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# The increasing rate of undergraduate male attrition: What the men tell us. A qualitative case study.

Monika Neelam Kushwaha  
*James Madison University*

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The increasing rate of undergraduate male attrition: What the men tell us

A qualitative case study

Monika Kushwaha

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

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## Abstract

The current study explores the factors that may contribute to undergraduate male attrition and ways of improving retention at James Madison University (JMU) using qualitative case study methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five men who were currently enrolled at JMU, six men who had previously been enrolled at JMU but who had left before completing a degree, and two university administrators who work closely with students at risk of dropping out. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were analyzed using QSR's *N-Vivo 9*, a qualitative data management software package. Themes and sub-themes emerged around two major categories: factors that contribute to undergraduate male attrition and factors that may encourage male retention. Major themes around factors contributing to attrition included incomplete cognitive maturity, financial difficulties, lack of motivation, and JMU-specific factors. Sub-themes around factors that encourage retention included mentorship programs, exploration classes, alcohol-management programs, and off-campus supervision.

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Fifty years ago, the number of men undertaking higher education in the United States far outweighed the number of women. Current trends are quite the opposite: the representation of female students in institutions of higher education exceeds that of male students. Further, current research is indicating that men who initially attend college are at higher risk of not graduating than their women counterparts. This discrepancy increases as we look at students of ethnic minority, lower socioeconomic status, or first generation college-goers (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006).

The consequences of earning a college degree today are perhaps much more dramatic than in years before. On average, the high school graduate will earn \$1.2 million over the course of his/her career. A graduate of a four-year university will earn, on average, \$2.1 million over the course of his/her career, an income that nearly doubles that of the high school graduate (Porter, 2002). Additionally, according to the United States Department of Labor, occupations that will experience the most growth through 2018 are nurses, business compliance officers and financial examiners, teachers, computer scientists, and construction laborers and construction-related trades people (as cited in Robertson, 2010). Of these top five occupations, four require at least Bachelor's-level degrees, and, perhaps not surprisingly, the fifth will gross the lowest salary of the five.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008), the overall graduation rate for the incoming cohort of fall 2000 at four year universities within four years is 36.1 percent. This is further broken down by gender with 31.1 percent of men

graduating within four years and 40.2 percent of women graduating within four years. The graduation rate for completion within five years is 52.6 percent overall and 49.0 percent and 55.6 percent for men and women, respectively. Finally, the rate of completion within six years for this cohort is 57.5 percent overall and 54.3 percent and 60.2 percent for men and women, respectively (NCES, 2008). The overall attrition rate of men in undergraduate settings has also increased over the past decade (NCES, 2010). Men from the incoming cohort of 1999 graduated at a rate of 59.4 percent within six years; men from the incoming cohort of 2002 graduated at the lower rate of 55.3 percent within six years (NCES, 2010).

The trend is also seen at James Madison University (JMU). According to the university's Office of Institutional Research, women at JMU graduate at a higher rate than do men. The incoming freshman cohort of fall 2000 is an example of this trend at JMU. In 2001, 91% of women returned; eighty-nine percent of men returned. By 2004, 69% of women who entered in 2000 had graduated, while only 53% of men had graduated. Eighty-one percent of women graduated within five years, while only 74% of men graduated within five years. Finally, 82% of women graduated within seven years, while only 77% of men graduated within seven years. These numbers indicate that national trends are also seen at JMU. A deeper understanding of this trend through interviews with current undergraduate men at JMU can enlighten and inform the community as to causes of and interventions for this issue at the university. Additionally, interviewing men who have dropped out of college can provide additional vital information.

Much of the research regarding undergraduate male attrition has been conducted by scholars in the areas of higher education and college student development, offering important insights. There are a number of potential theoretical bases within the discipline of psychology that may provide insight into this alarming trend. Psychology examines human behavior from a biopsychosocial perspective, which incorporates neuro-biological functioning, psychological factors, and the greater socio-cultural context into an integrated and holistic approach (Melchert, 2007). Neuro-biological processes that may contribute to the trend of increased male attrition include the later development of the prefrontal cortex in young men. There are several psychological theories that may help explain this trend. This cognitive developmental phenomenon is incorporated into Jeffrey Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Arnett, 2006), which may help to elucidate psychological factors behind increasing attrition rates among men in undergraduate institutions. Arnett has conceptualized emerging adulthood as a stage that integrates historical developmental theories with the contemporary socio-cultural climate. Additionally, quantitative findings from research disseminated from JMU's Office of Institutional Research has indicated that another potential theoretical base for understanding undergraduate male attrition is learned helplessness theory (JMU, 2005). Finally, macro-level environmental and/or societal factors, such as the increase of urbanization and single parent families (e.g., Mortenson, 1999), may contribute to undergraduate men's relative lack of academic achievement.

Qualitative data can further elucidate psychological factors behind increasing attrition rates by venturing to the source of the issue: undergraduate men and men of undergraduate age who left college by 18-25. By interviewing men aged eighteen to

twenty-five both attending and not attending an undergraduate institution, one may begin to understand some psychological factors that bear upon undergraduate male attrition. Because qualitative research utilizes the experiences and narratives from participants to inform understanding of particular phenomena (Stake, 1995), it is particularly suited to the current inquiry. Additionally, case study methodology was appropriate for this inquiry because the current research question is a novel one, and the researcher hoped to build or construct new meaning of the current attrition trends (Stake, 1995) by interviewing young men either currently or previously affiliated with JMU. By interviewing these men and learning of their perspectives, the researcher hoped to create a base for future research. This was accomplished by engaging a grounded perspective on the current phenomenon, which is particularly fitted to novel inquiry.

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to uncover the perspective of the college-aged man on the trend of male attrition, potential factors that may be causing the trend, and ways in which undergraduate male attrition may be addressed at JMU. Data from these interviews were analyzed in the context of the biopsychosocio-cultural model, i.e. Arnett's (2004, 2006) emerging adulthood theory, Seligman's learned helplessness, neuropsychological development, to determine the ways in which the biopsychosocial model could be applied to the trend of increased male attrition and expand upon ways in which undergraduate men and men of undergraduate age experience college. In view of this objective, research related to the gender gap in college was explored. Further, the neuro-biological factors of prefrontal cortex and executive functions development; psychological bases of learning styles and learned helplessness theory; higher education research on attrition, retention, and academic achievement; socio-cultural factors

including progressive classroom environments and a greater global economy; and Arnett's emerging adulthood theory, which synthesizes traditional developmental theories with the current social context were examined.

### *The Gender Gap*

It is crucial to examine data that have already been collected regarding the gender gap in college. In her book, Sax (2008) discusses the shift in the gender gap in college over the past four decades, the ways in which men and women differ when they enter college, the extent to which gender differences expand or contract during college, and some of the ways in which the college experience may differ for men and women. While Sax (2008) offers some interesting insights into this gap, the literature and data that she has gathered seems to focus either on the college student experience as a whole, or primarily on the female experience. Additionally, Sax (2008) discusses academic outcomes as they vary by gender. Some of her findings include that men tend to have higher grade point averages (GPAs) when they are in more competitive environments (e.g., fraternities), when they are working toward degrees in hard sciences versus social sciences, and when the institutional culture is more traditional. Sax (2008) does not describe graduation or completion of an undergraduate degree as an academic outcome.

The data that Sax (2008) cites are quantitative in nature, gathered through various surveys conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). She specifically uses two databases: one surveyed over eight million college freshmen over the past four decades and the other was a longitudinal file of students who entered college in 1994 and were followed up in 1998. The sample size that Sax (2008) draws from is impressive, and the findings that she describes are strong. However, Sax's (2008)

research does not specifically describe how men experience college in their own voices, nor does her research follow students of either gender who have dropped out of school.

Kleinfeld (2009) also explored the gender gap in college, particularly differences in male and female mindsets as they pertained to higher education. Her findings were based on qualitative data in the form of interviews and focus groups with high school seniors who were considering college. Kleinfeld's (2009) participants noted that young men appear to be "lazier" than young women and tend not to expend effort toward academic endeavors. Further, they noted that young men also tend not to plan ahead, while young women seem to be better at setting goals and making plans to achieve those goals. Finally, her participants noted that young men are easily distracted by non-academic endeavors, such as gaming or drinking, and are more likely to be pressured by peers into ignoring their academic responsibilities (Kleinfeld, 2009). Kleinfeld's research exemplifies the advantages of using qualitative methodology to explore the phenomenon of the gender gap in higher education.

#### *Brain Development and Executive Functions*

Brain development, particularly in areas that impact executive functioning, continues throughout late adolescence and early adulthood (Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009; Huizinga, Dolan, & van der Molen, 2006; Samango-Sprouse, 2006; Casey, Tottenham, Liston, & Durston, 2005; Anderson, 2002; Anderson, et al., 2001; Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000). That areas of the brain are not fully developed by the time most students graduate high school may impact the ability of some young men to succeed in an undergraduate environment.

### *What are executive functions?*

While the literature on executive functions continues to grow, there is still little consensus on the definition of executive functions. Executive functions may be generally understood to be an umbrella term for the mental processes required for formulating goals, planning how to achieve them, and effectively carrying out those plans. In adults, executive functions can be understood as the neurobehavioral manager in charge of directing attention, monitoring one's activity, and coordinating and assimilating information and activity (Anderson, 2002; Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000; Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009).

Executive functions are a vital component of the brain's work in managing one's life activities. They impose internal structure when external structure is not available (Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009). As such, the development of executive functions is vital to the success of college students who find themselves in an unstructured environment after the structure of high school.

### *The prefrontal cortex*

Executive functions rely strongly on the frontal lobe, and in particular, the prefrontal cortex. Lesions to the prefrontal cortex have indicated a decreased ability to engage effectively in executive functions (Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009; Anderson, et al., 2001; Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000).

Development of the prefrontal cortex occurs in spurts over the first two decades of life. During gestation, the processes of proliferation, migration, and differentiation of cells occur. Dendritic outgrowth and synaptogenesis also begin during this time and continue throughout adolescence. The process of myelination in the prefrontal cortex

begins at birth and also continues throughout late adolescence and early adulthood. Finally, synaptic pruning begins around four years of age and continues throughout late adolescence and early adulthood (Samango-Sprouse, 2006; Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009). Of importance in relation to college-aged students is that the area of the brain responsible for executive functions continues to develop the speed and accuracy of its processes during the time when young men would traditionally enter undergraduate education, and these processes are unlikely to fully mature until after these men are expected to graduate.

### *Gender differences*

There has been some controversy regarding gender differences in the development of the prefrontal cortex and the processes of executive functions (Casey, Tottenham, Liston, & Durston, 2005; Anderson, et al., 2001). However, regarding the executive functions that pertain to the ability direct and maintain attention, there have been findings that indicate that there may be gender differences at play. It has been noted that early development of attentional processes occur quicker in boys than in girls; however, these trajectories change in early adolescence, and girls begin to overtake boys. Eventually, men catch up; however this often does not occur until they reach their early-to mid-20s (Anderson, et al., 2001; Samango-Sprouse, 2006). The ability to effectively attend to specific aspects of the undergraduate environment may play a crucial role in succeeding in college.

### *Learning styles*

There has been much research conducted regarding the learning styles that are adopted by men and women. This research generally indicates that men and women

learn differently (e.g., Kleinfeld, 2009; Wehrwein, Lujan, & DiCarlo, 2007; Severiens & Dam, 1997; Severiens & Dam, 1994). One study indicates that women learn effectively with a single mode of instruction; that is, they do not require a variety of modes of instruction – visual, auditory, kinesthetic – to grasp and retain new information. The same study indicates that men learn most effectively with multiple modes of instruction simultaneously, with one of the modes employed being kinesthetic. That is, men learn best by doing and by either listening or reading at the same time (Wehrhein, Lujan, & DiCarlo, 2007). Other studies indicate that men learn best in structured and competitive environments, when teachers speak louder, and when the temperature is cooler, while women are better able to navigate less structured environments (Kleinfeld, 2009). These differences in learning style seem to favor women in undergraduate environments as these environments are less likely to be highly structured.

### *Learned Helplessness*

Learned helplessness describes a state in which an organism has learned to behave helplessly even when the opportunity to avoid harmful or unpleasant stimuli is available (Seligman & Beagley, 1975; Maier & Seligman, 1976). Research depicting learned helplessness was originally conducted on animals, such as dogs and rats, and was later generalized to humans (Maier & Seligman, 1976; Hiroto & Seligman, 1975). For the purposes of this project, the focus will be on how humans are affected by learned helplessness. The word “learned” is a key descriptor of learned helplessness: it indicates that the helpless behavior has been learned so deeply over time when exposure to an aversive stimulus is uncontrollable that inaction has become a conditioned response despite potential opportunities to be successful in removing or avoiding the stimulus.

The effects of the inability to control the aversive stimulus are present in one's motivation, cognition, and emotion (Maier & Seligman, 1976; McKean, 1994b). After being exposed to uncontrollable aversive stimuli, one tends to lose motivation to affect change when the stimuli are presented and change may be affected or when the stimuli are no longer uncontrollable. Exposure to uncontrollable stimuli also affects one cognitively in that one's ability to perceive control when such stimuli are controllable is decreased. Finally, in humans, repeated exposure to uncontrollable stimuli may have an emotional effect most often seen as depression (Maier & Seligman, 1976; McKean, 1994b).

#### *Academic helplessness*

Research has been conducted on the ways in which learned helplessness affects undergraduate achievement. In reviewing this literature, McKean (1994a) developed a theory of academic helplessness. Academic helplessness is a concept that was proposed as a means of understanding the needs of undergraduate students who give up when faced with setbacks in college. Two main risk factors of academic helplessness were proposed. The first is an expectation for uncontrollability in the academic environment. This expectation is likely to have been fostered throughout an undergraduate's grammar and high school careers (McKean, 1994a). The second risk factor is a pessimistic attributional or explanatory style, which is a cognitive personality variable linked to learned helplessness. Students with a pessimistic attributional style believe that academic setbacks are caused by internal, global, and stable reasons (McKean, 1994a; Petiprin & Johnson, 1991). That is, they believe that these setbacks are caused by factors within themselves (i.e., lack of ability), will likely affect their entire academic careers as

opposed to any particular course, and that these factors are unlikely to change. Students with a pessimistic attributional style tend to have non-specific academic goals and tend to utilize resources (e.g., advising, tutoring, etc.) available to them less than other students, which may lead to lower grades and subsequent giving up (Peterson & Barrett, 1987).

Like learned helplessness, academic helplessness also has behavioral, cognitive, and affective components. A behavioral effect of learned helplessness is passiveness; likewise, a behavioral effect of academic helplessness is procrastination. An affective effect of academic helplessness is a reactive dysphoria in response to the academic setback. Finally, cognitive effects include increased frustration and decreased sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem in addition to decreased GPA (McKean, 1994a).

Finally, research conducted on gender differences in academic helplessness has had mixed results. One study (Petiprin & Johnson, 1991) found that men with a pessimistic attributional style performed poorly on a simple task that was administered after a more difficult task. Women in this study tended to perform poorly on tasks administered in this sequence despite their attributional styles. Other studies did not find the same gender differences (e.g., Peterson & Barrett, 1987).

### *Attrition, Retention, and Academic Achievement*

#### *Attrition*

Research conducted on male undergraduate attrition has been minimal, at best. Preliminary findings indicate that the best predictor of male undergraduate attrition is high school grade-point average (GPA). Men particularly at risk of dropping out of undergraduate institutions are those with high school GPA's of lower than the eightieth percentile. Risk of attrition decreases when high school GPA is higher than the eightieth

percentile (Jorgensen, Fichten, & Havel, 2009). Other research has indicated that the current social structure may lead to higher undergraduate attrition in men. According to Zorbas, O'Neill, & Chapman (2004), men may feel pressured to attend undergraduate institutions because they feel they should. As such, they may not choose majors or programs that are of interest to them, thereby decreasing their motivation to succeed in these programs.

### *Retention*

In general, researchers have found several factors contributing to retention of undergraduate students. These factors include high student satisfaction, social integration, academic achievement and integration, and high connection to the college or university (Leppel, 2002; Reason, 2009; Sanchez-Leguinel, 2008). Additionally, some work has been done on the factors that increase male persistence. One such factor is male marital status – single men are likely to be more persistent than married men. Additionally, men who are younger and men who work fewer hours are more likely to be retained by undergraduate institutions (Leppel, 2002). Other research posits that gender, when examined in combination with other factors, such as race, high school GPA, and financial dependency on parents, has no bearing on retention (Reason, 2009). When gender is examined outside of the context of these other variables, it does become a significant predictive factor to retention.

### *Academic achievement*

Lounsbury, Huffstetler, Leong, and Gibson (2005) examined the relationship between student sense of identity and collegiate academic achievement. Because the college years occur, for most students, during the stage of emerging adulthood, and

because the stage of emerging adulthood is fraught with questions regarding one's sense of self, Lounsbury, et al. (2005) hypothesized that students with a stronger sense of identity, as measured by the Adolescent Personal Style Inventory (APSI), would have higher GPA's. Additionally, the researchers wondered whether gender and race impacted the extent to which identity development affected academic achievement.

Data for the study were collected from 434 second-semester freshman students who had volunteered their participation. The researchers found a positive, significant correlation between sense of identity and GPA for their full college sample. They did not find a significant difference in the correlation between sense of identity and GPA between men and women. This finding is significant in that GPA is a key criterion for success in college and, ultimately, graduation. While Lounsbury, et al. (2005) did not find a difference between men and women, the quantitative nature of their study did not allow for deeper exploration into the meaning of sense of identity for these different groups.

To more deeply understand college students' definitions of success, Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, and Purswell (2008), conducted a qualitative study using focus group interviews with twenty-two academically successful second-year students at a public university in central Texas. The researchers wished to examine the notion that undergraduates think of success more ways than just in terms of GPA or graduation rate. This study explored whether students had a multifaceted view of success. The researchers used grounded theory methodology for this study because of a paucity of prior research on student perceptions of success.

The researchers found that student definitions of success were, indeed, multifaceted. Their definitions included achievement of good grades; however, students varied in what their definitions of “good” were. Additionally, their reasons for why good grades were important differed from being tied to self-worth to simply being a measure of learning. Another aspect of success for these students was social integration. Finally, it was also important to students to be able to effectively navigate the college environment (Yazedjian, et al., 2008). Limitations of this study included a relatively homogenous sample particularly regarding student GPA, parent education, and ethnicity. Additionally, fascinating as this study is, it does not address gender differences in perceptions of success in college.

### *Education versus Men?*

#### *The war against boys*

There has been much speculation that in the effort to acquire parity for women in schools, the decline of academic achievement among men has declined (Sommers, 2000). For many years, feminist activist groups, such as the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and Ms. Foundation, have described shortcomings in the welfare and well-being of girls and young women in the social, occupational, and educational arenas. While it is certain that many women had suffered disparities in these arenas, it has been decades since women have achieved parity as students. While this may seem like a victory to be celebrated, the focus of scholars and the media continue to center around the plight of women, and in doing so, boys have been left behind (Sommers, 2000).

*A new classroom environment*

Progressive education measures have changed the classroom environment. What once used to be structured, traditional, top-down classrooms are now child-centered classrooms that emphasize creativity and independent learning (Sommers, 2000). Theoretically, this shift is not a bad idea. However, research has shown that boys, especially those who are struggling in school, tend not to thrive in environments that are less structured. Several studies were conducted in the United Kingdom, where trends around male achievement in schools and colleges are similar to those in the United States, that removed boys from more progressive classrooms to traditional classrooms with more teacher-led work, high expectation, strict homework checks, consistent sanctions for incomplete work, frequent testing, and more rigid structure (as cited in Sommers, 2000). Findings from these studies indicate that when placed in more structured classrooms, boys perform better.

*A new global environment*

So has a more progressive college environment led to worse achievement outcomes for men? Perhaps not. There are many potential reasons that men are not achieving such high levels in undergraduate environments as their female counterparts. Primarily, the social climate has changed significantly over the past several decades. The divorce rate has increased, which has resulted in many single-parent families. As mothers are more likely to retain custody of children after a divorce, many young men grow up without positive male role models, while young women are likely to have strong role models in their mothers. Combine single-parent families with the fact that seventy-

five percent of schoolteachers in the United States are female, and the opportunity for positive male role models for young men decreases further (Mortenson, 1999).

Additionally, urbanization is likely more difficult for men to adjust to than for women. Women may possess more skills to adapt to an urban environment than men: women tend to be more communicative and cooperative, which likely helps with social and occupational networking, whereas men tend to be more competitive and aggressive. Finally, a shift in the economic patterns of this country may play a large role in unsettling men. The economy of the United States has undergone a shift from being primarily goods-producing, which favored men, to being primarily service-producing, which favors women (Mortenson, 1999). As such, men who might have enjoyed a goods-producing career may instead disengage from career options.

While it is possible that temperamentally, women are more suited to being college students than men, it is nonetheless vital for men to continue to attend college, particularly due to future career prospects in this country. As such, it is crucial to understand the ways in which the undergraduate environment may or may not foster achievement in men.

### *Emerging adulthood*

In order to better understand the disturbing trend of attrition as it affects men of undergraduate age, it is important to understand the developmental stage that these individuals are traversing. Recent research has described this stage as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2004; Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005; Arnett, 2006). This stage is described by Arnett (2004) as being the age of possibilities; that is, most young people in this country will leave home at age eighteen or nineteen, but will not

marry, become parents, or find long-term jobs until their late twenties. The period in between is an exploratory period. During this time, emerging adults may attend an institution of higher education, but may not complete undergraduate degrees within the “standard” timeframe of four years. They may experiment with romantic relationships to determine what they want in a life partner. They may explore a variety of career trajectories, either through changing majors of study in college or by working in varied occupational fields. This stage of life may be exciting for these emerging adults; however, it is also fraught with anxiety due to the very nature of being unsettled that makes this time exciting (Arnett, 2004; Arnett 2006).

Additionally, emerging adulthood as it is experienced today is a relatively new phenomenon. As such, most parents of emerging adults had a much different experience during their twenties. This divergence prevents many emerging adults from benefiting from the experience of their parents, thereby potentially eliminating a crucial support system (Arnett, 2004).

Arnett (2004; 2006) describes five main features of emerging adulthood. These features are identity exploration, particularly pertaining to love and work; instability; self-focus; feeling in-between or transitioning between adolescence and adulthood; and possibilities. Identity exploration was considered a developmental task of adolescence by Erikson (as cited in Myers, 2008); however, Erikson depicted his stages of psychosocial development in the 1950s. Not long after, Erikson noted that there seemed to be a prolonged adolescence of youth in industrialized nations (Erikson, 1968, as cited in Arnett, 2004). Currently, many individuals in the twenties in the United States continue to explore career and relationship possibilities (Arnett, 2004). The feature of self-focus is

unique to emerging adulthood: during this time period, emerging adults are responsible solely for themselves. They are generally no longer living with their parents, and so may make their own rules governing their own behaviors. Additionally, they are generally not responsible to or for spouses, partners, or children. As such, the emerging adult may generally do as he or she pleases within the auspices of the law (Arnett, 2004; Arnett, 2006).

Arnett (2004) began gathering much of his data regarding emerging adulthood via interviewing individuals who fell in this age range. He uses these interviews to illustrate various aspects of emerging adulthood from a first-hand perspective. While these interviews certainly provide valuable depictions of the experiences of emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) does not use these interviews to examine gender differences during emerging adulthood.

#### *Emerging adulthood and college*

Another feature of the emerging adulthood developmental period is engagement in higher education. Participating in higher education is more important now than it was several decades ago because more employment opportunities and future financial security is dependent upon academic achievement. According to Hamilton & Hamilton (2006), who conducted a meta-analysis of studies looking at attrition rates in undergraduate students over the past several decades, in 1999, 45% of the college-age cohort (ages 18-24) were enrolled in higher education. In 2001, roughly 62% of graduating high school students were enrolled in college the following fall. These numbers are certainly higher than they would have been 30 years ago; however, high enrollment rates do not guarantee high graduation rates. It has been noted that approximately 50% of first-year students at

2-year colleges do not stay for a second year, and about 25% of first-year students at 4-year colleges do not stay for a second year. Also concerning are data stating that more than 40% of students who earn more than 10 credits of college coursework never complete a 2- or 4-year degree (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). A primary reason for college attrition is lack of academic resources by non-completers. Another reason involves financial difficulties. While Hamilton and Hamilton (2006) certainly describe the importance of higher education for the contemporary emerging adult and elucidate potential reasons for attrition, they do not take into account the disparity between non-completing men and non-completing women.

#### *Summary and Statement of the Problem*

Nationwide, attrition rates for undergraduate men are higher than those of undergraduate women resulting in fewer men acquiring undergraduate degrees. There may be many factors that play into this discrepancy. The changing social climate as it pertains to a protracted adolescence, less mentoring by male role models, and increased urbanization and single-parent families may certainly affect the rates of male attrition in the college environment. The lack of structure in high school environments may be a hindrance to men instead of helping men learn to manage more unstructured environments. Men who do not succeed in college may be affected by internal issues, such as feelings of helplessness in the academic setting. Or, they may need some more time to cognitively mature (Huizinga, Dolan, & van der Molen, 2006; Anderson, 2002; Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000; Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009).

To date, there has not been any work done that asks these men themselves what may be hindering their success in an undergraduate environment. The current study aims

to explore factors that hinder male success at JMU from the perspective of men that are currently attending the university and of those who have dropped out. Further, the study will also explore ways to increase male retention at JMU.

### *Research Questions and Hypotheses*

This study is an exploratory case study designed to discover the factors that may affect male undergraduate attrition at JMU and the ways in which male attrition may be curbed as determined from the self-reported perceptions of the study's participants. As such, the research questions are as follows:

1. How do JMU-affiliated college-aged men understand attrition in undergraduate men?
2. What risk and/or protective factors do they perceive as affecting success in an undergraduate setting?

Hypotheses based on current literature are that neuro-biological factors that may prevent male graduation at JMU likely include an incompletely developed prefrontal cortex, which may affect the ability of young men to engage in goal-directed behavior and maintain their focus on academics in an unstructured environment. Psychological factors that may impact attrition rates include difficulties arising from the developmental stage of emerging adulthood and a feeling of academic helplessness. Socio-cultural factors that may prevent male graduation may include changing social factors, e.g. lack of mentorship/ apprenticeship by male role models, greater urbanization, etc., that are less men-friendly.

## CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

In the analysis of this phenomenon, it is desirable to include qualitative data. Qualitative research utilizes the experiences and narratives from participants to inform understanding of particular phenomena (Stake, 1995). Additionally, Arnett's (2004) work on emerging adulthood began through his own qualitative inquiry with several emerging adults nationwide. As this project used much of his theoretical base for analysis, it followed that qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this work.

Further, current inquiry used a case study approach, the case being: How do JMU-affiliated college-aged men understand attrition in undergraduate men, and what risk and/or protective factors do they perceive as affecting success in an undergraduate setting? These questions were answered through interview with college-aged men who are either attending or have dropped out of JMU.

Case study methodology was appropriate for this inquiry because the current research question is a novel one. Through this study, the researcher hoped to build or construct new meaning of the current attrition trends (Stake, 1995). Additionally, because this is a previously little studied area, the case study took on an exploratory tone (Yin, 1989). According to Stake (1995), an intrinsic case study is conducted because of "need to learn about a particular case" (p.3) rather than to learn about other cases from a single case. An instrumental case study is conducted to learn about a greater process beyond just the single case (Stake, 1995). The nature of the current case falls into both of Stake's (1995) categories: it is intrinsic in that the perceptions of JMU-affiliated college-

aged men need to be understood, and it is instrumental because by understanding the perspectives of these men, the current trend in undergraduate male attrition may be curbed.

Because such little research exists to better understand attrition in undergraduate men, it was thought to be useful create a base for future research by engaging a grounded perspective on the current phenomenon. Grounded theory qualitative methodology is particularly fitted to novel inquiry. The purpose of grounded theory research is to develop theory from the data that is collected in the process of the study. Ideally, data will continue to be collected until a new theory is sufficiently developed (Willig, 2008). The current study incorporated a grounded perspective in that participants drove the understanding of the current phenomenon as it related to existing theory.

#### *Participants*

Participants for this project were men aged 18-25 who were either currently enrolled in a four-year college/university or who were once enrolled in a four-year college/university but have since dropped out. Men who have dropped out who may be included in this study did not leave school due to medical leave, nor did they transfer to another institution of higher education. These participants were divided into two groups: those who were currently attending college and those who were not currently attending college.

A total of eleven young men participated in this project. Five of these men were currently enrolled at JMU and ranged in age from 19-22. Six men had previously been enrolled, but were no longer attending JMU. These men ranged in age from 21-25.

Additionally, two university administrators who work closely with students who are at risk of being suspended or expelled from JMU and who have been suspended or expelled for academic reasons but would like to return were also interviewed.

### *Setting and Apparatus*

Half of the interviews with participants took place in the researcher's office on campus, which was conducive to private conversation. The other half of the interviews were conducted by telephone. A digital audio recorder was used to record all interviews.

### *Procedures*

*Recruitment.* Recruitment of participants occurred in multiple ways. First, participants who were currently attending college were recruited through referral from JMU's Office of Institutional Research. Participants who were not currently enrolled were recruited through JMU's Office of Academic Success. Snowball sampling, the referral of participants via participants who had already participated, played a large part in the recruitment of individuals for this project. All participants were compensated with a \$10 gift card to a local retail establishment. All recruitment was conducted on a first-come, first-interviewed basis.

*Informed Consent.* Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The researcher read through the informed consent form with all participants prior to the interview. The researcher kept a signed copy of the informed consent form, and the participant also received a copy of the informed consent form. The participant was notified that his participation is voluntary and that he was free to withdraw from the study at any time if he chose without negative consequence from the researcher. For participants who were interviewed over the phone, a copy of the consent form was either

mailed or e-mailed before the interview. During the phone interview, the consent form was reviewed and permission to proceed was received from each participant prior to digitally recording the interview. A copy of the informed consent form may be found in Appendix A.

The consent form also informed participants of potential risks and benefits that could be incurred from participating in the study. Benefits of participation in the study involved receiving a \$10 gift card to a retail establishment of their choice. Only minimal risks might have been incurred by participation, including discussing information that may have been embarrassing to the interviewee. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Further, should participants have revealed information that triggered severe mental discomfort, such as experiencing suicidal thoughts, the interviewer was prepared to immediately terminate the interview and engage in a therapeutic process to help the participant acquire appropriate mental health services.

*Demographic information.* Demographic information was collected from each college-aged participant prior to the interview. Such information included age, ethnicity, enrollment status, number of undergraduate semesters completed, cumulative undergraduate grade-point average, high school grade-point average, SAT score, declaration of major, declaration of professional identity, and whether or not the participant was a first-generation college student. A copy of the demographic questionnaire may be found in Appendix B.

The demographic questionnaire was not administered to participants from university administration.

*Interview.* Semi-structured interviews were to be no longer than sixty minutes. Average interview lengths were approximately thirty minutes. There were three separate interview protocols, one for each group: currently enrolled students, no longer enrolled students, and university administrators (Appendices C-E). The purpose of the interviews was to gain understanding from a grounded perspective of the factors that contribute to creating a hospitable or inhospitable environment for men in the undergraduate setting. Interviews were recorded.

Each interview, regardless of group, began with the same narrative, as follows:

I am interested in hearing about your experiences as a young man at JMU. Fifty years ago, the number of men undertaking higher education in the United States far outweighed the number of women. Current trends are quite the opposite: the representation of female students in institutions of higher education exceeds that of male students. Further, current research is indicating that male students who initially attend college are at higher risk of not graduating than their female counterparts. I am interested in your story and stories of your friends that depict your experience as a college student. What stories about your experience come to mind as you hear this?

This opening was structured to elicit open-ended responses from participants.

Follow-up questions were also open-ended as possible to elicit participants' views without bias. Further questioning occurred to hone in on aspects of this phenomenon from their perspectives.

*Member checking.* Member checking is a crucial component of qualitative research, particularly when employing case study methodology (Stake, 1995). This process allows participants to screen material for accuracy and provide further insight into the phenomenon being studied. This researcher used member checking by emailing a summary of his interview to each college-aged participant with the key points or highlights from the interview. The participant was allowed to edit the highlights section

should this summary not have adequately describe the participant's experience. These summaries and edits that participants made were included as memos and were analyzed with other data from the study. Of note, no participants offered edits to the highlights sections they were sent.

*Data collection and analysis.* Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and were subsequently entered into *N-Vivo 9*, a qualitative data management software program. Each interview was entered into *N-Vivo 9* as a separate case. Cases were grouped by category: currently attending college, not currently attending college, or university administrator.

Each interview was coded separately. Initially, each interview was coded line by line for moments of insight and/or thick description. These codes were grouped into categories. Additionally, *a priori* codes were created to reflect theoretical themes, such as emerging adulthood: uncertainty, learned helplessness, environment, etc. These codes and themes were analyzed for frequency of occurrence. Codes and themes within each category were grouped as appropriate. Additionally, codes and themes were compared and contrasted between group using queries from the *N-Vivo 9* software.

### *Positioning*

As a non-participant in this case, the researcher gathered information via interviews. The researcher role was that of observer as she had no experience being a college-aged male. The advantages of this positioning were that few of the researcher's own experiences may have equated with those of the interview participants. This being said, the researcher's own undergraduate experience was not very long ago, which may have been a disadvantage. As such, it was important for the researcher to not assume that

she knew what the participants were talking about as what they said may have related to her own experiences. Instead, she attempted to enter into each interview without personal experiences to draw from so that she remembered to continually ask for clarification without coloring the participant's experiences with her own. Additionally, the researcher was likely to have certain ideas regarding what the experiences of these men may be like, and as such, would likely come into the interview with her own preconceived notions about the information that she would receive.

There may also have been power issues arising from this structure. As the interviewer, the researcher was in a position of power over those being interviewed. Also, the college-aged participants were younger than the researcher and would not have achieved the level of education that she has. Additionally, some questions focused around what may help students succeed in college, while she already had succeeded as an undergraduate. These factors may have contributed to increasing the power differential between the college-aged study participants and the researcher.

## CHAPTER III:

### RESULTS

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to begin understanding, from a grounded perspective, the factors that may contribute to the high percentage of undergraduate male attrition at JMU. This study also aimed to discover, from the horse's mouth, ways in which young men may be helped to succeed at JMU. This chapter describes the results of this study, beginning with an overview of participant demographics, themes and sub-themes around factors that may contribute to increased attrition among undergraduate men at JMU, and themes and sub-themes around programs that may encourage higher rates of male retention.

#### *Participants*

Eleven young men participated in this project – five were enrolled students at JMU, and six were no longer enrolled. The enrolled young men tended to be younger (mean age = 20) than then non-enrolled men (mean age = 23). All of the men who participated represented themselves as Caucasian save one, who represented himself as Asian. All men who participated scored at least 1200 out of 1600 on the SAT and had high school grade-point averages of at least 3.5 out of 4.0. The most notable difference between men who were currently enrolled and men who dropped out was the indication of a professional identity or future professional identity. All enrolled men who were interviewed had a professional goal that they were working toward. Only two of the six men who were not currently enrolled indicated that they had a definite professional identity that they were working toward. The rest of these men, regardless of whether or

not they had declared a major while at JMU, did not know the answer to the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Additional interviews were conducted with two administrators at JMU who work extensively with students at risk of being suspended or expelled from the university and those who have already been suspended from the university. The demographic questionnaire was not administered to these participants.

*Factors that contribute to attrition*

Interviews from each interview were coded for themes and sub-themes from two major categories: factors that contribute to attrition and factors that may encourage retention. Four major themes were derived in the category of factors that may contribute to attrition: incomplete cognitive and social maturity, financial difficulties, lack of motivation, and JMU-specific factors (see Figure 3.1). Some sub-themes overlap between two or three themes. Further explanation of each theme and its sub-themes is presented below.

*Incomplete cognitive and social development.* The first major theme from this category that emerged was that college-aged men in general and college-aged men who leave school specifically tend to lack the cognitive maturity required to successfully navigate the undergraduate environment. This maturity includes by the ability to engage in goal-directed behavior, delay gratification, monitor and plan one’s actions, and appropriately attend to important stimuli (Huizinga, Dolan, & van der Molen, 2006; Anderson, 2002; Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000; Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009). One young man very eloquently described this phenomenon:

“Guys just don’t know how to handle themselves here. I know I didn’t when I got here... between the beer and the girls and all the free time, I’m

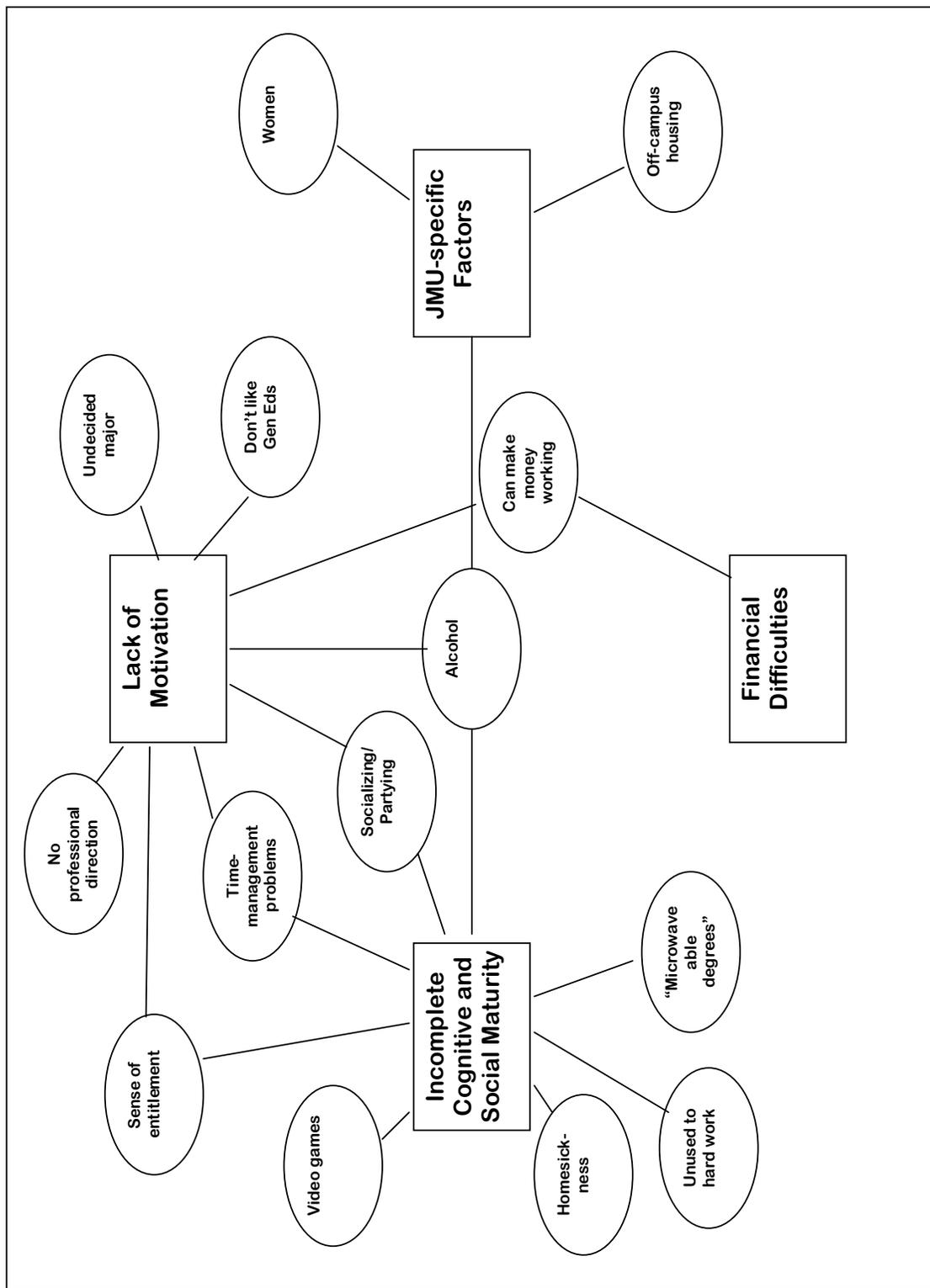


Figure 3.1. Factors that contribute to attrition: Themes and subthemes

amazed I didn't flunk out freshman year. Now that I'm a little older, I can handle myself more, but I've seen guys who never seem to get to that place... and they have to leave. Girls don't seem to have that problem."

The above statement hits upon many of the sub-themes that build upon the theme of lack of maturity. The first sub-theme that will be explored is that of *time-management problems*. This was a sub-theme that was prevalent in every interview that was conducted, indicating that this may be a critical area to address in improving retention rates. Interviews essentially indicated that young men seem to have much difficulty with time-management in the minimally structured environment that is the essence of most undergraduate institutions, including JMU. The average high school day lasts between six and seven hours, totaling up to thirty-five hours per week. Additionally, many of the young men who eventually attend JMU are involved in extra-curricular activities adding several hours a week to their schedules. A full undergraduate course load provides each student with approximately fifteen scheduled hours per week leaving the rest of the week unscheduled. In order to be successful, students must effectively manage their time so as to complete the reading and work required for their classes. This skill may be lacking in the young men who end up dropping out. Several interviews indicated that young men are doing other things with time they should be spending studying, such as playing *video games*, another sub-theme.

Video gaming seems to be another factor that pertains to male attrition. The following statement from a university administrator neatly sums up the effects that gaming may have on academic success:

"There's a fair number of males that come through [this office] ... who think nothing of spending a few hours every night [playing video games] at the minimum, and it kind of creeps up on them I think how much time it does take. And then you have the hard-core ones who play instead of

going to class ... they're playing online, they're playing with somebody around the world, and they can't leave, and for some it seems to take over their lives."

Another sub-theme that falls under the theme of lack of maturity, and that overlaps with the theme of lack of motivation, is the amount of *socializing and partying* that occurs for men at JMU. This sub-theme is linked to time-management problems, as well as the sub-themes of *alcohol* and *women*, which will be described in a later section.

One young man described this factor and the impact it had for him:

"The first few weeks being here, the goals of my hall mates, nothing had to do with academics, every reason for being here was social and not academic ... drinking, pursuing girls, stuff like that, particularly freshman year, and then after that, you get a group of friends, and you have a hard time turning down social activities because you have all that free time."

Other men described similar difficulties with simply turning down invitations to socialize even when they realized that they had pressing academic needs. Some described an internal need to not be left out of the fun while acknowledging that they would probably still be liked by their friends even if they chose to stay in and study.

The sub-theme of *alcohol* is linked to the themes of lack of motivation and JMU-specific factors, as well as to lack of maturity. The availability of alcohol to undergraduate students may play a large role in attrition rates. One young man describes this phenomenon:

You come here, the first thing guys will throw at you, even my FROGS [freshman orientation guides], don't you know anything about the ratio or drinking policy at JMU, you never have to pay for your beer, you go to a party and just grab one... biggest thing I've noticed is alcohol abuse, that's a huge one, and it gets a lot of people in trouble. Just from knowing what I see on weekends ... these kids don't know how to control themselves, underage possessions constantly and eventually just beats some of these kids up because they don't know how to control themselves and they get in trouble. Parents will pull them out and stop paying for their college and they'll just stop. I think the biggest enemy that some of

these men have... is this whole masculinity thing – who can drink the most, that kind of thing. It takes a smart person to sit there and think, this is stupid, this can get me in trouble.

Others spoke of drinking affecting their grades because they would not limit their consumption to the weekends. They described waking up hung over during the week and sleeping through their morning, and sometimes even afternoon, classes.

Another sub-theme that came up with some young men was *homesickness*. Several bright young men missed being at home with their families. Some men who endorsed feelings of homesickness qualified this factor by saying that if the academics were going well for them, they may not have been homesick. Others who endorsed feelings of homesickness stated that if they did not feel homesick, their academic performance may have been better.

The last three sub-themes under the lack of maturity umbrella are somewhat related to each other: being *unused to hard work*, having a *sense of entitlement* (which also falls under lack of motivation), and expecting what one participant elegantly called “*microwaveable degrees*.” Some of the currently enrolled men, as well as the university administrators who were interviewed, noted a sense of entitlement in many students regarding the grades they feel they deserve without necessarily putting in the required work. Other participants stated that they noticed some of their peers were not used to hard work. Regarding effort, they stated that many of young men they knew never had to exert effort in high school in order to do well. As such, they never learned the skills required when material was not as easy to learn. Finally, one participant referred to an inability to delay gratification in undergraduate settings as the desire for a microwaveable degree. His description follows:

“Maybe the males in America are just lazier... Maybe they just want to get it right now, maybe they’ve lost the idea of delayed gratification. Maybe males have a problem with vision and working to that point. I think people in previous generations understood that, they worked hard to get what they want. So maybe it’s this change of perspective as a whole, I want an undergraduate and graduate degree so let’s throw it in the microwave and get it done... With the younger generation, you can get a lot of things right away, food, the internet, so maybe they wonder if they can get the education right away instead of over time... Back in the day, even with your work, everyone had to go to the library, you had to look at your books, and read the books, or you had to cook your food, things that took time, you had to put work in it... and college doesn’t really change, you still have to put 4-10 years into it, and they’ve never done anything close to that, so it’s a different experience because college takes more time than everything else in our lives, so they can’t do it.

*Financial difficulties.* Another major theme that emerged in factors that contribute to attrition is that of financial difficulties. The cost of an undergraduate education continues to rise, and students are not necessarily supported financially by their families toward the goal of obtaining an undergraduate degree. Further, federal funds for student loans are smaller than they used to be. As such, many students must rely on themselves when financing an education. This, combined with some other factors, was the case for one of the unenrolled men I spoke to:

”I couldn’t afford it anymore. I was working part-time and I had taken out loans... it wasn’t like I was brilliant at school, I don’t know, maybe I was too tired from working to do well in my classes... school just cost too much.”

The sub-theme that emerged out of this broad theme of financial difficulties was that these young men could *make more money working*. This sub-theme was also cross-referenced under the theme of lack of motivation. One young man noted that he started working in sales part-time while working on his degree. He said as his time in school went on, his interest in academics did not increase; however, he enjoyed being somewhat

financially solvent, so he kept increasing his hours until he was working full-time. Eventually, it made more sense for him to leave JMU and continue his career in sales.

*Lack of motivation.* The third major theme that emerged from these interviews was a lack of motivation. It appeared that for many reasons, young men who left JMU were not motivated toward an academic goal. Several sub-themes under this major theme have been discussed under other themes. The sub-themes already discussed are *time-management problems, socializing/partying, alcohol, sense of entitlement, and making more money working*. Other sub-themes also emerged while analyzing the interviews.

One sub-theme that emerged exclusively under the theme of lack of motivation was a *dislike of General Education courses*. JMU's general education requirements are generally completed within the first two years of study and have the dual purpose of creating a well-rounded education for JMU's students and allowing students to explore a variety of areas before committing to a major. There was general consensus between study participants that young men who left JMU after the first or second year of study did not enjoy their GenEd classes and wondered why they were required to take them. As one participant described:

“These guys didn't like the GenEds. They had nothing to do with their majors. They couldn't see the point in taking something they weren't interested in, so they would skip. One guy I know skipped so much he actually forgot to show up on the day of one of the tests. And then he got pissed off because the professor wouldn't allow him to do a make-up.”

The final sub-themes under lack of motivation are *undecided major* and *no professional direction*. These sub-themes are closely related, and may be a key difference between men who are successful in an undergraduate environment and men who are not successful in an undergraduate environment. Some men who were not

currently enrolled in an undergraduate institution had not gotten far enough through school to declare a major. Other men who were not currently enrolled had declared a major, but did not enjoy it, and did not plan to pursue a career in the field of their major. These men also did not know how to answer the question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” One young man’s take on this is below:

“I started out as a biology major because I wanted to work with animals. I didn’t want to be a vet, but I like being around animals, and I did good in biology in high school, so I thought that’s what I would do... I didn’t like my bio classes. They were really hard for me, and I wasn’t interested in them... I still don’t really know what I want to do. I still like animals. In the meantime, I’m working at a Best Buy, and it’s alright.”

The lack of professional direction described by the young man above was typical of what others had to say, as well. Enrolled students also struggled somewhat with their majors; however, those that did not enjoy their major had a professional direction in mind to aspire to and saw completing their chosen majors as a means to an end, which was earning their degree. An enrolled young man exemplifies this:

“The other thing is that I’m taking a degree [kinesiology] that I don’t like. I’m almost done so I’m just trying to finish it out. What I want to do for careers has nothing to do with college... It’s just a paper. I understand it, I like it from a non-professional aspect, I like the mechanics of it, but it’s not what I want to do for a career. I want to do something different, I want to be a firefighter-medic, and there’s nothing here at JMU that will teach you that kind of stuff... I have a general business minor, I want to climb the ladder in the fire dept, probably become a battalion chief or chief of the dept that kind of thing, really make a change. Having a degree will really do that because they say out of all fire personnel, 70% don’t have a degree... that’s why I chose to stay in college. Just because the potential, the money starting out of college is perfect, it’s great money. Guys coming out of high school, they have to work 15-20 yrs before they’ll be making what I’ll make when I get out of here.”

*JMU-related factors.* The final theme that emerged from these interviews was that of factors specific to the environment of JMU. One sub-theme under this major

theme is *alcohol* and was discussed under lack of maturity. Alcohol is readily available to undergraduates at the university, and many participants seemed to think that it was available to a greater extent than at other universities.

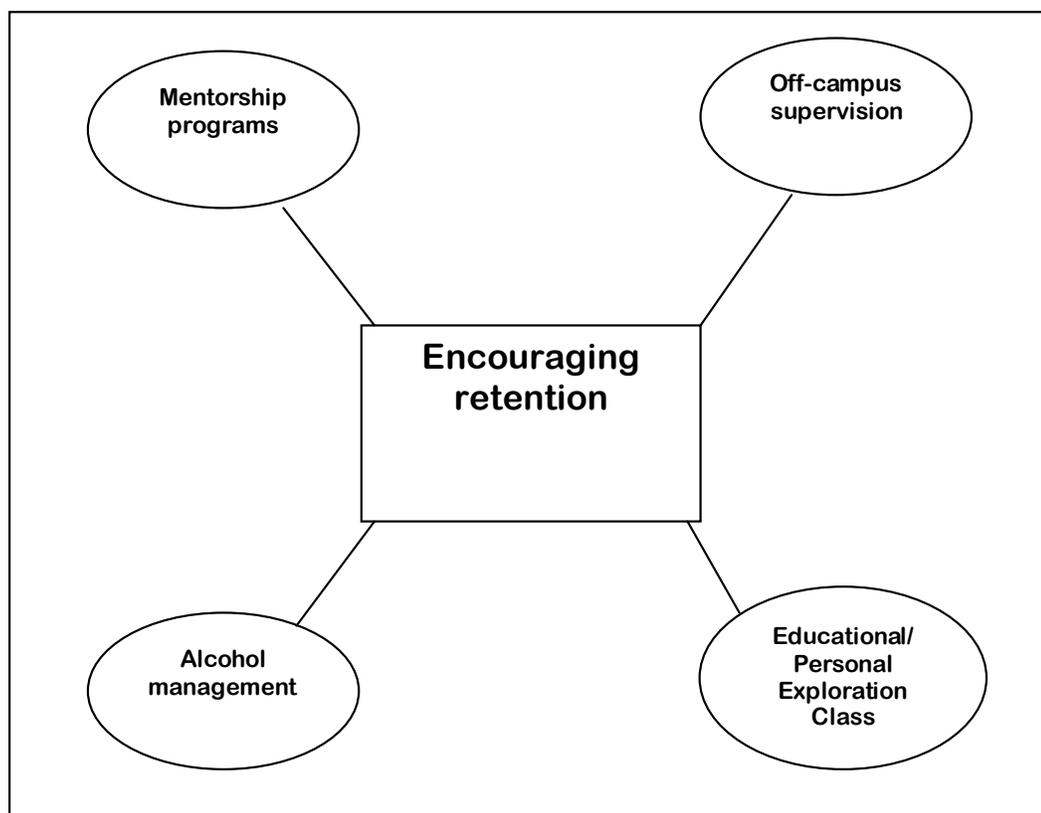
Another sub-theme that may be specific to JMU is that of *off-campus housing*. The majority of students at JMU live off-campus after freshman year in apartment complexes that are primarily occupied by undergraduates. Participants described these complexes as being hubs for parties any night of the week. Because the inhabitants of these complexes are generally college students, there is little caution regarding noise complaints by neighbors. As such, the partying may continue. It is at these complexes that much underage consumption of alcohol occurs. This off-campus partying lifestyle may have an effect on attrition rates of young men who may already be struggling academically.

The final sub-theme under this major theme related to factors that may contribute to attrition in young men is *women*. There are more women enrolled at JMU than men, and participants stated that this factor may play a large part in men's reasons for attending JMU. One participant described the "hunt:"

"My roommate is the perfect example of getting caught up with about a thousand different girls. He's a little Casanova. I know a lot of guys, that's all they're all about, just going out and socializing. Just the whole male mindset, I guess, based on human sexuality, how many women can I get?... Seems like they don't have self-control... Every single girl that I've known hasn't been one who wants to see how many guys we can get with kind of girl. They're always looking for a boyfriend, but it's not the first thing on their mind. There've been plenty of times with my friends that are girls where I've asked if they want to go hang out or see a movie, and they're like, oh no, I've got stuff. They've always been more focused on their studies than the guys I've know. But a guy will be the first one to drop and say, hey let's go do this."

*Factors that may encourage retention*

Participants were also asked to describe factors or ideas that may help men at JMU stay enrolled and complete a degree. There were four sub-themes that emerged that described factors that may encourage retention among young men at JMU (see Figure 3.2). These sub-themes are described below.



**Figure 3.2. Factors that may encourage retention: Subthemes**

The first sub-theme was a suggestion of mentorship programs. Several participants described a potential gain out of instituting a mentorship program where older, responsible men mentor young men. The participants described the value of having positive male role models, particularly for young men who did not grow up with positive male role models. One participant describes the value that having such a mentor had for him:

Well I've sought out mentors in the community, in the faith community, like pastors and older men. I've gone to a men's small group, it's 50 older men in the Harrisonburg community... It's about 50 older men and we're the only college kids who go, and it's 4 of us and we're the youngest by 23 years, but it's an incredible resource, and we get a lot of support there... I think it helps because it breaks down this generational divide, and they have things to offer, like teaching, life experience, presence, it's good to be around a man who has gone through life. Sometimes I doubt my survival because school can be an anxious experience, and then I get guidance and support from these men because they've been there and they made it. That's been fundamental to success.

Participants suggested implementing a mentorship program through the university that connects undergraduate men with appropriate male mentors either at the university or in the community. They stated that it would be important that the mentor was someone old enough to have completed an undergraduate degree and be settled.

Another sub-theme that emerged from the interviews was the possibility of off-campus supervision. Many participants noted that the off-campus lifestyle might be detrimental to the success of struggling male students, and suggested that perhaps there may be a way to implement supervision in off-campus residences. However, they were unsure as to how this may be accomplished.

A third sub-theme that emerged was the possibility of a class that students could take during the freshman year that focused on personal and academic exploration.

Participants stated that this class may help students determine which majors and/or career paths they were most suited to. A participant's description of such a class is below:

I don't know how you can make a class, not just an orientation class, maybe like a 1 credit class that everyone has to take, to I don't know... that helps guide them to find some direction, some encouragement. You'd need the right professor to do that, that could be exciting for them or something... with maybe a skills test, or a personality test, like the Myers-Briggs, something where you can learn about yourself a little bit more. If you do that, you could see what you're good at, what you're gifted in, what your abilities are, so then figure out what majors could fit. In high

school, we have this idea of this is what I want to take, but when you take it, it's not, and then you freak out because you don't know what to do anymore. So a class to help them focus.... some people don't know what they're good at, no one tells them what they're good at, no one encourages them... And there are the parents who tell them specifically, like, you'll be a lawyer, and they think they can be in law, but they could maybe burn out, but it's not necessarily for them, so it would be good for them to recognize what they're good at, so maybe it could affirm that they're good at something or help them change direction...

A final sub-theme that emerged had to do with the creation of an alcohol-management program. Participants indicated that alcohol-consumption and the legal difficulties that often followed were a potential factor that increased attrition in undergraduate men. Participants stated that alcohol offenses end up punished by the city of Harrisonburg, as well as through the judicial committee at JMU resulting in double punishment for a single offense. There were some suggestions about implementing a support program at JMU for men who had trouble with alcohol, instead of delivering a second punishment. One participant describes one way that JMU may intervene:

I feel like there needs to something done about this alcohol thing... And I feel like after an offense, there should be something here on campus where it's a little bit more comfortable as opposed to ASAP [Alcohol Safety Action Program] which the county and the city already does... And it never works! The same people I've seen take ASAP just redo it again. People from ASAP will come over after ASAP and drink with them. I feel like if it's a little more central-focused and you know understand what it does for the university, how bad the image is for them, their family, and their school, I think it's a little bit more effective... It's like here it is, here's your punishment, take it. After that, it's up to you to make your decisions. But I feel like if you need help making your decisions and helping yourself along with the process, then less incidents will occur. I know many people who have repeated offense and have been kicked out of JMU, never went back to school after that, and they're screwed... Like if you get a speeding ticket, if you enroll in a driver education course, sometimes they'll drop that, but that driver education course was your support. That helped you. I feel like if they had something on campus for the men it would be a little easier...you already get punished by the city and the county, let's try to get you back on track at school.

## CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this qualitative case study was to explore from a grounded perspective the factors that may contribute to undergraduate male attrition at JMU and ways to encourage retention among the undergraduate male population. This chapter presents a discussion of the results of this study and their implications. Discussion of limitations and considerations for future exploration are also provided.

### *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

Perhaps the most salient finding of this study is importance of motivation and goal-directed endeavors in being successful as an undergraduate student at JMU. That the enrolled men that were interviewed had goals regarding a future professional identity and that those who were not enrolled mostly did not know what they wanted to do professionally seems to be a significant difference between enrolled and no longer enrolled college-aged men. This lack of motivation or goal seems to be particularly troublesome for young men when combined with other factors that may contribute to attrition, such as homesickness or socializing. For example, if a young man feels homesick and cannot articulate his purpose in being in an undergraduate environment far away from his home, he may be more likely to throw in the towel and drop out of college. Or, if a young man cannot articulate a professional goal toward which he is working, he may be more likely to shirk his academic responsibilities in favor of engaging in social activities.

This leaves one to wonder why these men enroll in undergraduate education at all if they do not know what they would like to learn. Some research suggests that young men initially attend universities not because they have an innate desire to expand their knowledge or work toward a professional goal, but because they feel they should or that they are expected to (Zorbas, O'Neill, & Chapman, 2004). This sense of taking the next step may lead men to choose courses of study that are not interesting to them because they do not know what they are interested in. Zorbas, O'Neill, and Chapman (2004) suggest that perhaps young men would be better served by going to trade school and learning practical skills that may be applied in the work force. However, other research (Kleinfeld, 2009) indicates that most young men who go to college because they feel they should have little desire to attend trade school. These men may attend four-year or comprehensive universities because there may be greater hope in discovering an area of interest at such institutions than at a trade school, where there may be narrower options of areas in which to specialize.

Some young men who were interviewed for this study stated that they began university because they did not know what else to do. They indicated that their friends were mostly going to university or were taking on jobs that held little interest for these men. Further, most of these men stated that given their grades in high school and their SAT scores, college was, more or less, a given. This leads one to begin understanding that for some men, attending college is an alternative to doing nothing. They do not want to attend trade school, and they would prefer not to work at the type of job that is available to those with high school diplomas. Traveling or exploring the world is also not a financially viable option. Going to college ends up being the least noxious option

available to them. This lack of motivation becomes apparent when they choose to engage in activities that are not conducive to passing their classes, which in turn may lead to dropping out.

*Guys just don't know how to handle themselves here*

Another salient theme that emerged from conducting these interviews was an inherent lack of cognitive and social maturity in young men that end up leaving JMU. Men who were no longer enrolled at JMU did not outwardly reflect that their behavior while at JMU lacked maturity; however, some did note that they were not ready for the responsibility of being a college student. Men who were enrolled at JMU and university administrators stated outright that young men are “immature,” and generally more so than young women.

The undergraduate environment at JMU is likely very different from the environments that incoming students are accustomed to. Freshmen are required to live on campus in dorms with other students. Supervision is minimal. This type of living is conducive for encouraging students to learn how to manage themselves, build relationships, and resolve conflicts in an adult manner. If help is needed, a resident advisor, usually an older student, may be available. However, many students may not know how to seek help when it is needed, or may not recognize that help is needed. As such, these students end up attempting to successfully navigate this new, unstructured environment on their own, and some young men may not be adequately prepared to do that.

Arnett's (2000, 2004, 2006) emerging adulthood theory describes the pace at which young people “grow up.” This process occurs more slowly than in decades past

with decisions regarding career, relationship, and general life trajectories not occurring until the late twenties. The traditional age of entrance to a university is eighteen years, which is approximately one decade earlier than one may decide what one's life ought to look like. Further, parents play a much larger role in the lives of emerging adults (Arnett, 2004, 2006), particularly regarding organizing their offsprings' time. Young adults may be slower to learn these skills if they have not had to use them during their time in high school.

Arnett (2004, 2006) further describes the emerging adulthood period as a time of exploration during which young people are responsible solely for themselves. They no longer have to abide by the rules of their parents nor do they have significant others – spouses, children, partners – to whom they must answer. This exploratory period may be linked to the energy young men at college expend toward socializing, dating women, and drinking. Further, the young men interviewed described no shortage of eligible women to date or alcoholic beverages at JMU, perhaps further encouraging engagement in socializing behaviors.

Additionally, the looser structure of an undergraduate environment may not be ideal given development of the prefrontal cortex in young men (Samango-Sprouse, 2006; Spencer-Smith & Anderson, 2009). Because this development allows young men impose internally-derived structure on an unstructured environment, that the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed may contribute somewhat to attrition.

*Do we need a gap year?*

One university administrator who participated in this study described the common tradition in Europe of taking advantage of a gap year. Exploration as to what a gap year

is revealed that gap year is a year that young people who would otherwise be students take time off from studying to work, travel, or both (Shellenbarger, 2010). Gap years are not uncommon for European students and are often taken between completion of secondary education and attending university. The top two reasons for engaging in gap year are recovering from burnout from high school and a need for personal exploration (Shellenbarger, 2010). For students who may not otherwise know what they want to be when they grow up, taking a gap year to explore, travel, volunteer, and work may help them determine where their passions lie or, equally important, where their passions do not lie. The administrator who discussed gap year expressed that young men may benefit greatly by taking time off before college, but that American culture was not necessarily accepting of this tradition, nor would it be financially feasible for all students who might have benefited from such exploration.

So if taking a year off is not practical for future JMU men, what may help them reap the benefits of such a year while attending university? One participant's detailed suggestion about an exploration class comes to mind. The participant described a class that could be taken during freshman year that would allow students to explore themselves, their abilities, and their interests. He stated that taking aptitude and career tests might help young men discover areas of strength and interest that they had not earlier considered. Perhaps it would be encouraged to shadow someone in a career that seemed interesting to a young man. Further, he described ways in which these young men could learn more about themselves, beginning with quick personality inventories, such as the Myers-Briggs. A class such as this that lasted a full semester might encourage ownership of the academic aspects of the college experience. It would also be

important for such a class not to simply be an inventory of the courses of study available at the university, but to encourage deep exploration of future career trajectories. As such, it would be important for students in this class to also explore areas that JMU may not provide training in, such as certain courses of study not available at JMU or certain vocational or technical training programs. Additionally, this class would likely be most effective for students during the latter part of the freshman year or the beginning of the sophomore year. This would allow for some adjustment to the undergraduate environment prior to deciding on a career path. Further details of such a class would certainly need to be ironed out; however, the idea of a structured space dedicated to exploration of the developing self may hold some promise.

*How do we address the alcohol issue?*

One factor that most young men who were interviewed described as potentially having an impact on male attrition was that of alcohol over-consumption. One young man discussed addressing the problem of poor decision-making around alcohol by creating a program that young men who had encountered legal trouble due to drinking could attend. The inclusion of an alcohol-management class may not be feasible at JMU; however, there is another option that may be considered.

The Amethyst Initiative (AI) is an organization of U.S. college presidents and chancellors who launched a movement to support debate regarding lowering the minimum legal drinking age from twenty-one to eighteen (Amethyst Initiative, 2011). This movement was brought about because of the overwhelming amount of underage binge-drinking that occurs on college campuses. Members of the Amethyst Initiative do

not openly advocate for lowering the drinking age, but rather for continuing to openly discuss the problems of underage drinking (AI, 2011).

The AI was launched in July 2008. Since then, there has been much debate regarding the need for such an initiative (Saylor, 2011). There has been much research that has indicated that the laws passed in 1984 to increase the minimum legal drinking age to twenty-one have been linked with decreased accidents and fatalities caused by alcohol consumption. There is little information available regarding how the universities of presidents and chancellors who have signed the AI have changed. It is likely that further data will become available regarding the ways in which campuses have changed as the AI expands.

There are 136 current signatories to the AI; however, JMU's president is not on the list (AI, 2011). While joining the AI may not provide immediate alterations in the ways that undergraduates drink, it may be worth further exploration to consider the impact that joining this movement may have on the university and the bingeing behaviors of its young men.

*What about academic helplessness, learning styles, and high school GPA?*

Some expected themes did not emerge through these interviews. It was surprising for this researcher that the young men interviewed did not generally mention aspects of academic helplessness, difficulty learning in classes, or lack of academic preparation in terms of high school GPA as factors that may contribute to undergraduate male attrition at JMU. Research indicated that one factor that may predict undergraduate male attrition is high school GPA with GPA's lower than at the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile being particularly predictive of college drop-out (Jorgensen, Fichten, & Havel, 2009). Perhaps this theme

did not emerge during interviews as a factor that contributed to male attrition because men who are admitted to JMU generally do very well in high school. This may also relate to reasons that factors associated with academic helplessness did not emerge as themes from these interviews. Academic helplessness generally indicates a long-term pattern of lack of control in academic environments (McKean, 1994a). Given that students who are admitted to JMU generally do well in high school, it may be extrapolated that the young men who dropped out of JMU experienced some sense of control over their academic environments. There may be one aspect of academic helplessness that emerged from interviews, and that was the lack of goal-directed behavior while at college (McKean, 1994a). However, this was the only aspect of academic helplessness that came to light through this study as a factor that may contribute increased attrition among undergraduate men at JMU.

Learning styles were not mentioned at all as factors that may contribute to attrition. This may be because men who left JMU were little interested in their coursework or in retaining information in general.

*Increase retention by modifying the admissions process?*

Admissions committees at undergraduate institutions have historically based their decisions on high-school GPA and standardized test scores (Sternberg, 2009). And why not? Traditionally, students with high GPA's and test scores have consistently performed well in the undergraduate environment (Jorgensen, Fitchen, & Havel, 2009). However, the current study and other research (e.g. Sternberg, 2009) posit that sole emphasis on high-school GPA and SAT scores may not be enough to predict success in college. In

fact, all participants of the current study who left JMU had high high-school GPA's and SAT scores.

The Kaleidoscope Project, initially conducted at Tufts University in Massachusetts, supplemented the undergraduate admissions application with a university-specific addition (Sternberg, 2009). This supplement was based on Sternberg's theory of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 1999; Sternberg 2009), which integrates the traditional analytic view of intelligence with creative intelligence, practical intelligence, and wisdom. Creative intelligence was defined as the ability to generate new and exciting ideas (Sternberg, 1999). Practical intelligence was defined as the application of intelligence to experience toward adapting to, shaping, and selecting environments (Sternberg, 1999). Sternberg (1998) describes wisdom as the balancing of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests via the application of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge toward the common good and while maintaining positive ethical values.

The goal of the Kaleidoscope Project was to insert analytical, creative, practical, and wisdom-based essays as part of the admissions process to broaden the way in which admissions officers think about applicants. During the first year of the project, applicants chose whether or not they wished to participate in the project by completing the supplemental part of the application. Admissions officers were trained to evaluate these essays, and applicants were evaluated for creative, practical, and wisdom-based skills in addition to academic and personal qualities. There were no significant group differences between admitted students who completed the supplemental application and admitted students who chose not to complete the supplemental application. However, students who received an "A" grade (top rating) on this supplemental had approximately double

the undergraduate acceptance rates than those who completed the supplemental application and had a grade of less than A. Sternberg (2009) noted that though this project was still in its earliest stages, it was apparent that the theory of successful intelligence provided a basis for the expanded evaluation of skills needed for undergraduate success.

It is possible that the difference in successful intelligence between men who persisted through their experience at JMU and men who left may have been significant. Some aspects of the factors that pertain to male attrition discovered in this study seem to fit into Sternberg's (1999) theory of successful intelligence. For example, successfully intelligent individuals were likely to adapt to their environments (Sternberg, 1999). Some of the participants of the current study who had left JMU cited homesickness and an inability to adapt to the undergraduate environment. This indicates that these men may have been lower than necessary in practical intelligence. Perhaps eventually adopting the measures of the Kaleidoscope Project for JMU's admission processes will help the admissions committees to select young men who will be more likely to persist and succeed at JMU.

#### *Limitations*

Qualitative research has the potential for adding depth and texture to an inquiry. Case study research focuses inquiry to a specific subject or group, which may allow a researcher to deeply understand a single subject. These areas of potential also are limitations of such studies. This study focused on undergraduate male attrition at JMU and attempted to understand that phenomenon by focusing on men who were currently enrolled at JMU and men who had previously been enrolled at JMU. Additionally,

university administrators who work with students who are at risk of dropping out or who have dropped out also participated in this study. As such, some understanding of this phenomenon as it occurs at JMU has been gained. However, these results may not be generalizable to young men at other universities with similar attrition patterns.

It was crucial for the design of this study for the interviewer to keep questions during interviews as open-ended as possible. This approach assisted the emergence of themes from a grounded perspective. Because prompts during interviews were open-ended, some expected results based on the initial literature review, such as differences in learning styles and the role of academic helplessness, did not emerge. As such, some *a priori* themes were never coded. This does not necessarily mean that such themes are irrelevant to this phenomenon, and as such, it is likely that there is more to learn about undergraduate male attrition at JMU.

Additionally, the sample of students who participated in this study was small and relatively homogenous. Recruitment remained challenging throughout the course of the study, and all young men who responded to recruitment efforts were interviewed. Because the sample of students was small, the ideas expressed in this study may not be representative of all ideas that the young men who are enrolled or who have been enrolled at JMU.

Finally, the results of this study do not imply causality between the factors that may contribute to attrition and undergraduate male attrition at JMU.

#### *Future Directions*

Future research in this area may combine quantitative and qualitative methodology to determine from a statistical perspective the factors that are significant

contributors to the trend of undergraduate male attrition. It may be useful to conduct replication studies using a nation-wide sample to allow generalization of these results. It may also be useful to explore some of the themes that were expected to emerge out of this research that did not, such as the effects of learning style and factors that are related to academic helplessness. These themes may be particularly amenable to study using quantitative means.

As the theory of successful intelligence continues to develop, it may be helpful to evaluate men who have persisted and who have dropped out in terms of successful intelligence. Evaluating the differences between these groups of men from the basis of the theory of successful intelligence may offer a broader perspective as to what may encourage or inhibit success in undergraduate settings. Additionally, the Kaleidoscope Project may help JMU select students for admission who are more likely to succeed.

Future directions for JMU in addressing the pattern of undergraduate male attrition may also be implied from this study. Perhaps the most feasible suggestion for the university would be to incorporate an exploration class to be taken during the latter part of the freshman year or early during sophomore year. JMU may also be able to feasibly create a mentorship program so that young men at risk of dropping out may have an older, experienced mentor who could be a positive role model. Additionally, JMU's policy regarding disciplining students who struggle with responsibly consuming alcohol may be evaluated and joining the Amethyst Initiative might be considered. Finally, the university might work with the city of Harrisonburg to manage the off-campus housing developments with more supervision.

## Appendix A

### **Consent to Participate in Research**

#### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Monika N. Kushwaha from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to understand from a grounded perspective factors that may contribute to the trend of increasing attrition among undergraduate men and ways in which this trend may be curbed.

#### **Research Procedures**

This research project focuses on the experiences of college-aged men living in the Harrisonburg/Rockingham, Virginia area either attending or having dropped out of a four-year university. It involves participation in an interview. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your personal understanding of undergraduate male attrition and your experiences with this trend. Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions related to the study have been answered to your satisfaction. This interview will be digitally audio-recorded, with your permission and the transcript will be made available to you at your request.

#### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require approximately 60 minutes of your time.

#### **Risks**

There is no more than minimal risk to you in participating in this study. The interview protocol does cover personal matters that may make you uncomfortable. You may remove yourself from this study at any time without consequences of any kind.

#### **Benefits**

You will receive a \$10 gift card for your participation.

#### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research may be presented at professional conferences. The results of this project will be published for my dissertation and may also be published in academic journals. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. Your name, occupation, and residence will be disguised. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Once done with the digital recordings, they will be erased. Transcripts will be stored in a computer which is password protected. The printed copies of the transcripts will be kept in a locked desk drawer and will be destroyed once the project is completed. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers including audio-tapes and transcripts will be destroyed.

### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

#### **Monika Kushwaha**

Department of Graduate Psychology  
James Madison University  
MSC 7401  
Harrisonburg, VA 22807  
kushwamn@dukes.jmu.edu

Should other questions arise, you may also contact:

#### **Dr. Harriet Cobb**

540-568-6834  
cobbhc@cisat.jmu.edu

### **Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

David Cockley, Ph.D.  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
James Madison University  
(540) 568-2834  
[cocklede@jmu.edu](mailto:cocklede@jmu.edu)

### **Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be (*audio*) taped during this interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

**Demographic questionnaire**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnic identity: \_\_\_\_\_

Enrollment status:

\_\_\_\_\_ Full-time

\_\_\_\_\_ Part-time

\_\_\_\_\_ No longer enrolled

Number of undergraduate semesters completed: \_\_\_\_\_

Cumulative Undergraduate GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_ (Named or undeclared)

Have/had you identified a professional identity? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

If so, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Are/were you a first-generation undergraduate? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

High school GPA: \_\_\_\_\_

SAT Scores: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

**Interview Protocol – College-aged men attending a 4-year university**

Read to each participant: *I am interested in hearing about your experiences as a young man at JMU. Fifty years ago, the number of men undertaking higher education in the United States far outweighed the number of women. Current trends are quite the opposite: the representation of female students in institutions of higher education exceeds that of male students. Further, current research is indicating that male students who initially attend college are at higher risk of not graduating than their female counterparts. I am interested in your story and stories of your friends that depict your experience as a college student.*

What stories about your experience come to mind as you hear this?

**Other prompts:**

What factors do you think might be contributing to this trend?

You are still in college, so this trend does not apply to you. What has helped you continue to succeed in college?

What might help men, in general, succeed in college?

Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience in college?

Do you know of men that this may apply to? Would he be willing to offer his own insights?

## Appendix D

**Interview Protocol – College-aged men who have withdrawn from a 4-year university**

Read to each participant: *I am interested in hearing about your experiences as a young man in college and after college. Fifty years ago, the number of men undertaking higher education in the United States far outweighed the number of women. Current trends are quite the opposite: the representation of female students in institutions of higher education exceeds that of male students. Further, current research is indicating that male students who initially attend college are at higher risk of not graduating than their female counterparts. I am interested in your story and stories of your friends that depict your experiences.*

What stories about your experiences come to mind as you hear this?

**Other prompts:**

What factors do you think might be contributing to this trend?

You are no longer attending college. What were the factors that led you to withdrawing?

What may have helped you to stay in college?

What might help men, in general, succeed in college?

**Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience in college or after college?**

## Appendix E

**Interview Protocol – University administrators**

Read to each participant: *Fifty years ago, the number of men undertaking higher education in the United States far outweighed the number of women. Current trends are quite the opposite: the representation of female students in institutions of higher education exceeds that of male students. Further, current research is indicating that male students who initially attend college are at higher risk of not graduating than their female counterparts. I am interested in your perspective and stories of students you have worked with that depict your experiences regarding this trend.*

What stories about your experiences come to mind as you hear this?

**Other prompts:**

What factors do you think might be contributing to this trend?

What might help men, in general, succeed in college?

**Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience at JMU as it pertains to this trend?**

## Appendix F

## Summaries of Interviews

*Currently enrolled participants*

## Participant 1:

I definitely see a difference between girls and guys at college. I feel like both the girls and the guys party, but the guys do to their detriment and the girls don't let partying get in the way of their goals. And I think guys get competitive about how much they can drink, and girls don't do that. I started out like that too – I joined a fraternity and partied a little harder than I should have my first 2 years. But I left the fraternity, and found support with the fire squad I volunteer with. I'd like to join the fire squad, and having a degree will put me about 20 pay grades above where I'd be if I just went out of high school. I'm not really interested in my degree program, but to me, it's the actual degree that matters. I think guys get in trouble here when they drink. I know a lot of guys who've had trouble with the law, with drunk in public or underage possession charges. Then they get in trouble with JMU and then they get kicked out. I think it'd be helpful if JMU offered help to these guys instead of kicking them out. I'm not sure how exactly that would happen, but the ASAP program in the county is not working. Maybe the JMU guys don't feel like they connect with the other guys.

## Participant 2:

I haven't really noticed that there is a difference between the number of guys who graduate and the number of girls who graduate. I think it makes a difference who your friends are. All my friends, guys and girls, are graduating. I always assumed I was going to college – it was never a question with my parents, and they've been really supportive the whole way through. I changed majors after a year or so, but I'll be finishing on time, and I've got a job lined up. I know one guy who dropped out and took 2-3 years off and is doing a lot better now than he was before. I guess I can see not knowing what you want to do as being a factor for dropping out. I know some people who had a really hard time the first couple of years because they didn't know what they wanted to do, or because their parents had told them what to do, or because they didn't like what they thought they wanted to do. If they didn't have good support systems, they might have dropped out. I think helping guys figure out what they want to do would be helpful – like if there was a class that could help you figure out what you wanted to be or help you explore your personality.

## Participant 3:

I think one of the factors that has played into the trend of lower graduation among men is the lack of proper male role models. I think that maybe the increase of single parent families has made an impact. My father was absent for most of my life, and I've sought places to get mentorship from older men. I did a program in Colorado one summer, and

here in Harrisonburg, I've sought out a male spiritual support group. I feel like that really helps me a lot to see what I could become if I stay focused. I also think college guys are generally less mature than college women. They go to college because they're compelled to go, not necessarily because they have an interest. I think it also helps to have a definite goal. I think JMU could help improve graduation rates for men by creating mentorship programs with older men in the community and by helping men figure out what they want to focus on while at JMU.

Participant 4:

I think guys get really distracted when they're at JMU. They do all the extracurricular activities, they get involved with social activities, and they forget about the academic. They think they have a lot of free time, especially freshman year, so they don't turn down social activities and spend a lot of time drinking and partying. I think guys feel responsible to their friends to hang out and party and feel like they can't say no even if they have stuff to do. I used to be like that my first year or two here. But I've made friends who encourage me to work and do well academically. I don't know what JMU can do to help young men. Maybe if they monitored the social scene more that would help.

Participant 5:

I had noticed that more of my guy friends than my girl friends seemed to drop out. I guess I never thought that it was part of a bigger trend. The guys I know dropped out because their grades were so bad and they couldn't figure out how to raise them. Most of the girls, if they had problems with grades, seemed to be able to focus and get them back up. The guys couldn't focus enough to bring the grades up. Maybe that has to do with maturity. The guys I know who dropped out did so after moving off-campus. They party really hard at the developments off-campus, and I think these guys got really sucked into that. Girls seem to be able to handle the partying better. Maybe JMU could monitor the off-campus situation better.

*Not currently enrolled participants*

Participant 1:

I wanted to go to a different school to study architecture, but I didn't get in. JMU was my safety school, so I came here. They didn't really have an architecture program here, so I chose another major and I didn't really like it. Then, I changed my major, but didn't like that either. I stopped focusing and my grades went down a lot. Financially, I just couldn't afford to stay here anymore. I left JMU. I thought about coming back a few times, and did a semester here and there at community colleges, but nothing that worked toward a degree. I think I have a total of 8 semesters under my belt, but nothing consistent enough for a degree. I don't know what JMU could have done to help me figure things out. I guess it might have been helpful to have some guidance regarding

choosing a major or a career path. Right now, I still don't really know what I want a career in. I'm working in sales, and it's fine, but I don't think I want to do this long term.

Participant 2:

I was really excited about going to JMU. It was a couple of hours away from home and not a lot of people from my high school came here. I got really into the social scene and joined a fraternity. I also wanted to be a veterinarian. I started by majoring in biology, but it was really hard, and I didn't like it that much. I also didn't like the chemistry classes I had to take. I also got really homesick. I missed my family and friends, and I think I was partying really hard to mask how much I missed home. I wasn't dealing with that the best way. After 2 semesters, I just needed to go back home. I think it would have been helpful I had gotten more support. I know I could have gone to the counseling center, but I just didn't think about it at the time. And my fraternity brothers weren't exactly helpful. I just needed to go home.

Participant 3:

I went to JMU because I got in, so I figured, why not? It was expected of me to go. My family had been hit pretty hard by the economy, so I knew that I'd have to take out loans to go to school. I did pretty well with a 3.1 GPA my first two years, but I was also working part-time at a car dealership during school. I never loved my major, and I was making a lot of money selling cars, so over time, I just kept increasing my hours, and eventually, it was just more worth it to me to quit school and work full-time. I am pretty content with my decision. There wasn't a lot JMU could have done for me because I never really had any problems with school. I socialized while I was there, but I wasn't one of the guys who was out partying all week and ignoring the academic stuff. I was too busy between working and going to school to party a lot. I was just more worth it to me to work full-time.

Participant 4:

I never realized there was such a difference between girls and guys and dropping out of college. Looking back, I realized my focus was absolutely not academic at JMU. I had heard that you could go there to party and be with girls, and that's what I did. I had a great time, but I skipped class a lot, and I remember missing a test or two, also. I didn't like all the GenEd classes. I didn't think there was a point to learning all this stuff that I didn't need to know. I got on academic probation after the first semester, and didn't straighten out my act after that. I didn't really know how to straighten things out. I never needed to study or focus or anything like that in high school, and I didn't know how to study. Plus, it's a lot of material to get through every semester, and I couldn't do it and party at the same time. My priorities weren't straight. I don't know what JMU could have done to help. I was offered services when I got on probation, but I didn't use them.

## Participant 5:

I went to JMU because you're supposed to go to college after high school, and it was the best, longest, non-stop party. Even though I lived on-campus as a freshman, I had a lot of older friends who lived off-campus, and I may as well have moved into their apartments. I was off-campus all the time. I don't know how my friends got the alcohol they got. Every now and then, I'd give them some cash, and there would be more booze. I got arrested for a drunk in public on my way back to the dorm one night. The officer didn't charge me with underage drinking because I didn't actually have any alcohol on me. They made me go to ASAP, and that was a joke. I never really got my act together there. My parents pulled me out pretty quick. I moved back home and got a job. The only thing I think JMU could have done would have been to help me focus on schoolwork and maybe help figure out how to socialize more responsibly – I don't know if I would have listened though.

## Participant 6:

I really didn't like being in school. I liked hanging out with friends, but I didn't know what I wanted to do career-wise, and the GenEds seemed dumb to me. It was a really expensive party. I guess if JMU could have done anything for me, it would have been to help me figure out what I wanted to focus on as a profession. I'm working at a Best Buy now, and I don't really like that much, but at least it's a job. I'm trying to move out of my parents' house, and get my own place. I just don't think college was for me.

*Administrators:*

## Participant 1:

I think students in general have poor study skills compared to what they need to know to be successful in college. The students that I've seen never learned how to study in high school because they didn't need to. They don't know how to manage their time, and don't understand that just because they're in class for only 15 hours a week, that they need to spend more time than that working on class material. I've also noticed that young men tend to be more immature than women. They spend a lot of time socializing and dating and drinking and forgetting that their purpose in being at JMU is to get the degree. They don't value a well-rounded education and don't understand the purpose of taking GenEd classes first before really getting into their majors. The off-campus culture here at JMU is also detrimental to student success. JMU offers a lot of services from learning resource centers to study skills workshops to counseling. The students that I see have never used these services.

## Participant 2:

The men that I see are in much worse shape than the women. If a young woman ends up in my office, we work out a plan, and she's more likely to pull herself together and figure

out what she needs to do to succeed. The young men can't do that. A lot of them aren't motivated. They want the good grades, but they don't want to work for them. They also don't seem to know what they want to do with their degrees. There isn't a long-term goal in mind. The young men I see party a lot. There is also a huge video game culture that seems to be detrimental. Young men spend a lot of time playing video games and will play through the night and straight through class. They get sucked in. It would be great if we did Gap Year here to give these guys some time to figure out what they want to do before getting to college. It would help if they had a sense of direction before being let loose.

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