upon the reasons identified.

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the students, professors and administrators at Clemente Course in the Humanities, Worcester. Your hard work, courage and dedication is inspiring. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be a part of your loving community.

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Introduction

Executive Summary

Worcester Clemente Course in the Humanities (Clemente) is part of a network of Clemente Courses around the globe. Clemente is an organization that inspires and equips motivated, low-income adults to take charge of their lives. The Clemente Course in the Humanities was founded in lower Manhattan by Earl Shorris in 1995.¹ The program began on the idea that low-income adults could benefit just as much as Ivy League freshman from learning about the humanities and thus should have equal access to humanities courses.² Earl Shorris believed the humanities “gives people a sense of self, to see the world and themselves differently...people who know the humanities become good citizens, become active, not acted upon.”³

The course from 1995-96 was so powerful and soon inspired many more. Shorris helped to develop independently run Clemente Courses around the United States and in other countries. He received a National Humanities Medal for his efforts.⁴ New York’s Bard college now administers the Clemente Course, giving academic credit, professional development support, outreach, fundraising and academic oversight.⁵

In current Clemente Courses, students typically face significant barriers to education. Clemente is a year long program that offers free, accredited humanities courses to under-served

¹ Esther Ferington, National Endowment for the Humanities, <https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/national-humanities-medals/the-clemente-course-in-the-humanities> (March 10, 2018).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

adults. The nine-month course meets weekly for four hours.⁶ According to Clemente’s official website, the experience of Clemente is quite rigorous, but the class is accessible to motivated and engaged individuals.⁷ Now, over 10,000 students have benefited from Clemente Course in the Humanities.⁸

The Clemente Course chapter in Worcester relaunched itself 4 years ago. According to Clemente, “this program activates students’ intelligence, fosters the skills to make informed decisions, and kindles the self-confidence to act upon them. Clemente uses the transformative experience of the humanities to spark a productive change in its students.”⁹ Joybel Kakaire, a graduation speaker for the cohort of 2015-16, reflected on her experience at The Clemente Course in Worcester: “It calls for soul searching and knocks at the door of purpose in an individual, but it is also a turning point in our hope for humanity.”¹⁰

Problem Statement

At Clemente, every student receives all of the course materials for free. In addition, transportation and childcare are also provided, removing crucial barriers to attendance that many students in higher education face. Despite the supports provided, retention has remained around 50% throughout the last three years.¹¹ In this current cohort (4th year of Clemente Worcester) seventeen students remain out of 29.¹² Student retention is vital for the success of Clemente for a number of reasons. For one, funders often look at student retention rates as a indicator to donate

⁶ Lela Hilton, Clemente Course in the Humanities, <https://clementecourse.org/about/> (accessed February 20, 2018).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview with Administrator, January 15.

¹² Ibid.

or not. With lower retention rates and no significant improvement, funders are less likely to donate or continue to donate. Secondly, on a basic level, students cannot benefit from the wonderful opportunities Clemente offers if they are not able to stay in the program until graduation.

Research Questions

What are possible reasons students drop out of the Clemente Course in the Humanities in Worcester? What are possible solutions to attrition that may increase student retention? My research examines reasons for attrition at Clemente in Worcester and provides possible solutions to improve student retention. I have collected qualitative data to generate possible reasons and solutions to attrition. My unit of analysis is the Clemente program, specifically students who are currently enrolled in the program, or alumni. My dependent variable is retention. I have centered the student perspective in my analysis, yet I have also interviewed alumni, professors and an administrator to provide a holistic perspective to retention. According to McLenney and Waiwaiole, “Improving student retention is not something that can be done by an isolated group at the college...or achieved through a single stand-alone initiative. Improving retention rate is a collective responsibility: everyone---faculty, staff and administrators, along with students themselves--must work together to promote student success.”¹³ Analyzing the perspective of students, faculty and administration separately, as well as finding connections and disconnections between various perspectives leads to a more well-rounded analysis on student retention.

¹³ Evelyn Waiwaiole, *Student Voices on Student Retention*, Community College Journal, 75. (2005): 34.

Definitions

The word retention is often associated with persistence and progression. Different scholars have defined retention in various ways. In this paper, I will consider Tinto's definition and Bean's definition. Tinto defines retention as "Students meeting clearly defined educational goals whether they are course credits, career advancement, or the achievement of a new skill."¹⁴ Bean develops this idea of retention further. Retention is accomplished when, "Students' successful academic and social integration into the college community, marked by the feeling that one fits at the institution and positive educational attitudes and experiences."¹⁵ The Clemente program views retention as students participating in the program from September until graduation in May. Students can take the course for 6 credits, 3 credits or no credit, yet they are still Clemente graduates and considered students who persisted within the program.

Background on Retention at Clemente Worcester

Clemente in Worcester relaunched itself in 2014. Each year Clemente takes about 30 out of 60 applicants to be a part of the cohort year. The table below shows the number of students who graduated and graduation rate for every year at Clemente Worcester.¹⁶

¹⁴ Lydia Voigt, Student Success, Retention and Graduation: Definitions, Theories, Practices, Patterns and Trends, Stenson. (2008): 5.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶ Interview with Administrator, January 15.

Cohort Year	Number of Students who Graduated	Graduation Rate
2014-15	16 out of 30	53%
2015-16	19 out of 30	63%
2016-17	19 out of 30	63%
Current Cohort (so far)	17 out of 29	59%

Several trends have developed at Clemente in terms of retention. The reported reasons for attrition are majority personal reasons outside the program in the student’s own life.¹⁷ Yet, some students still leave for unknown reasons and a few reported to leave for curriculum related reasons.¹⁸ One clear trend, consistent over all four years, is if students make it to second Semester, they will most likely graduate. Thus, students at Clemente are most likely to drop out in the first semester.¹⁹

Main Findings

The main findings of this research project show there are three major reasons that contribute to attrition at Clemente Worcester: diversity of learners, lack of academic self-esteem among students and personal challenges faced by students. The reasons are acknowledged by many professors, administrators and students in Clemente, yet there have been no significant

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Ibid.

solutions found by the program. All three reasons are intertwined with student identity. Types of learners, academic self-esteem and personal challenges are all factors significantly influenced by student identity. Thus, understanding student identity at Clemente Worcester is an underlying key method to addressing these problems and forming substantial retention solutions.

Chapter 1: Conceptual Framework

Clemente is a unique educational program, and thus retention theory based upon standard higher education institutions is not directly relatable. Clemente does teach college level classes to adults similar to a many community colleges, however, Clemente is a free program and provides additional support systems: childcare, course material, and transportation. In addition, Clemente's student body is very diverse. People from different cultures, ethnic and racial backgrounds, ages and varying income levels. To account for the distinct characteristics of the Clemente program, I have used several retention theorists from different perspectives to analyze the data I collected.

Tinto's theory on retention has become the foundation for retention research. Tinto's theoretical model is used to understand the effect of multifaceted interactions within the system on students persistence. Tinto wrote: "It is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his [or her] commitment to the institution that determines

whether or not the individual decides to drop out”²⁰ Tinto argues that students are more likely to remain enrolled in an institution if they become connected to the social and academic life of the institution. Students become integrated in the program, by developing connections to individuals, participating in clubs, or engaging in academic activities. Students who engage in these activities are more likely to persist than those who remain on the periphery.²¹

Tinto points out that student integration into an institution can occur along two dimensions, the academic and the social. Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life at the institution, while social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections.²² The two ideas, social and academic, interact and enhance one another. Tinto notes that there are both formal and informal systems within the institutions that can encourage integration and persistence.²³ Below is a graphic representation of Tinto’s model of departure showing the various interactions of variables that lead to a students’ departure decision.²⁴

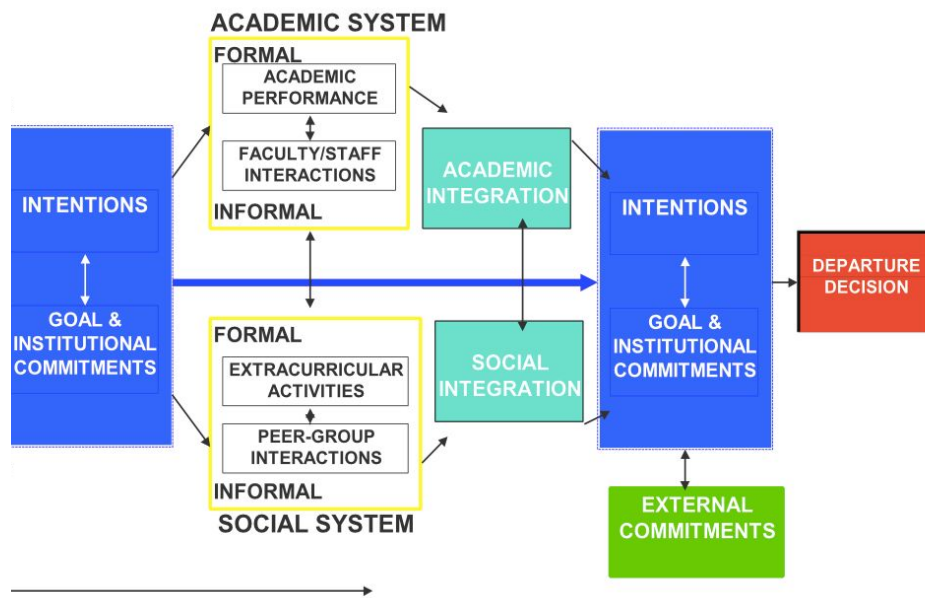
²⁰ Melinda, Karp, *An Exploration of Tinto’s Integration Framework For Community College Students*, Community College Research Center, 12. (2008): 3.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, 1993).

²⁴ Ibid.

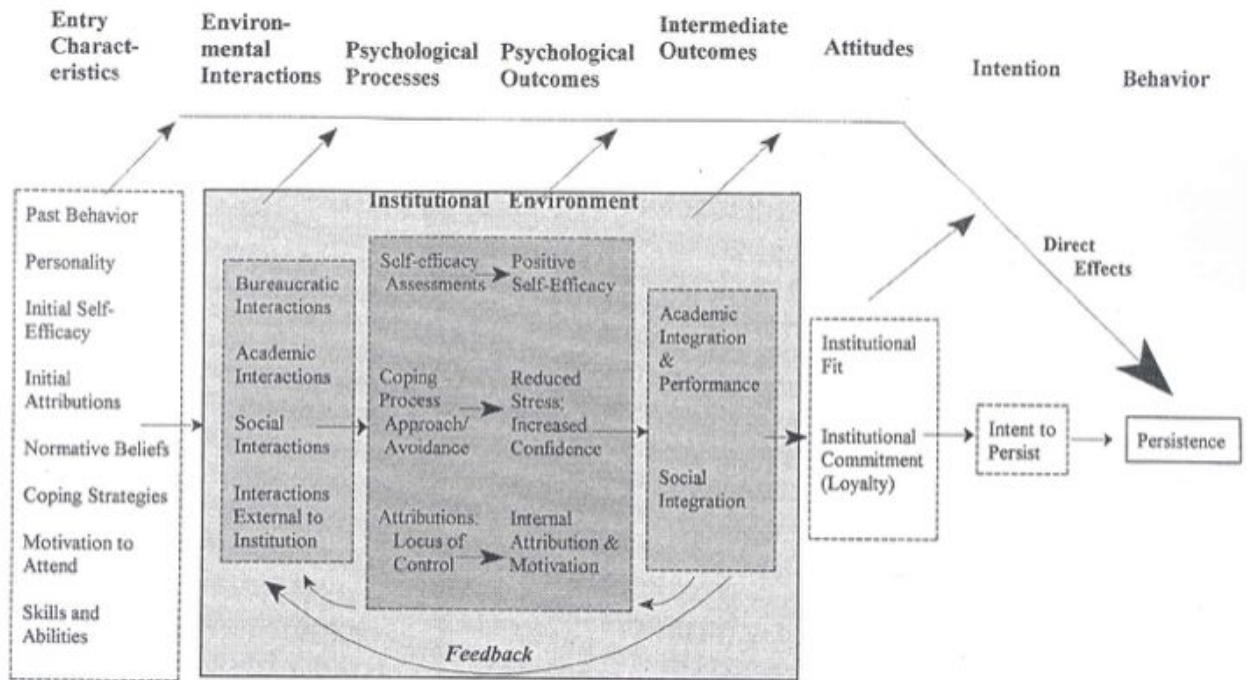


Tinto's model accounts for student characteristics and education experience, it fails to include academic and social interactions of students outside of their current experience. In addition, Tinto focuses on young students who live on campus and attend traditional four year colleges. Bean and Metzner add on to Tinto's theory to construct a conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate students.²⁵ Their theory acknowledges that nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment rather than by social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition. Non-traditional students are usually defined as part-time, commuter students, according to Bean and Metzner.²⁶ This model accounts for background and identity variables (age, ethnicity, gender, past school performance) interacting with both academic variables (study habits, academic advising...) and environmental variables (finances,

²⁵ John Bean and Barbara Metzner, *A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition*, American Educational Research Association, Vol 44, No. 4. (1985).

²⁶ Ibid

outside encouragement and family responsibilities).²⁷ These interactions create academic and psychological outcomes (internal motivation, increased confidence, self-efficiency) which in turn produce intent to leave or persist. Below is the Bean and Metzner's student retention model.²⁸



I combined Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's theories to develop a more accurate model that applies to the students at Clemente. Adult learners have many environmental variables influencing their experience--for example, family and job responsibilities. Each background variable is expected to affect how the student will interact with the institution.²⁹ Combining models of Bean and Metzner with Tinto better account for retention theory of adult students. Yet, Clemente is not a traditional higher education program--there are no letter grades, GPA,

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

majors or various courses offered to choose from. Thus, some variables included in Bean and Metzner's model are not applicable to Clemente.

Clemente has a diverse student body--many of the students at Clemente are adult minority, low income students. The idea of academic and social variables reflected in Bean and Metzner's and Tinto's theory does not adequately account for broader systems of oppression that minority and low-income students face. Clemente in the Humanities is founded upon the idea that economic, cultural and social opportunities should not impede on one's ability to study the humanities at a college level. Thus, Clemente has built its program on providing education for people who may face economic, cultural and social barriers.

Despite the values Clemente holds, it is important to acknowledge that Clemente still exists within constructed racial, economic and gender systems in American society. For instance, in the United States there is a strong correlation between poverty and race--this contributes to the education achievement gap that exists between minority students and their dominantly Caucasian counterparts.³⁰ The result is a shift of power and privilege to the dominant group and the marginalization of minority and poor students. The dominant systemically oppressive categories (gender, race, income and sexual orientation) that exist in current day American society influence all institutions and individuals within this society.³¹

Like all parts of society, Clemente Worcester is still influenced by these dominant oppressive systems and therefore certain parts of the program may perpetuate dominant oppressive systems that exist in American culture. Although the program's mission works toward providing opportunities to minority and low-income students, the program still exists

³⁰ Steven Carbone, *Race, Class and Oppression: Solutions for Active Learning and Literacy in the Classroom*, *Inquiries Journal/ Student Pulse*, 2 (01). (2010).

³¹ *Ibid.*

under an umbrella of oppressive systemic structures. Clemente Worcester must be cognizant of the systems that students in the program are oppressed by and acknowledge that students experience oppression both inside and outside of Clemente due to a number of identity characteristics: race, gender, age, income and sexual orientation.

To take into account oppressive systems in American society in the retention model I consider Braxton's theory. Braxton includes cultural variables to re-work and critique previous retention theorists' models and ideas in order to understand retention theory that better fits minority and low-income students. He acknowledges that many retention theorists tend to relate the retention of minority students as similar, if not identical to those of majority students.³² His idea is not to discredit Tinto and other retention theorists, but rather add complexity to this theory based upon students in varied ethnic, racial social and economic backgrounds.³³ Braxton's main critique is that minority students enter an institution that is majority white and thus have to adjust to this culture--making academic and social integration a much different and more challenging process.³⁴ This does not directly relate to Clemente, as Clemente is an incredibly diverse student body, yet he centers identity as a variable to retention in his theory and thus provides an important perspective on retention for low-income and minority students.

³² John Braxton, *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The data from the student, professor and administrator interviews is analyzed separately--each perspective requires a unique analysis. All perspectives, however, involve analyzation based on academic, personal and social variables identified using Braxton, Tinto and Bean and Metzner. I then draw conclusions from all of the perspectives to find common trends in the analysis. My analysis begins with the student perspective as my methodology is student centered. I analyze the data from seven student interviews, two professor interviews and one administrator interview.

For the interview process, I based my questions around understanding academic integration, identity and social integration of the students at Clemente. First from I interviewed students, then professors and an administrator. Below is an example of questions I asked. Each set of questions within each theme is adjusted based on the perspective being interviewed.

Academic Integration

1. Students
 - a. How is the workload at Clemente? Do you face any challenges?
 - b. Do you enjoy the Subjects you study at Clemente?
 - c. Do you enjoy being in class? Why or why not?
2. Professor
 - a. What are academic challenges you feel your students face?
 - b. What methods do you use to address those challenges?
3. Administrator
 - a. What support systems does Clemente have to help students with academic needs?
 - b. Do students use the academic support systems?

Identity

1. Students
 - a. Do you live with your family?
 - b. Do you have a job?

c. Are you ever absent because of outside responsibilities?
2. Professors
a. Do you feel students struggle with managing Clemente with their outside life?

3. Administrator
a. What personal challenges do students tend to face at Clemente?

Social Integration

1. Students
 - a. Do you have friends from Clemente?
 - b. Do you like your professors?
2. Professors
 - a. Do you have positive interactions with your students?
 - b. Do you value community in your classroom
3. Administrators
 - a. Are there any community building activities that go on at Clemente?
 - b. Is there orientation at Clemente?

Student Perspective

I organized my student interviews into three main factors: identity, social and academic based within the theory of Tinto, Bean and Metzner, and Braxton. Below is the template I used to organize my student interviews:

Academic integration

- Grade (year at clemente)
- Academic self-esteem
- Enjoying your subject
- Enjoying studying your subject(s)--study patterns
- Level of difficulty
- Academic advising

Identity

- Race/Class/Ethnicity/Gender

- Access to basic human needs (health, housing, food, transportation)
- Family responsibilities
- Hours of employment
- Personal Goals
- English as a Second Language?
- Educational background

Social Integration

- Connections with Peers
- Personal contact with Faculty (professors/administrators)
- Positive or negative feeling within social situations

Five students I spoke to were in the current cohort. One person was in the process of dropping out of Clemente. And the last person was in the first cohort. Everyone except one current student was taking the courses at Clemente to receive college credit. At Clemente there is an option to take the courses for no credit and thus homework and other assignments are optional. Ideally, I would have liked to interview a more diverse group of students, however, the opportunity to interview students from all cohorts was limited.

For each section academic, personal identity and social there is a compiled data chart that summarizes students' responses. I then go through each variable in each section to explain the importance of the variable in relation to the section and retention at Clemente as a whole.

Chapter 3: Findings

Student Perspective

3.1 Academic Integration

I examined 5 main academic variables: grade, academic self-esteem, enjoying subject and study, level of difficulty and academic advising. The curriculum taught and assignments given creates student interest/non-interest. Students express study habits and skills to show the the student is taking on student responsibilities and identifying as a student. The level the students express to take on academic interest and student responsibilities reveals the level of academic integration. In addition, recognizing possible barriers or contributors to academic integration: self-esteem and level of difficulty. Support systems provided by the institution to improve academic integration: academic advising.

I constructed a chart based on the retention model to show each student interview outcome (see chart on following page).

Grade (credit?)	Academic Self-Esteem	Feelings of Connection or Enjoyment to Subject/Study	Level of Difficulty	Academic Advising
Interview 1 Current cohort (not for credit)	-Has not been in school for so long -Older and feels like her brain does not absorb information	-Feels connected to the subject of Philosophy -Enjoys Critical Thinking -Does not do the HW -Connects what she learns to her outside life.	-Overwhelming "old english" style--need to be broken down more	-Does not go to tutoring even though she probably should
Interview 2 Current cohort (taking class for credit)	Low at first but improved after she continued	-Not going to stop doing hw or trying -Enjoys art history -Serious about being a student -Does all hw -Prioritizes studies	-Finds it challenging-	-Tutor helps with grammar and vocab, but does not help with content
Interview 3 First cohort	-Gone to college not as intimidated by academia	-Appreciated diversity in texts -Coursework was enlightening -No rules or guidelines -Motivated to be a student	-To keep up was challenging	-More support from tutors (immigrants and refugees)
Interview 4 Current cohort For Credit	-Used to academia knew what to expect	-Likes philosophy -Wants to take advantage of this opportunity	-The specific textbook is very challenging and wordy -It is classic writing and I am lost -When you are lost you cannot expand your mind with the concepts because you are trying to understand them in the first place -A lot of reading	-Tutors are helpful
Interview 5 Current cohort For credit	-Struggles with writing and pronunciation -Feels like I am improving already -First experience with college level english-fast and intense -Feels comfortable because there are a lot of foreign language learners	-Philosophy--wish there was more time for each philosopher -Listens to audio book while she studies -Looks forward to each class -Relates philosophers to her life -Makes connections between class and life	-Able to balance workload -First challenging, intimidating as an older person -Coming from another culture and country is stressful	-Had to reach out a few times before the tutor got back to her -Try to come as often as possible but hard with everything going on her life
Interview 6 Current cohort (Leaving Clemente)	-At first low but now feels more confident -Been out of school for so long -Feels more confident now only knew a few people felt shy -Feel more comfortable speaking in class	-Pushes herself to raise her hand -Does not love big binder -"Classes intertwined"	-Going back to school after a long time can be challenging -Struggled with writing a paper for the first few months	-Emails writing tutors -"Trouble citing and grammar" -Don't use them a lot but helpful when she does -Study groups and tutors available -Hard to go to stud groups because she is busy.
Interview 7 Current cohort For Credit	-Shy did not know what to expect -Worried about being out of school for so long -"That is what made me the most nervous being out of school for so long. I didn't really know how to study or be in class for long."	-Philosophy process of looking at things from a different lens -More guest speakers -More detail in syllabus	-Struggled to write papers -Being a mom and balancing workload-makes it work	

3.1.1 *Enjoyment of Subject and Study*

Firstly, I analyzed the interviews for students' enjoyment of subject and study. I looked for expressions of enjoyment, interest and connection to subject and work. Six out of the seven students expressed feelings of enjoyment, interest and connection to subject or work. Three out of the six students expressed connecting what they learned at Clemente to their own life.

A large part of academic integration, according to Tinto, is "enjoying your subject" and "the study patterns required/requested."³⁵ The act of enjoying the subject and work you do in a certain educational context relates to one's intrinsic motivation to continue their education. Thus, when students at Clemente express interest, joy, and connection with the subject and the work it is more likely they will persist with the program.

3.1.2 *Student Responsibilities*

In multiple studies done on attrition in higher of education, Pantages and Creedon, concluded that students who stated that they possessed poor study skills and study habits were more likely to drop out.³⁶ In addition, students who persist spend more time studying than dropouts. I examined the interviews for students taking on student responsibilities. Did they talk about study habits and work ethic, attendance? One student explained how she did not do the homework (this student also was not taking the class for credit). Two students expressed they were serious about their work and prioritized their studies. One student expressed how they were very motivated to be a student. Three students did not discuss their motivation to do work. If

³⁵ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, 1993).

³⁶ Timothy, Pantages and Carol Creedon. *Studies of College Attrition* (Reed College, 1990).

students are not practicing study skills and study habits they may be less academically integrated in the Clemente program and more likely to dropout.

3.1.3 Self-Esteem

Every person I interviewed reflected on their academic self-esteem. I correlated expressions of worry to low self-esteem and expressions of confidence to high self-esteem. Four students I interviewed expressed worry when reflecting on the academics at Clemente. All four of the students mention the reason for worry to be partly (if not all) because they had not been in school for a long time. Other reasons of worry were due to unknown expectations and unpreparedness due to English as a second language. Two people expressed feelings of confidence due to recent experience in academia in the United States. One said she had “gone to college and was not as intimidated by academics” and the other student said he was “used to academia and knew what to expect.”³⁷ Two students expressed that as time continued their confidence in the program improved and thus had higher academic self-esteem.

Academic self-esteem often can be a crucial component to student retention in a non-traditional and adult education program. Many students come into the program with little recent academic experience. Carol Kaaworm suggests, “many adult learners experience significant anxiety and self-consciousness about their acceptance, place in a collegiate environment.”³⁸ In addition, “confident and resilient learners find entry into college often challenging their identities and sense of adult competence...they may face challenges negotiating

³⁷ Student interview, January 10, 2018.

³⁸ Carol, Kaaworm, *Emotional Challenges of Adult Learners in Higher Education*, 120. (2008): 29.

the institutional procedures, the time commitments and demands of the course work, and the ego demands of classroom assessment. They may sometimes be discouraged or disheartened.”³⁹

When looking at Academic Integration among the students at Clemente it is crucial to consider academic self-esteem as this can prove to be a barrier. If students do not feel they have the confidence to be a student at Clemente they are not identifying with the student role and may not be able to enjoy the subject and study and accomplish student responsibilities.

3.1.4 Level of Difficulty

I analyzed level of difficulty--students’ expression of feeling challenged, overwhelmed, lost and stressed when discussing the work at Clemente correlated to students experiencing difficulty with the work in the program. All seven students I interviewed felt one or multiple of these feelings, however, the reasoning behind the feelings is different. Two students mention the textbook as a reason for experiencing difficulty with the work. Two students mention they experience difficulty when it comes to writing papers. One student mentions difficulty due to coming into another culture as she had recently come to the United States. Another student mentions the reading to be challenging.

3.1.5 Academic Advising

Finally, the last theme I considered was academic advising. Did students mention academic advising? If so, did students find academic advising helpful and did they make use of

³⁹ Ibid.

the advising available? Three students mention using the tutors once and a while, but not that often due to time constraints. One student did not mention academic tutors at all.

3.2 Identity

The identity section I includes seven major variables. First, characteristics of one's identity: race, class and gender. In addition, the last characteristic I included is country of origin and when students had moved to the United States. The second theme identified is access to basic needs. This includes steady, safe housing, sufficient food access, mental and physical health and transportation available to commute back and forth to and from Clemente. Does the Clemente student mention any personal barriers to accessing these needs? Third, family responsibilities--what type of responsibilities do they hold in their family? Fourth, employment--what are the hours and flexibility of their job (if applicable)? Fifth, educational background--what is their past experience in traditional educational settings? The sixth factor is English as a second language--does the student consider themselves an ESL learner? Do they struggle with writing, speaking and understanding english? Finally, the last theme is personal goals--what are the student's aspirations and hopes for their future after Clemente?

3.2.1 Identity Characteristics

For identity characteristics I asked students about how they identified themselves in terms of race, class, gender and country of origin. Six of the students identified as females and one as male. Three of the students identified as white--two white females and one white man. Two

females identified as Asian. One female as hispanic. One female as indigenous. Three students are born outside the United States and four born within the United States. Three people identified as middle/lower class and four people identified as lower class.

Overall the students are racially diverse. In addition, almost half of the students were not born in the United States. In terms of gender among this set of students it is disproportionately female.

It is crucial to consider the racial, gender, class, age and home country of your student body when examining reasons for attrition. The identities of the students affects the educational needs of the students and thus different supports may be needed to increase retention based on the identity makeup of the students. Educational related retention studies have developed extensively in the past twenty years to take into account race and class. Although Clemente is a free and alternative education program, rather than a traditional higher education institution, identity characteristics are still valuable components to consider when thinking about retention. John Braxton, Caplan and Nelson note that situation-centered retention problems among minority students can have a system change orientation.⁴⁰ For instance, “the idea that minority students are not motivated to learn or have low expectations has been around for decades and ignores how systemic inequities, racism and discrimination have worked against minority populations.”⁴¹ Although Clemente creates a space where racial diversity is celebrated and respected, there are still societal legacies that have contributed to how students exist in educational spaces due to their racial identities. In addition, interactionist retention theory on minority students has developed to challenge past retention theory, such as Tinto, to show that

⁴⁰ John Braxton, *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Ibid, 129.

“minority students must separate from their cultural realities and take the responsibility to become incorporated into college’s academic and social fabric in order to succeed...”⁴²

Furthermore, there is little concern to address the systemic problems within institutions and minority students are often forced to operate in multiple contexts.

Clemente operates in a different fashion than many higher education institutions, yet the program still operates in a society built upon white European dominated culture and thus takes on this culture partly within the organization. This must be considered when looking at retention among a racially diverse population.

In addition, Clemente has a high population of non-American students who did not grow up in the United States. Students from other countries must assimilate to American education cultural norms--language, writing, speaking, and pedagogy. Clemente is a program designed for adult learners and thus certain factors related to adults must be centered when looking at retention at Clemente.

Some identity characteristics appear to be more relevant to retention than others in the context of the Clemente program, however, it is vital to consider student identity when examining retention.

3.2.2 Basic Needs

The second theme I analyzed is student access to basic needs (food, housing, health and transportation). Five of the seven students expressed having access to food, housing, and transportation and exhibiting mental and physical health. One female student discussed how she

⁴² Ibid, 129.

was struggling to find housing for a while and thus decided not to do Clemente--once she found stable housing she applied to Clemente.⁴³ She explained how she would not be able to participate in Clemente unless she had proper housing. During her first few months at Clemente she almost had to move out of her house due to roommate issues--she explained she would have been homeless if this had happened.⁴⁴ She ended up being able to stay in her home and her roommate left. She discussed how she thought she was going to have to dropout of clemente when she was experiencing housing problems.⁴⁵ She also mentioned how she experienced bad anxiety in many social situations--a condition hindering her mental health.⁴⁶ Another woman explained how she had been battling cancer for years. She felt that cancer had worsened her memory and her physical health.⁴⁷

It appeared most students (five out of seven) did not express any barriers to basic needs, however, two students experienced significant personal challenges to feeling physically and mentally healthy as well as some housing issues.

There is extensive literature on education in relation to students' basic needs. For instance, Sara Goldrick-Rab writes, "In public schools K-12 students are provided with breakfast and lunch, support them with subsidized housing and offer counseling and case management. When they graduate from high school, however, these efforts abruptly end."⁴⁸ Sara Goldrick-Rab shows how retention rates at community colleges is connected to basic need

⁴³ Student Interview, January 10th, 2018.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Sara Goldrick-Rab, *Securing Students' Basic Needs So They Can Learn*. (2018): 3.

insecurity among students. Without student access to basic needs, students will have an increasingly difficult time engaging in the courses and work at Clemente.

In addition, there has been studies to show the connection of mental health to dropping out of college. Daniel Eisenberg shows that students with poor mental health are more likely to drop out. The authors write, “Problems we consider--depression, anxiety, and eating disorders--could affect noncognitive factors like persistence, motivation, consistency, patience, self-control, self discipline, self-esteem and interpersonal behavior”.⁴⁹ This article is discusses a more traditional college experience, yet this concept can apply to the students at Clemente who may struggle with mental illness. When students are struggling from anxiety or depression it may make it harder to attend class and do assignments and increase the likelihood of dropping out.

3.2.2 Family Responsibilities and Employment

The third theme reflected on in the interviews is family responsibilities. I asked students if they lived with their family and what that was like. Students also naturally brought up their family in relation to their work with Clemente. Two students appeared to have few responsibilities. One due to his young age and another lived on her own and expressed not having many. Five students mention they are a mother of one or more. Four out of five are single mothers. In addition, one mother spoke about family issues she faced with her daughter that often occupied her time outside of Clemente and mental energy during class.

⁴⁹ Daniel Eisenberg, *Mental Health and Academic Success in College*, *Journal of Economic Analysis and Policy* 9, 40. (2009): 6.

Many of the students interviewed had significant familial responsibilities. For example, the majority of the students identified as single mothers. Only one mother specifically talked about how their family responsibilities impacted her work at Clemente.

The fourth theme I reflected on in the interviews is employment. How much time did students have to work a week? How flexible were the hours? One student reported to be in between jobs. Two students reported their jobs had flexible hours. One student reported that she does not have a job, but is the primary caretaker of her family. Two students expressed they had full-time jobs working within the field of community development. The majority of students had full-time or part-time jobs outside of Clemente.

Research done on adult learners in higher education notes that adults have unique barriers such as family responsibilities and part or full-time employment. For instance, Kazis suggests “adult learners are more likely to work fulltime and have family responsibilities that compete for their time, energy and financial resources”.⁵⁰ Furthermore, for single mothers their time and energy responsibilities can often be even more strenuous. Although the Clemente program provides childcare, family responsibilities can still impede on students’ ability to engage in the program academically and socially. In terms of employment, a full-time job or even part-time job is another responsibility students face that take immense amounts of time and energy. At times family and employment responsibilities may be hard to balance with student responsibilities at Clemente, thus students might not be able to keep up with the time commitment Clemente requires leading to a higher chance of attrition.

⁵⁰ Richard Kazis, *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results*, Employment and Training Administration. (2007): 14.

3.2.3 Educational Background and ESL Learner

The fifth theme is educational background. What did students experience academically before Clemente? One student had never graduated high school. Two students not born in the United States (from China and Slovenia) had received their bachelors in their native countries, but only had taken English as a second language classes in the United States. One student had graduated from high school. Another student had dropped out of Quinsigamond Community College and attended Worcester State. One student had graduated highschool and taken some college classes. Lastly, one student had received their bachelors degree. In addition, two out of seven of the students identified themselves as English as a second language learners.

There is a large diversity in students' educational background when they enter Clemente. Various student needs are required based on the amount of previous education for each student. Many community colleges, similar to Clemente, have students who differ in academic skills. In Hanover Research, the article notes:

2 percent of adults in the United States lacked a high school credential. Moreover, even individuals who have earned a high school diploma or its equivalent sometimes lack basic skills. For example nonprofit organization Jobs for the Future estimates that nearly 93 million American workers aged 18 to 64 lack basic literacy and math skills.⁵¹

Even if students have graduated from high school in the United States there can be a lack of sufficient literacy skills. Clemente is a rigorous program that demands certain literacy skills from its students. Educational background can be a factor in one's ability to manage the subjects and study at Clemente.

Many ESL (English Language Arts) learners at Clemente are immigrants who have recently moved to the United States. The Hanover Research article suggests that immigrants in

⁵¹ Hanover Research, *Trends in Adult Education*. (2014): 12.

the United States represents one of the fastest growing markets for adult education. The article further states, “The immigrant population in the United States is very diverse, making a one-size-fits-all approach to education impractical”⁵² This article speaks to the specific educational needs of immigrants--in order to participate in Clemente one needs certain linguistic and written skills. Furthermore, academic immigrant needs may be different from other students at Clemente, for example someone who never graduated high school. Various educational backgrounds creates a diverse group of learners with a varying degree of needs. This diversity can make it harder for Clemente as a program to meet the educational needs of all students. Interest and confidence in a student’s subject and study can be compromised if they do not have the necessary academic skills required for the work.

3.2.4 Personal Goals

The final theme examined was personal goals. What did students want to accomplish during and after Clemente? Students had a diverse set of goals involving their experience during clemente and their future. Student one wanted to feel empowered and continue her education past Clemente. Student two and four hoped to receive a bachelor's degree in the United States. Student three hoped to work through some issues that she was going through. Student five wanted to improve their english. Student six wasnted to start her own non-profit in her community and have a higher role in the community. Student seven wanted to receive college credits and have an opportunity to learn more.

⁵² Ibid.

Every student has a future goal they set for themselves. According to Donna Dodge, in the article *Goal Setting and Choice on Student Motivation* she states that according to Locke, Latham and Skhunk, prominent theorists in educational psychology: “Goal setting helps to create student motivation and helps to maintain self-regulation, goals help to empower students and hold them accountable for learning.”⁵³ There is a connection between goal setting and student motivation. Thus, creating personal goals can help students have motivation to continue their work at Clemente.

3.3 Social Integration

Social integration refers to the extent and quality of students’ interactions with the social systems of the educational environment. Tinto assumes that students who have extensive, high quality interaction with persons in this social environment are more likely to continue enrollment at their college--in this case educational program.⁵⁴ Tinto and Bean and Metzner mention many measures of social integration that involve students who live on campus and attend a four year university. In this case I selected the following variables to measure social integration at Clemente: peer connections, personal contact with administrators and professors and lastly enjoying socializing at Clemente (inside and outside class). Much of the literature around non-traditional commuter students in relation to retention concludes that social integration matters little.⁵⁵ Yet, every single person I interviewed or spoke to about Clemente mentioned the community they felt at Clemente. When examining retention theory by Tinto and Bean,

⁵³ Donna Dodge, *Goal Setting and Choice on Student Motivation*, Masters of Arts and Education Action Research Papers 210. (2017).

⁵⁴ John Bean and Barbara Metzner, *A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition*, American Educational Research Association, Vol 44, No. 4. (1985).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

however, social integration is a key component to retention.⁵⁶ Below is a graph showing the qualitative data for social integration:

Student	Friends at Clemente	Personal Contact With Faculty and Administrators	Enjoying socializing at Clemente (in class and outside of class)
Student 1 Current Cohort	-Help others in Class -Feels supported by others students -Supports others students--someone they can talk to	-No comment	-Clemente has given me a community -Attends Community Dinners -Feels it is a place that creates student voice
Student 2 Current Cohort	-Good friends with another chinese women	-Professors are very busy -Administrator is helpful	-Does not socialize as much because she is not confident in pronunciation and grammar.
Student 3 1st Cohort	-Felt a community of friends	-Felt that professor made fun of their comment	-Some of the same people tended to talk in class -Appreciated hearing what everyone had to say
Student 4 Current Cohort	-No comment	-Open-minded and friendly professors -Give space to let your voice be heard -Ask lots of questions	-Attended community dinners -Enjoys diverse community
Student 5 Current Cohort	-No comment	-Professors are amazing and approachable	-Looks forward to hearing different perspectives in class
Student 6 Current Cohort	-Got to know people in class	-Professors are easy-going	-Some people in class can take a step back--some people think slower -Enjoys the community
Student 7 Current Cohort	-Made several deep connections with people	-Administrator tries to make students feel welcome comfortable	-Community dinner-brings people together -ESL students sit together

⁵⁶ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, 1993) and John Bean and Barbara Metzner, *A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition*, American Educational Research Association, Vol 44, No. 4. (1985).

3.3.1 *Friends at Clemente*

Tinto measures social integration through peer friendships on campus.⁵⁷ Liu considered the importance of relationships in regards to retention by studying the effects of alienation on first-year student retention. The study showed that there was a strong connection between a student's feelings of alienation-belonging and his/her decision to stay at or depart from the university.⁵⁸ When students have friendships with other students they are more likely to have feelings of belongings and thus persist through the program. Five out of seven students alluded or explicitly mentioned friendships they had at Clemente. Two students did not mention friends at Clemente at all.

3.3.2 *Personal Contact with Faculty and Administrators*

Personal Contact with faculty and administrators is a main component to social integration. Oseguera and Rhee mention the importance of faculty interactions on retention. When students have positive experiences with faculty they are more likely to persist.⁵⁹ I took positive expressions about faculty to be positive interactions. Five out of seven students expressed positive feelings associated with interactions with faculty. One student did not have a comment and one student from the first cohort mentioned a negative experience with a professor. She felt that the professor had made fun of a comment she made in class. Majority of students expressed having positive experiences with faculty.

⁵⁷ John Bean and Barbara Metzner, *A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition*, American Educational Research Association, Vol 44, No. 4. (1985).

⁵⁸Lindsay Wayt, *The Impact of Students' Academic and Social Relationships on College Student Persistence*, 106. (2012): 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid

3.3.3 Socializing at Clemente (inside and outside classroom)

Several studies look at student social engagement inside and outside the classroom. Did students have positive interactions with peers inside the classroom and also positive interactions in extracurricular settings outside the classroom? Wilford and Wadley found that students who experienced both positive social interactions inside and outside the classroom were more likely to persist.⁶⁰ Four out of seven students mentioned attending community dinners and also having positive experiences at these dinners. Four out of seven students also explicitly mentioned that they enjoy the community that Clemente has created. One student explained that she does not socialize much because she is not confident in pronunciation and grammar. Two students felt that some students spoke more in class than others and dominate the discussions--thus having more negative experiences of socializing in class.

Several studies have been done to show that students feeling a sense of community lowers attrition rates⁶¹. When students feel as if they belong they are more likely to persist.⁶² It follows then, when students are more socially integrated they are more likely to persist in the educational program.⁶³

3.4 Professor Perspective

What is the role of the professor to create a space for Clemente students where academic and social integration take places as well as personal development? Tinto notes that social and

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Pilar Mendoza, Juan Suarez, Sense of Community in Student Retention at Tertiary Technical Institution Vol 44, Issue 4. (2016): 285-314.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, 1993).

academic integration is a key concept in retention. For adult students, however, all academic and social interaction (mostly) must take place within the classroom space. Tinto argued that “the classroom must serve as a smaller social and intellectual meeting place where faculty and students can interact. As he wrote, “engagement in the community of the classroom can become a gateway for subsequent student involvement in academic and social communities of college generally.”⁶⁴ Faculty at Clemente have the responsibility to develop their own curriculum and pedagogical methods. According to Cuseo, who examines the connection between retention and college faculty, “Professors usually have more *frequent and continuous contact* with students than any other institutional representative...in addition, college instructors most heavily influence and structure of students’ *out-of-class activities*.”⁶⁵ Faculty, especially in a program like Clemente (students commute and faculty control their curriculum and pedagogy), are a major variable to the social and academic integration and personal development that takes place amongst their students.

I interviewed two teachers at Clemente to hear the methods they use in their classroom, challenges they face as professors and insights they may have about improving retention. Both teachers were in their fourth year at Clemente. To analyze the interviews I examined their methods to see which methods fostered social integration, academic integration, personal development other. Some fit into one or multiple categories. I then looked at theory based around teaching methods for adults and diverse students and examined Clemente teachers’ practices. Lastly, I connect student responses about their classroom and study experience to the perspective of the professor to determine possible strengths or improvements.

⁶⁴ Christopher Chaves, *Involvement, Development and Retention*, 34, No. 2. (2006): 140.

⁶⁵ Joseph Cuseo. “The Role of College Faculty in Promoting Student Retention Instructional Strategies for Reducing Student Attrition.” 2001.

3.4.1 Methods

Method (Art History)	Method Categorization	Method (History)	Method Categorization
Have students work in galleries--see work in real life	Academic Integration	Does not act as the gatekeeper of knowledge--creates trust with students	Social/Academic
Link art to major issues	Academic Integration	Students engage with a variation of historical narratives	Academic
Break students up into small groups--feel more comfortable to talk. Helpful for ESL students.	Academic/Social and Personal	Hands on assignments involving the history of Worcester	Academic
Don't ask students personal stories. When they come in they have a blank slate.	Personal	Applying skills from their lived environment.	Academic
Makes herself vulnerable as a professor. Let the students get to know her.	Social	Give students a place to reflect on what they learn.	Academic/personal
Encourage students to speak out. Whats every students to have a voice.	Academic/Personal	Uses partners and small groups. Trying to get everyone to participate.	Academic/Social
Bring in community members in Worcester to speak about art.	Academic/Social/Personal	Balance lecture with other methods	Academic

Both Professors appeared extremely conscious of how to create an environment that would provide students with academic and social integration. Both professors mentioned the administrator provided more of the personal development support in the program and thus this was less of a focus within their class. Although there are several other professors, interviewing two professors provided me with a general idea of the professor perspective.

Both professors created assignments that allowed students to apply what they were learning in the classroom to the outside world. Studies done on adults in higher education have

have recommended that students are likelier to learn when they can relate their learning to their life.⁶⁶ According to Kolb, a primary theorist in experiential education development theory:

“Experiential learning models offer relevant frameworks that allow adult learners to couple abstract learning objectives with real-world contexts. In other words, these model leverage students’ real-world experiences to connect classroom concepts and discourse with students’ prior knowledge and understanding of world.”⁶⁷

It is valuable for professors to include assignments that force students to to directly apply what they learned in the classroom to the real world. This can allow students to feel more connected to the what they learn and feel more able to take on the assignment.

Both professors also expressed using small groups as well as large group discussions in their classroom. According to Knowles, traditional postsecondary models lean toward a more lecture based pedagogical practice, this traditional teaching method can not only demean them (adults), but does not acknowledge the real-life experiences and knowledge that students bring to class.⁶⁸ In addition, “For many low-income adult learners, traditional pedagogical approaches replicate the very techniques that did not work particularly well for them in high school. Adult learners benefit from active engagement in defining the learning program and approach, from methods that tap their experience base as workers and in other aspects of life, and from learning that is structured in ways that align with work settings—in teams, group discussions, emphasizing skill practice, use of technology, and use of case method to elicit lessons.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Richard Kazis, *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results* (Washington, D.C: Office of Policy and Development Research, 2007), 14.

⁶⁷ Christopher Chaves. "Involvement, Development, and Retention." *Community College Review* 34, no. 2 (2006): 139-152.

⁶⁸ Malcolm Knowles, *Adult Learner*, (San Diego: Butterworth- Heinemann, 2011).

⁶⁹ Richard Kazis et al., *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results* (Washington, D.C: Office of Policy and Development Research, 2007), 14.

Introducing a variation of methods within the teaching pedagogy at Clemente can help adult students with different learning styles and real life experience engage more in their learning. This also connects to the method of not portraying oneself as the gatekeeper of knowledge--a method the art-history professor expressed to use. This allows a more level playing field in the classroom as all students and professors are adults with immense life experience and should be treated so. In addition, both expressed to encourage student voice in their classroom and this fits along with this non-traditional pedagogical approach.

Both professors expressed teaching multiple ethnic perspectives. Working with a diverse student body, professors should be teaching through a global context and through varying perspectives. Research shows that students' self-esteem is strengthened when they see and read about people of their own racial or ethnic groups.⁷⁰ Thus, "Teachers can select text or, if necessary, supplementary materials that incorporate the perspectives, voices, historical events, poetry, artwork, journals, and illustrations of the range of racial and ethnic groups..."⁷¹ It appeared both professors were conscious of providing multiple perspectives through various types of art expressions. For instance, according to the Art-History professor there is a basic art history textbook she uses (in part due to financial reasons), however rather than simply teaching to the textbook she always asks, "What was left out of the textbook?"⁷² The professor gave an example that involved talking about a painting of Thomas Jefferson where there was no mention of slavery in the textbook.⁷³ Furthermore, they explained the students immediately recognized

⁷⁰ Robert Cole, *Educating Everybody: Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, Revised and Expand*, Education Resources Information Center. (2008): 40.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Interview Professor, January 7th, 2018.

⁷³ Ibid.

that certain perspectives and information was left out when she asked the question and then this was discussed as a group.⁷⁴

In terms of social integration, both professors stressed the importance of community within the classroom and outside of the classroom. In the classroom the Art-History professor mentioned how she shared personal stories about her family in order to foster openness and trust within the classroom.⁷⁵ In addition, the History professor emphasized that he wanted to build trust with his students and create a community in his classroom.⁷⁶ The Art-History professor also mentioned that “community building takes time.”⁷⁷ In terms of outside the classroom both professors reflected on community dinners and felt that these events fostered community building.⁷⁸ As mentioned previously, students who feel a sense of community in their educational space are more likely to persist.⁷⁹ If professors, are conscious of creating community within the classroom it is more likely that students will feel a sense of community.

Although there are other methods these professors used and other professors in program, this gives insight to the some methods from the professor perspective. Overall both professors seemed to be thoughtful about the pedagogical methods they used and curriculum they included based upon the students they were teaching.

3.4.2 Methods Outside Class

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Interview Professor, January 7th, 2018.

⁷⁶ Interview Professor, January 12th, 2018.

⁷⁷ Interview Professor, January 7th, 2018.

⁷⁸ Interview Professor, January 7th, 2018. Interview Professor, January 12th, 2018.

⁷⁹ Pilar Mendoza, Juan Suarez, Sense of Community in Student Retention at Tertiary Technical Institution Vol 44, Issue 4. (2016): 285-314.

Outside of the class both teachers expressed how they were self reflective. Teachers are required to summarize the way their class went and share with the other Clemente staff. In addition, teachers meet at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. The Art History professor expressed this was helpful because teachers experienced similar issues and this created a place they could discuss them.

3.4.3 Challenges Faced

I looked at student based challenges from the perspective of the two Clemente professors. A challenge, both professors expressed, is having a diverse group of learners. For instance, students are at various educational levels and thus it is difficult to meet every student's needs. The Art History professor added another complexity to this challenge: "every year is so different."⁸⁰ Meaning, that every year the student body changes quite dramatically. As a professor you might grow to meet the needs of the current year, yet next year will prove to be different challenges based on the new group of students. In addition, both professors expressed the need to provide ESL learners with more support in the classroom. The Art History professor noted that this year there was a higher percentage of ESL learners than previous years. This can be hard when you develop certain methods that work for one group, but then don't for another.

Meeting the academic, individual needs of all students is crucial to retention. According to Bean and Tinto academic performance is linked to academic integration.⁸¹ If students feel they understand they will be more academically integrated into the program. In terms of language, for example, "Students whose language skills are not aligned with the language of

⁸⁰ Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018.

⁸¹ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, 1993). And bean

instruction in higher education— because their home language is either a non mainstream (or nonstandard) one dialect of English or a language other than English—will be at risk of academic underperformance.”⁸² If students are not understanding the material properly and/or do not have the skills needed this is a barrier to academic integration and thus retention.

Both professors discussed students’ academic confidence in the classroom. The History professor remarked, “Students are intimidated by academic culture.”⁸³ Although they have all this life experience outside the classroom, many do not have much inside contributing to a lower academic self-esteem. In addition, the Art History professor mentioned that many of students’ confidence in academia grows as the semester progresses. Students are less willing to participate and engage when they have a low academic self esteem.⁸⁴ As mentioned earlier through the student perspective, student self-esteem can be a crucial factor to retention. When students feel a lack of self-esteem, “many adult learners experience significant anxiety and self-consciousness about their acceptance, place in a collegiate environment.”⁸⁵ Self-consciousness and anxiety diminishes students ability to enjoy the subject and study and thus integrate academically. In addition, the experience of anxiety can also be a barrier to social interactions and thus prevent social integration.

Art History professor identified limited time as being a challenge they face. For instance, they state, “making choices of what to do and leave out.”⁸⁶ The professor conveys they often felt behind on everything they wanted to cover and thus sped up their pace in order to catch up, yet

⁸² Robert Cole, *Educating Everybody: Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, Revised and Expanded*, Education Resources Information Center. (2008): 40.

⁸³ Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018.

⁸⁴ Robert Cole, *Educating Everybody: Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, Revised and Expanded*, Education Resources Information Center. (2008): 40.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018.

then some people in the class are not fully understanding the depth of what he is teaching.⁸⁷

Finding a way to fit all the topics he wanted to cover in a short amount of time, but also ensuring every student understood created a challenge for him from a pedagogical standpoint.

Maintaining a certain pace in the classroom is crucial for student learning and thus retention. If the pace is too fast students tend to not understand and lose interest.⁸⁸

3.5 Administrative Perspective

I interviewed one administrative staff at Clemente to understand how, on an institutional level, administration decisions impact retention. Also, to gain perspective about retention at Clemente from someone, who in the last four years, has worked hard to retain students in the program. Realistically, I would have liked to interview more administrators to better understand all the policies made at Clemente. The interview, however, gave me insight into the decisions and methods used in Clemente on an institutional level. Both Bean and Tinto mention the role of the institution in their retention models.⁸⁹ I conducted my interview with an administrator after I had talked with the students and professors. This allowed me to ask specific questions based upon the student and professor perspective I had gathered in previous interviews.

⁸⁷ Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018/

⁸⁸ Robert Cole, *Educating Everybody: Diverse Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, Revised and Expanded*, Education Resources Information Center. (2008): 40.

⁸⁹ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, 1993). And John Bean and Barbara Metzner, *A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition*, American Educational Research Association, Vol 44, No. 4. (1985).

At Clemente there are two main administrators: one devoted to student social support and support and one devoted to academic structure and support. The administrator I interviewed described their role at Clemente. Their role consists of a student support system and the head of recruiting. In terms of a student support system, the administrator remarks, “I look at my job as trying to be as welcoming as possible...I try to be in touch and make myself available”⁹⁰ From the administrator’s perspective it seemed she provided the personal student support needed to retain students in the program. The administrator was therefore attempting to address personal factors related to retention. They explained how sometimes the program is not the right fit for some people, but often they find that students need to get over a “hump” in the beginning weeks and they views it as their responsibility, as the administrator, to help them.⁹¹ They also explained that many students take a step in their life that they have been thinking about taking for a long time. For instance, moving due to an abusive living arrangement. This step causes students to leave then have to leave the program. Furthermore, as administrator, they stressed their devotion to the program. In many Clemente programs their job only consists of budgeting and paperwork, yet she tries to “expand her role as much as possible.”⁹²

The administrator not only was in charge of paperwork, admissions and fundraising, they took on a serious role in helping students deal with their personal issues.⁹³ For example, they explained how this meant doing “anything and everything.”⁹⁴ Going to court hearings was one example they shared.⁹⁵ They told me, however, they did not explicitly make this clear to

⁹⁰ Interview Administration, January 8th, 2018.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid

students--that they were there if students needed them, yet they did not advertise the extent of the support they would provide.

Although the issues students faced were not related directly to the Clemente institution itself, these issues created a barrier for students to engage in the Clemente program. According to this administrator, the Clemente Worcester program is willing to be a support system for students when they are dealing with their personal issues. For students who are often minority, low-income, and adult learners there are many personal barriers they face to continuing to participate in Clemente. For instance, two out of seven of the students I interviewed faced significant physical or mental health issues.⁹⁶ The administrator explained the recruitment and the application process. The administrator at Clemente said they have learned recruitment should happen “naturally.” Meaning, they want students to find out about Clemente through connections and thus have the motivation to reach out to Clemente. She explained: “There needs to be a number of gates to go through.”⁹⁷ Without these gates, the administrator described, “there is not the type of student that will commit.”⁹⁸ Thus, the recruitment process serves as the first step of the admissions process--the student must have the motivation to seek out Clemente. Furthermore, the administrator explained they prefer recruitment to be done by alumni. Alumni and prospective students can connect on certain level she is unable to and alumni have experienced the program itself.

Once the prospective student has contacted Clemente they can schedule an interview as the next step of the process. The interviews are usually fifteen minutes and students are asked to read a section of philosophy or history and then discuss the ideas in the reading. The idea is to

⁹⁶ Student Interview, January 8th and 9th, 2018.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid

see how the prospective student comprehends and reads.⁹⁹ Students are not asked any personal questions. The administrator explained, “We choose not to get a sense of their outside life. The idea is to trust people.”¹⁰⁰ Relating the application process to retention, the administrator reflected that them and their colleagues try and measure desire, yet you never know because things are always changing in people's lives.¹⁰¹

The first interaction the student experiences with the institution is in the recruitment and application process. Examining reasons for attrition at an institution is interconnected with the recruitment and application process. For instance, how the institution decides to select their students is a contributing factor to how many students leave the program.¹⁰² According to Tinto the first stage of retention is Admission to College: “setting realistic expectations so that the prospective student can choose the appropriate school.”¹⁰³ Although Clemente is not a traditional institution for higher education, there is still an application process where the institution and student each make a decision. Clemente decides to accept or deny the prospective student and the student decides to attend the program or not. The way these decisions are made contribute to retention at Clemente.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ascend Learning, *Student Attrition: Consequences, Contributing Factors, and Remedies*. (2012).

¹⁰³ Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, 1993).

Part 4: Discussion and Recommendations

4.1 Diversity of Learners

One theme that came up explicitly in both professors' interviews and that other students touched on was the diversity of learners at Clemente. The History professor states, "Clemente's course is the most diverse group of students ever"¹⁰⁴ Many students mentioned how special it was to be in an educational space where there were students of different ages, races, ethnicities and backgrounds. Yet, this diversity can also prove to be an academic challenge. The diverse student body has varying ways of learning, skills and educational backgrounds. For example, for the students interviewed, one student had not graduated high school, but another student had received their bachelors degree.¹⁰⁵ The professor, thus must teach to a variety of different learners who have specific academic needs. The Art-History professor stated, "it is quite a challenge to meet everyone's needs."¹⁰⁶ How do professors make sure they are meeting the needs of students if every student has entirely different needs?

Another facet in connection to meeting the needs of diverse learners is english as a second language students. Two students identified as ESL students and two other students discussed how reading old english was challenging for them and mentioned they have observed additional academic challenges ESL learners face in Clemente program. Student five, an ESL student, said she struggled with "pronunciation and reading english."¹⁰⁷ In addition, according to the Art-History professor expressed this to be the most challenging year because of language

¹⁰⁴ Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Student Interview, January 9th, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Student Interview, January 10th, 2018.

limitations--some broke through, but others have not. This relates to the professor's statement that "every year is so different."¹⁰⁸

Meeting diverse learners needs appears to be a challenge that affects both professors and students. In relation to retention students' academic needs must be met in order to be properly integrated in the program according to Bean and Tinto. It is crucial that the Clemente program is meeting the academic needs of every individual student in order to retain students in the program.

How does the Clemente program ensure that they are meeting all the academic needs of all the Students in Clemente? Clemente has set up support systems within the organization and partners with various outside organizations in order to provide resources to all of the Clemente students. In addition, the Professors are aware of the diversity of learners and are constantly working to develop their methods to fit the needs of their students. Despite this, however, some students still face academic challenges. In examining Level of Difficulty in Academic integration the data showed that all seven students faced academic challenges at Clemente. In addition, only three students mentioned using the tutors provided by the Clemente program. Students did not mention using outside organizations as a support. It appears that although there are supports some students do not use them due to time constraints and other reasons. In addition, if students are struggling they have to make the initiative to seek help.

As every students' academic abilities are quite different there could be a simple survey at the beginning of the semester to help students identify their needs or possible support they may need. Based on their identified needs students will be connected to the appropriate support

¹⁰⁸ Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018.

system. Surveying students would also give professors and administrators a better idea of what types of needs are specific for the current cohort. One of the challenges professors mentioned facing is that every student body was entirely different--if the professors have a better idea of the student body academic needs in the first week then they can adjust their teaching to those needs in the beginning of the semester. Furthermore, one ESL student mentioned to me that she used audio books to help her read the required texts for class.¹⁰⁹ There are methods that students can access on their own in order to support them with their academics. In addition to being directly connected to supports, students would also receive a handbook type of document with suggestions of helpful methods to use for students who may struggle with certain academic skills.

4.2 Academic Self-Esteem

Another challenge and possible reason for attrition that was mentioned by students and professors and also intertwines with addressing diversity of learners is student academic self-esteem. As previously mentioned in the *Student Academic Integration* section, every student interviewed reflected on their academic self-esteem. Four students expressed feelings of low academic self-esteem. The reasons mentioned were not being in school for a long time, unknown expectations and unpreparedness due to english as a second language. Therefore, for this student ESL is connected to their academic self-esteem. Feelings of worry about not being in school for a long time is common among adult learners because they want to feel “acceptance

¹⁰⁹ Student Interview, January 13th, 2018.

[in] a collegiate environment.”¹¹⁰ Feelings of acceptance are associated with feeling like they can take on the “demand of the course work, and the demands of the classroom.”¹¹¹

Furthermore, the Art-History professor mentioned, “Students are intimidated by academic culture.”¹¹² He explained that with age comes more interactions and thus students at Clemente are intellectually prepared and more so than traditional college students he teaches. Their knowledge is rooted in experience, rather than traditional academic knowledge.¹¹³ This professor recognizes the lack of academic self-esteem among his students, and more than half of the students interviewed expressed a lack of academic self-esteem. With a lack of self-esteem students’ feel “discouraged or disheartened.”¹¹⁴

Both professors and students themselves also acknowledged that students tend to improve their self-esteem as they continue with the program, thus academic self-esteem is lowest at the beginning of the program.

Many studies have shown that academic achievement is linked to self-esteem.¹¹⁵ If students feel confident in their abilities they will most likely participate more in class, complete assignments and try to understand the material more. This leads to higher academic integration and thus higher retention among students.

Academic self-esteem and individual academic needs is connected to individual identity. Clemente is a program for non-traditional students and is rooted in the idea to respect and value diverse perspectives. The program works to provide a space for all types of people who often

¹¹⁰ Carol Kaaworm, *Emotional Challenges of Adult Learners in Higher Education*, 120. (2008): 30.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Professor Interview, January 7th, 2018.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Kaaworm, Carol. *Emotional Challenges of Adult Learners in Higher Education*, 120. (2008): 31.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

have experienced significant barriers to education. Clemente is geared toward helping low-income and minority students have access to higher education. Despite these goals and values of the organization, the social and structural conditions in American society are rooted in legacies of colonization and oppressive educational structures that do not reflect the ideas and ways of knowledge of minority peoples. White and western ideas dominate culture in our society and therefore minority students growing up in the United States have most likely faced “systemic inequities, racism, and discrimination that have worked against minority populations both inside and outside educational spaces.”¹¹⁶ Minority students thus are more likely to have lower academic self-esteem, as they are less likely to fit into this pervasive dominant culture. In addition, low-income and minority students are less likely to have graduated from high school and college--these students may need more additional support systems than other students in the program.

In terms of retention, academic integration involves high self-esteem and certain academic skills. Identity can be intertwined with students’ level of self-esteem and academic needs. In such a diverse educational space these factors are constantly at work with one another and influencing the students’ academic experience at Clemente and thus their decision to persist.

Improving students academic self-esteem relates to meeting the needs of the all learners. How can the program ensure that students have the emotional confidence to take on the academics at Clemente? Part of the solution could be to strengthen the academic skills of students as already discussed, however, another part is to ensure emotional confidence in oneself as a student.

¹¹⁶ John Braxton, *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).

According to Rendon's theory of Validation, active forms of validation must be provided to nontraditional students to encourage their continued involvement. Furthermore, validation must begin in the early stages of a student's academic program, ideally through instructors and student peer engagement.¹¹⁷ Both professors mentioned students' lack of academic self-confidence and that as time continues confidence improves. Also, students almost always dropout in the first part of the program not the second. When students come in it is vital to use forms of validation in the first few weeks in order to raise students' self-esteem as quickly as possible. Professors should be overly supportive of student participation and feedback on work. In addition, according to Christopher Chaves, "Extending the idea of student validation to adult students, however, means that the knowledge and experience they bring into the classroom must be used as a learning resource and validated via the curriculum."¹¹⁸ Creating an environment where students feel validated as students will increase their academic self-esteem and make them feel as if they can accomplish the demanding academic expectations at Clemente.

4.3 Personal Related Challenges

Previous data at Clemente shows that students mostly drop-out for personal reasons related to familial responsibilities or access to basic needs. In addition, the administrator explained that students often decided to make a positive personal decision in their life after the first few months at Clemente that then impacts their ability to continue. Two students expressed facing challenges to basic needs. One who experienced housing problems related to her boyfriend and another who suffered from physical and mental health challenges due to cancer. In

¹¹⁷ Chaves, Christopher, *Involvement, Development and Retention*, 34, No. 2. (2006): 140-155.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

terms of familial responsibilities five students were mothers, the majority being single mothers. The student who had housing issues explained that one will not be able to be successful in the Clemente program if they do not have access to basic needs or have major personal issues. She explained that she had waited to start Clemente when she was having serious personal issues.

During the administration process, the administrator mentioned that they do not ask about personal situations and rather trust the student to judge their own ability to enter the Clemente program. The students entering Clemente often have significant personal issues. The Clemente program is for students who have had significant barriers to education, yet many people end up dropping out due to personal issues they continue to face, once again creating a barrier to their education. When students drop-out this cycle continues to take place. Consequently, student retention at Clemente is impacted by students' personal life and issues they face related to basic needs and familial responsibilities.

To find a solution to students' personal problems can be challenging for an educational program. Personal reasons for retention take place outside Clemente and thus are not directly related to the policy and choices the program Clemente makes. Clemente clearly has implemented an administrator to serve as a support for students when they are dealing with personal issues, yet despite this support person, retention continues to stay the same. Additionally, conditions are constantly changing in Clemente students' lives so it is difficult to predict.

When I talked to the administrator she explained that she was not explicit about her role--she did not explain to the students that she was a resource for their personal needs. There may be reasons to not explain this to students, but students may be more comfortable reaching

out for help if there is more transparency of the administrator's role. For instance, one student I interviewed who was having housing issues did not know that the administrator could help her or be a person of support. With more transparency, students may open up more about their personal issues and thus have the opportunity to be helped.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Programs that provide adult education to unconventional students should consider the following ideas when examining retention: diversity of learners, students' academic self esteem and individual personal challenges. These concepts are mentioned in some retention theory around adult education and unconventional students, however, there is no literature that distinctly mentions all three together when looking at adult education of unconventional students. At the core of these ideas is the concept of identity. In society, identity can influence the type of learner the student is and thus the individual's specific academic needs. Furthermore, academic self-esteem of students is highly intertwined with addressing the needs of diverse learners. As mentioned earlier on, race, age and academic experience are characteristics of one's identity that influence one's academic self-esteem. Finally, individual personal challenges students face are influenced by their race, gender, income and age--all characteristics of one's identity. Similar to how Braxton includes cultural variables in the conversation on retention at traditional educational institutions, the various identities within the student body must be examined when

looking at retention for adult educational programs that work with unconventional students.¹¹⁹

This allows the program to better understand the types of students entering and anticipate possible adjustments in curriculum, pedagogy and support systems based upon those specific student needs. Furthermore, the implication of identity when addressing learning needs, academic self-esteem and individual personal challenges must be understood by the faculty and administrators in the program when working to improve student retention. A program that provides adult education to unconventional students should ask two vital questions: What are the identities of the students who are in the program? and What ways can the program attempt to address the academic, social and personal needs of students with those specific identities?

In terms of Clemente Course in the Humanities in Worcester, every year the identities of the student body changes, bringing new academic, social, and personal student needs. In order to improve retention, the academic, social and personal needs of every individual student must be met by the program. Thus, every year the faculty and administrators must first identify possible needs for the incoming students. The sooner the needs are identified, the better Clemente can address those needs. For instance, if a student is an ESL learner, every professor should be aware of who this student is in their classes and come up with possible methods that cater to this student's learning needs starting from day one of the program. The administrator mentioned how students' personal lives are constantly changing and thus new personal challenges can occur for students. This is a personal student need that cannot be anticipated in the beginning of the program. If students, however, has gotten to know the professors and administrators through a sit-down or community event before the program begins they may feel more comfortable coming

¹¹⁹ John Braxton, *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).

to the faculty when they face personal challenges during the program. Students who feel more supported and are more likely to stay in the program.

Clemente Worcester can work on improving retention by better understanding the academic, social and personal needs of the students early on. This is not an easy task to accomplish, yet there could be some sort of survey or interview given post student acceptance to the program to better understand the types of students that are enrolled. Then, based upon the needs identified, administrators and faculty can adjust their methods to better address the students currently enrolled and begin at the beginning of the program. For instance, both professors discussed how every year the student body changes and it takes time to understand the needs of the current students.¹²⁰ If professors and administrators identified needs before the beginning of the course, they could better understand and address those needs. Clemente must create a system to familiarize the professors and administrators with the newly accepted students in order to identify academic, social and personal needs for the cohort and thus adjust their methods based upon the needs identified. It is a challenge to identify and address every single need for every student, yet there may be certain trends that are revealed for the students in that specific cohort and thus one method can support several students.

According to the Hanover Research article, previously mentioned in the findings on *Educational Background and ESL Learner* section of the paper, immigrants in the United States represent one of the fastest growing markets for adult education.¹²¹ The article further states, “The immigrant population in the United States is very diverse, making a one-size-fits-all approach to education impractical.”¹²² From a community development standpoint, urban areas,

¹²⁰ Interview Professor, January 7th, 2018.

¹²¹ Hanover Research, *Trends in Adult Education*. (2014): 12.

¹²² Ibid.

like Worcester, need to adjust their adult education programs and institutions to accommodate any changes in the adult population being served. According to the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, in the city of Worcester the foreign-born population now represents 20.5% of the overall population of Worcester. In addition, Worcester received 2,196 refugees from 24 different countries, between 2007 and 2012.¹²³ The number of arrivals have almost doubled in that five year period.¹²⁴

Adult Education programs in Worcester should account for the increase in foreign born population in Worcester. Meaning, adjusting the programs to provide better education for adults who are ESL learners and new to the Worcester community. It is crucial that educational organizations and institutions that serve adults in Worcester, understand the changing identities of their students and work to accommodate the new and different identities. Educational methods for adults cannot be static and should continue to change depending on the students who are being served.

¹²³ Anita Fábos, *Understanding Refugees in Worcester, MA*, Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise, Paper 32: (2015).

¹²⁴ Ibid.

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