

Gardner-Webb University

## Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University

---

Education Dissertations and Projects

School of Education

---

2019

### **The Impact of Graduation Coaches' Relationship Building Strategies on Student Dispositions and Self-efficacy**

Rick Strickland

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/education\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/education_etd)



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#)

---

THE IMPACT OF GRADUATION COACHES' RELATIONSHIP BUILDING  
STRATEGIES ON STUDENT DISPOSITIONS AND SELF-EFFICACY

By  
Rick Strickland

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2019

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Rick Strickland under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

---

Jim Palermo, Ed.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Date

---

Stephen Laws, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

Brian Richard, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

Prince Bull, Ph.D.  
Dean of the School of Education

---

Date

## **Abstract**

THE IMPACT OF GRADUATION COACHES' RELATIONSHIP BUILDING STRATEGIES ON STUDENT DISPOSITIONS AND SELF-EFFICACY. Strickland, Rick, 2019: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

This qualitative phenomenological research was designed to explore the relationships established by graduation coaches and the students they serve. The research that was conducted in two upstate South Carolina schools explored the perceptions and experiences of both the graduation coaches and the students who participated in the study. The study was conducted using a phenomenological research design to capture the essence of each participant's experiences and perceptions. Data were collected utilizing surveys, interviews, and field observations. The researcher did not participate in the interaction between the graduation coaches and their students. The results of the data collection revealed themes and supporting areas that provided insight into the experiences and perceptions of each participant resulting in a relationship that developed over time between the graduation coach and the students. Key themes that emerged were frequency of contact, quality of the relationship, and self-efficacy. These themes along with the supporting areas demonstrated that both the graduation coaches and students in the study perceived a positive relationship with each other with beneficial outcomes for the students.

*Keywords:* graduation coach, relationships, self-efficacy, student dispositions

## Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
The Research Problem .....	6
Definition of Terms.....	11
Research Questions .....	13
Assumptions.....	14
Limitations .....	15
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	16
Overview .....	16
High School Dropouts: Factors That Influence the Decision to Drop Out or Remain to Graduate .....	17
Self-Efficacy: Factors That Affect and Influence It .....	21
Mentoring and Relationships: Caring Adults and Their Influence .....	26
Characteristics of Effective Mentors and Building Relationships .....	31
Summary .....	33
Chapter 3: Research Methodology.....	35
Overview .....	35
Problem Statement .....	36
Significance of the Study .....	36
Data Collection .....	37
Participant Selection .....	41
Instruments.....	42
Procedures.....	45
Chapter 4: Findings .....	47
Introduction .....	47
Procedures for Data Analysis.....	47
Field Observation Delimitation.....	55
Themes that Emerged from Graduation Coach and Student Interviews.....	60
Findings.....	85
Summary .....	89
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations .....	91
Summary .....	91
Findings from Surveys, Research Questions, and Conclusions.....	92
Relationship to Other Literature .....	94
Implications for Change.....	99
Recommendations for Further Study .....	102
Conclusion .....	103
References .....	107
Appendices	
A Survey Protocol and Student Survey .....	114
B Interview Protocol Graduation: Coaches .....	123
C Interview Protocol: Students .....	126
D Field Observation Protocol .....	130
E Student and Graduation Coach Consent Forms .....	134

## Tables

1	Student Survey Questions and the Works Cited from Which They Were Generated .....	50
2	Student Survey Results .....	52
3	Survey Questions Aligned with Interview Question Themes.....	53
4	Themes Derived from Transcribed Interviews .....	56
5	Frequency Table of Themes and Supporting Areas from Graduation Coach Interview .....	57
6	Frequency Table of Themes and Supporting Areas from Student Interviews and Surveys .....	59

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

In an age that is moving our society toward a technological and information-based society it has become essential that our students are prepared to meet the demands of the new work force (Canton, 2006; Cornish, 2004; Wagner, 2008). We have entered into a global economy that has put us in competition for jobs around the globe and put our education system center stage as we are now compared to other nations through standardized test scores and graduation rates (Canton, 2006). For our students to be successful and lead a productive life within this new landscape, they must be able to graduate high school with a high school diploma and the skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education. Wagner (2008) indicated that only a third of students who graduate high school are prepared for college, and some postsecondary school will be needed to be successful in the coming job markets.

States and our federal government have recognized the need for students to graduate high school, and graduation rates have moved into local and national news. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has put an emphasis on increasing student graduation rates. NCLB intends for all students to graduate with a diploma within 4 years of entering high school with skills upon graduating that will allow them to find gainful employment. The future is not promising for students who drop out of school; and their future could include a life in poverty, participation in crime, poor health, and reliance on drug use (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

The United States is facing a dropout epidemic that is affecting the futures of our students. The students are faced with the question of dropping out of school or remaining

in school to achieve their diploma, but the decisions made by the students and the way they view their own self-efficacy and the connection to and relationships with adults in the school can have a significant impact on their future and their future health.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) reported dropping out of high school is related to many negative outcomes. For example, the median income of persons who had not completed high school was roughly \$21,000 in 2009. By comparison, the median income of persons who completed their education with at least a high school credential, including a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, was approximately \$30,000.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) also stated in their report that dropouts are more likely not to be in the workforce and to rely more on the government for help through Medicare. Dropouts are more likely to be involved in criminal activity and over their lifetime cost the economy over \$240,000.00.

To further complicate matters, there may be few options beyond the traditional structure of high school that students are pursuing to reach a diploma or a GED. Stearns and Glennie (2006) reported that students who drop out may not pursue a GED. This will limit the opportunities that students have in the work place and relegate them to the lower paying jobs compared to those who earned a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

This information paints a bleak picture for students who have disconnected from school; and to stem the tide of dropouts, schools and school systems will need to start looking for ways to reconnect students to the school. This sense of disconnectedness can arise from a student's self-perception about their ability to be successful within the school

environment or their self-efficacy. Testerman (1996) reported that students who dropped out of school reported greater self-esteem after dropping out. This sense of failure on a day-to-day basis can prove too much for a student, and dropping out begins to be appealing.

When weighed against this back drop, it becomes clear that we as a system of educators must attack the problem of dropouts from our schools, but we need to begin looking at it from a different perspective. While graduation rates are an important factor to consider, one must look at dropping out as a process that occurs over time not as an isolated event that happens in high school (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagaini, 2009; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). A student's self-efficacy and their dispositions are the factors that lead to the decision to drop out of school. To stem the tide of dropouts from high school, these factors must be focused on to keep these students in school. Each student needs to feel a sense of connectedness to the school; they must have at least one person who demonstrates that they are important to keep them on track to graduate (Happel, 2006; Kortering, Konold, & Glutting, 1998; Lan & Lantheir, 2003; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008).

Viewing dropping out as a process, one must consider that teens as they enter middle school are in transition physically and emotionally, leaving them caught between being a child and an adult (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Teens are trying to find their place and their way as they enter middle school, and their choices begin to affect their progress toward graduation. Neild et al. (2007) reported that a high percentage of dropouts send distress signals as early as sixth grade that include grades, attendance, and unsatisfactory behavior. The students are beginning to make decisions that affect their progress toward

graduation. Without a way to connect them to the school, the process of dropping out has begun.

Looking at dropping out as a process includes a student's sense of connectedness to the school or to at least one individual in the school who demonstrates genuine interest in the student. In a school, when students feel as though they are not connected, they report that they have experienced a lack of meaningful relationships with adults or a lack of acceptance at school leading to an environment that frustrates rather than inspires and in turn affects their self-efficacy and disposition about school. The sense of disconnectedness will result in students feeling unsupported and unmotivated which creates, from the student's perspective, a lack of caring from the adults in the school. Happel (2006) reported that in a survey, less than 50% of students acknowledged knowing a teacher or counselor they felt comfortable talking to about personal problems (Kortering et al., 1998; Meeker et al., 2008).

Other factors also play a part in the process of dropping out. Student choice and student disposition are part of the process. Poor attendance is a factor that compounds a student's feelings of isolation and disconnectedness from school. A student must be in school to learn the material to be successful. As students miss more days, the gaps in ability widen and their self-efficacy toward being successful in school begins to decline as they return to find they are further behind; and as a result, their disposition toward school becomes negative (Neild et al., 2007).

Disruptive behavior is another element of student choice that is also seen as a factor in the process of dropping out. As a student's sense of disconnectedness grows, it begins to manifest itself in their dispositions toward school and is expressed through

being disruptive, developing a negative attitude toward school, and not making attempts to confront or overcome difficulty. These attitudes interfere with the instructional process or result in the students skipping school. The perceived lack of care continues to grow, affecting attitude and attendance. The poor dispositions affect their relationship with other students at school, further creating a negative environment for the student; and creating a sense of not fitting in with peers perpetuates the feelings of disconnectedness (Arslan, 2012; Meeker et al., 2008).

The county in which the study took place decided to utilize graduation coaches to help students reach graduation. They were assigned only to high schools in the county. The responsibility of the graduation coach is to identify students at risk and work with them to help them gain a high school diploma. They are tasked with identifying students who have academic, social, or behavioral issues that create barriers to their success and help them toward graduation.

The importance of the graduation coach's duties that needed to be focused on for this research is building personal relationships with the students and their families. Meaningful relationships built with the student and at least one caring adult create a framework of support for the students and set the stage for successful mentoring of the student (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Such support can also serve to help the student develop their self-efficacy and resilience. The graduation coach serves in the transition to high school for at-risk students to remove barriers to graduation utilizing a set of skills found effective in successful mentoring programs.

There are characteristics of effective mentoring programs that graduation coaches should demonstrate in their practices. These characteristics are identified in a report

published by Rhodes (2006) in *Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs*. One support area was frequency, indicating consistency and persistence. Youth may be well on their way in the course of dropping out. Therefore, to turn this around for them, the mentor or graduation coach will need to meet on a regular basis with the student and be persistent even in the face of the negative feelings the student has developed (Rhodes, 2006).

Another area from the report by O'Connor (2005) was the necessity to build trusting and supportive relationships. The student will need to know that the graduation coach will be there to listen to problems and concerns the student will have as they work together. Supporting the student and remaining focused on the student, where the discussions and activities are student centered, will provide the graduation coach insight into what their students' needs are and how to provide the proper support.

O'Connor (2005) stated that guidance and the structure are also key components. It suggests that once the trusting relationship has been established, the mentor is now able to provide more than an unconditionally supportive relationship.

### **The Research Problem**

Wagner (2008) reported that only 70% of the age cohort in the United States graduates high school with a diploma, which puts us behind other nations that we compete with in the global economy. He further reported that a postsecondary education will be necessary to earn a decent wage. Cornish (2004) echoed this in his book *Futuring*, in which he stated that education will no longer be for the young but will be a continuing necessity throughout life. Canton (2006) reported that finishing college and developing technology skills will increase career opportunities and increase earning

potential. To be prepared for these opportunities, a student must first finish high school and receive their diploma, and school districts must focus on increasing the graduation rate for all their students.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) painted a bleak picture for the future of students who fail to achieve their diploma. The report indicates a reliance on public assistance, poor health due to limited access to health care, and lower lifetime wages. Considering this, school districts must put a focus on graduation and graduation rates to provide their students with the opportunities that otherwise will elude them.

Providing insight on the effects of positive relationships between adults, graduation coaches, and students in the school system and the effect they have on student self-efficacy and student dispositions to increase the graduation rate for the school district was the purpose of this study. As has been described, there are multiple factors that contribute over time to a student's decision to drop out. Neild et al. (2007) reported that as early as sixth grade, students are sending signals that they are at risk for dropping out. Archambault et al. (2009) reported that there is a gradual psychological disengagement from school, and the researcher argues that this is a result of a decrease in student perceived self-efficacy and feelings of isolation or perceptions of lack of care from adults in the school.

The school system in which this study took place has established graduation coaches to work at each high school in the district. The primary focus of the graduation coach is to ensure that every student receives the individualized support, direction, and guidance needed to earn a high school diploma to help increase the graduation rate. The responsibilities of the graduation coach align with this study and include the following

responsibilities.

The graduation coach will work with each student to emphasize study skills, test taking, and note-taking strategies. As stated earlier, students who begin to disconnect with school do so in part to declining self-efficacy with school-related tasks. Focusing on academic strategies, the graduation coach should be able to increase a student's academic ability, therefore increasing the likelihood of the student's academic success. This should serve to boost the student's perception of their own self-efficacy and begin the process of reconnecting to school.

The graduation coach will work with students to develop communication skills, problem-solving, critical-thinking skills and resiliency strategies. As discussed earlier, students who are disconnected from the school environment reported a variety of reasons for considering or dropping out. Factors included academic difficulty, poor relationships with peers and faculty, and doubts in their own ability to be successful in the school environment. Those who demonstrated difficulty with peer-to-peer relationships or student-to-faculty relationships felt a sense of isolation, but the graduation coach should work to help the student with problem-solving and communication skills as well as being available to meet with and counsel the student. This should create for the student the chance to share personal concerns and interact with an adult who can demonstrate positive communication to help model and develop a positive relationship. The graduation coach is cultivating a sense of belonging by providing activities that lead to increased positive social interactions with peers and faculty. Developing these skills with the graduation coach should allow for the student to begin cultivating positive relationships and improve their disposition toward school and further connect to the

school environment.

Resiliency is another skill that must be cultivated by the graduation coach to help students reconnect to the school environment. Students at risk for dropping out have developed the perception that they cannot succeed within the school environment to the extent that those students who have dropped out have reported higher self-esteem once they are no longer in the school environment (Testerman, 1996). The students came to accept their feelings of disconnectedness and academic difficulty creating negative feelings of self-efficacy and resulting in students disconnecting from the school. Resiliency can serve to help the student overcome their doubts and improve their self-efficacy and disposition toward school and in turn reconnect them to the school environment.

The graduation coach must be in continuous contact with students during the school day to achieve the goals outlined above. The purpose of contact is to maintain open communication with students regarding academic progress and student issues and develop a positive relationship with the students to provide them with at least one caring adult. Graduation coaches should maintain contact with the student throughout the year to monitor their progress and dispositions.

Determining which strategies were effective in reconnecting students to the school was a particularly important examination of the graduation coach's relationship building strategies. It was necessary to identify what strategies were used by the graduation coaches at each site in order to determine their effectiveness and then determine the extent of their value in improving student self-efficacy and student dispositions toward school. The importance of this study was highlighting activities used

and skills taught to students to help them connect to and be successful in the school environment by increasing their feelings of self-efficacy and improving their dispositions toward school. Identifying these strategies allowed the graduation coaches to be more effective when working with students and provided them a skill base to utilize when working with students.

Student relationships are a serious concern and must be addressed to keep students connected to the school community. Happel (2006) reported that reasons for dropping out included feeling unsupported or unmotivated. Happel also reported that in a survey, less than 50% of students who dropped out knew a teacher or counselor they felt comfortable talking to about personal problems. This lack of connectedness and relationships creates for the student a sense of disconnectedness.

As students transition to middle and high school and the level of support is reduced, the students are caught between being a child and an adult; and without the proper support, they experience a lack of meaningful relationships and the school begins to serve as a place of frustration and as a place of hurt that diminishes a student's self-efficacy (Kortering et al., 1998; Stearns & Glennie 2006). The relationship strategies of the graduation coaches serve to bridge this need for relationships by creating a sense of connectedness for the students. Fan, Williams, and Corkin (2001) contended that features within the school environment and a student's own experiences shape a student's perceptions of school. Schools can create features in the environment to influence student perceptions, such as the graduation coaches, to address a student's experiences and create meaningful relationships that connect a student to the school community.

Dang and Miller (2013) echoed the need for connectedness, stating in their work

that youth research has indicated that connectedness is strongly associated with positive outcomes for youth. Connectedness can be observed in interactions with youth and their mentors allowing for the foundation of a relationship to develop including factors such as respect, trust, frequent contact, and providing nonjudgmental acceptance of their ideas and culture to set the stage to challenge within the context of support (Anastasia, Skinner, & Mundhenk, 2012; Dang & Miller, 2013; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Rowley, 1999). The skill sets and characteristics of the mentor play a critical role in the students' success and connectedness to the school setting.

If the adage "I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care" is true for students, it is the role of the graduation coach to create this dynamic for students. The problem to be addressed by this study was to determine the impact of a graduation coach's relationship building strategies on student connectedness to the school, self-efficacy, and their self-perception.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Graduation coach.** A position that is designed to frequently connect with students to create positive relationships, monitor their progress, provide guidance, and improve their self-efficacy. The graduation coach is also tasked with engaging critical stakeholders to support their students toward graduation. The stake holders include the student, parents, any outside agencies, and members of the school community. They are responsible for delivering interventions to the students and maintaining continuous contact with the student. It is this piece that stands out and is supported by practices described in the report by O'Connor (2005) in which continuous persistent contact to build a trusting relationship is essential to a mentoring relationship. They are also

expected to help develop supportive structures within the school environment to support student growth and develop a sense of belonging for the students they serve.

**Self-efficacy.** Belief in one's ability to learn or perform a task at a certain level. It also reflects an individual's confidence in their ability to exert control over their motivation, behavior, and social environment (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

**Dispositions.** Refers to an individual's mood, temperament, or attitude.

**Relationship building strategies.** Strategies used by a graduation coach to build and maintain positive relationships.

**Relationships.** The way in which two or more people are connected.

**Disconnected.** To separate something or someone from something else.

**Indicators for personal success.** These will include improved dispositions toward peers and adults.

**Social cognitive theory.** States that learning occurs through observation, modeling, and motivation. A core concept in this theory is self-efficacy defined above.

**Maslow's hierarchy of needs.** An hierarchy set up to describe the needs people seek to fulfill. There are five levels, and people must have the needs in one level fulfilled prior to moving to the next level. The lowest level represents physiological needs such as hunger and culminates in the top level of self-actualization which is seeking the realization of a person's full potential.

**ERG theory.** This is a theory developed by Clayton Alderfer that expands on Maslow's hierarchy of needs by combining the middle levels where there was overlap in Maslow's work. The hierarchy in Alderfer's theory reduces Maslow's design to three

areas: existence, relatedness, and growth. Existence needs refer to our concerns with basic material needs related to safety and existence and relate to Maslow's safety and psychological needs. Relatedness needs refer to each person's motivation to maintain relationships and relate to Maslow's social and self-esteem needs. Growth needs refer to our internal desire for our own personal development and relate to Maslow's self-actualization and external self-esteem needs.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do the relationship building strategies used by the graduation coach influence students to remain in school?
2. How do mentees perceive and describe their relationship with the graduation coach?
3. How have the graduation coach's relationship building strategies affected the student's perception of their own self-efficacy?

Several tools were used to gain an understanding of the questions above to determine what strategies were used by the graduation coaches and what impact they had on student dispositions, connectedness, and the student's self-efficacy. The first tool utilized was a survey to gather initial data and to try and establish what strategies the graduation coach was using. Interviews were conducted with a random selection of students served by the graduation coaches and then the results were analyzed to determine what strategies had an impact on students and to align them with the strategies the graduation coaches describe. The graduation coaches were interviewed to determine which strategies they described and then it was decided if the strategies given by graduation coaches and students aligned.

## Assumptions

The following are assumptions of this study:

1. The researcher was impartial in collecting and analyzing the data. Moustakas (1994, p. 85) discussed the concept of epoche in which the researcher sets aside biases and preconceived ideas in order to see a phenomenon anew as if for the first time unhampered by voices of the past or present. The researcher described only what was seen as the phenomenon unfolded through observation and interviews in order to accomplish this.
2. The participants understood the purpose of the study and the survey instrument. They were capable of self-reporting and responded honestly. Moustakas (1994, p. 103) stated that co-researchers or participants should be provided the nature and purpose of the study to include obtaining informed consent to participate. The researcher communicated the purpose of the study and obtained consent from the participant and parents if the student was not of age.
3. Interpretation of the data reflected the intentions of the participants accurately. Creswell (2009, p. 191) discussed member checking as a means of validity and reliability. The participants after the interview were shown the transcripts and the researcher's interpretation of the interview to be certain it accurately reflected the intention of the participant.
4. The methodology used in this study offers the most appropriate design for the research conducted. A phenomenological study was selected by this researcher to identify the essence of the experience of students served by a

graduation coach (Creswell, 2009). Moustakas (1994) further clarified phenomenological research design by stating it focuses on a small number of subjects and through extensive engagement develops patterns and relationships of meaning. The researcher studied a small group of students at two high schools. The study is also appropriate considering each attendance zone only had one graduation coach.

### **Limitations**

The following are identified limitations of this study:

1. The study reflected the perceptions and beliefs of a limited number of participants, and each had their own interpretations.
2. The participants involved in this study were limited to available students on the graduation coach's caseload who were 18 years old or older.
3. The study had limited generalization based on the small sample size that was utilized.
4. The study was limited to the county in which the research was completed.
5. The study was limited due to the researcher's role as an administrator in the county in which the research was conducted and the researcher served in one of the attendance zones where the school's research was conducted.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

Research supports the view that dropping out of school is a process of gradual disengagement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Archambault et al., 2009; Bergeson, 2006; Neild et al., 2007). Students involved in this gradual process of dropping out send signals as early as sixth grade to include poor attendance, failing grades in math and English, and poor behavior (Neild et al., 2007). The future for students who drop out is not promising, as they face low employment rates considering they are entering a job market with increasing technological demands requiring a need for highly educated workers with less need for unskilled labor (Lan & Lantheir, 2003; Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) indicated that dropping out of high school is related to a number of negative outcomes such as lower salaries than their more educated peers, a greater reliance on government assistance, and they are more likely to be involved in criminal activity. This creates a serious concern for communities where its citizens face low wages, limited job opportunities, a greater reliance on local and federal assistance, and the possibility of an increased crime rate. “Prevention of the erosion of children’s beliefs in their academic capabilities has greater social implications in contemporary society than it did in the past” (Bandura et al., 2008, p. 532), considering the rapid technological changes today require development of cognitive competencies rather than training in jobs that require less cognitive skill.

Exploring the nature of the influence of graduation coaches’ relationship building strategies on students’ decisions to stay in school and their self-efficacy was the purpose

of this phenomenological study. This study also explored the perception of the student's relationships with the graduation coach. Fan et al. (2011) reported that student perceptions are shaped by features in the school environment and their own experiences. Student dropouts were seen as a result of a lack of meaningful relationships within the school and feeling unsupported and not fitting into the school environment (Happel, 2006; Kortering et al., 1998; Meeker et al., 2008). The review of the literature focused on reasons for dropping out, ERG theory and Maslow's hierarchy, self-efficacy, and relationships with mentoring.

### **High School Dropouts: Factors That Influence the Decision to Drop Out or Remain to Graduate**

Research indicates that dropping out of high school is the culmination of a series of events that leads to disengagement from school with early warning signals as early as middle school (Alexander et al., 2001, Archambault et al., 2009; Neild et al., 2007). The process of disengagement reflects that students can be pushed out of school by factors that negatively impact their connection to the school environment. As students experience school transitions, disadvantaged students demonstrate a deteriorating interest in academics and increased emotional distress. As they transition to middle school, students experience lower teacher expectations and reduced self-esteem (Becker & Luther, 2002; Neild, 2009).

Students continue to experience difficulty with transitions as they move to high school. Neild (2009) reported as students enter high school, their bonds formed in middle school are lost and they must navigate new social relationships along with new practices and routines within a new school. In high school, a teacher's focus is on subject area content delivery; and as students move from one class to the next, they can feel

anonymous and alienated. Also combined is a waning parental influence and increasing peer influence (Neild, 2009).

Transitions play a role in a student's decision to drop out when faced with changing demands such as multi-teacher and multi-subject environments (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Students experience a shift in connectedness to school experienced through internal or external changes or in the school climate due to these changing demands. Bowers and Sprott (2012) identified several types of students who drop out; two are those bored with the process and what they call the quietes. Those bored with the process were disinterested in school or disengaged with school. The quietes are students who go through the process of schooling but lack attachment. These students are lacking in a connection to school. Alderfer (1969) discussed the need for relatedness to an institution or a person in the institution who can share in acceptance, confirmation, and influence. Gist and Mitchell (1992) supported this view in their work, reporting ability or the perception of ability can be influenced by those in the school environment. Watching others, such as other students or adults, can affect self-efficacy since people judge their abilities compared or in relation to others' abilities. An effective strategy a teacher can utilize is modeling to help provide correct procedures and offset the possible negative effects of others in the environment.

Fan et al. (2011) defined school climate "as the character and quality of life within a school that is shaped by its structure, values and personal relationships" (p. 632). They further contended that climate is associated with motivation and belonging as students shape their perceptions based on features in the school and their own perceptions. Becker and Luther (2002) discussed the impact of school climate on

disadvantaged students stating there is a need to create a safe and supportive environment since many come from homes where support in these areas is deficient. They also discussed the need for not only high expectations and standards but caution that without support for these students, it will lead to a sense of learned helplessness.

School climate must provide for social support and a sense of belonging for disadvantaged youth since a student's feelings of acceptance by the teacher and school are associated with the students cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement (Becker & Luther, 2002). The most commonly identified protective factor in the climate of the school is a supportive relationship with an adult. Students desire caring teachers who listen to them and are concerned about their grades and their lives outside of school. (Becker & Luther, 2002; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). If these areas are not met and students see their teachers as too rigid or they supervise too closely not providing the student the opportunity to have choice or an opinion other than the adult, there are negative effects such as a sense of disconnectedness from school (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Bowers & Sprott, 2012).

Bandura et al. (1996) stated, "unless people believe they can produce a desired effect by their actions they have little incentive to act" (p. 1206). This speaks to the effect a person or student's perception can have on their success in a school environment. Bandura et al. (2008) reported that as a student progresses through the education system, there is a progressive decline influenced by academic demands, cumulative academic deficits, biological changes, and peer networks. McWilliams, Everett, and Bass (2000) listed reasons for dropping out of school to include bonding and attachment which can impact the degree of integration of the student into the school.

This sense of disconnectedness caused by the listed factors has a negative impact on a student's perception of school. Student perceptions about their performance are critical and can influence their decision to drop out; and these perceptions can be formed as early as kindergarten if the student had a poor relationship with the teacher (Gumora & Arsenio, 2002; Steinberg & McCray, 2012). An individual will pursue a goal to the extent their emotions and beliefs are associated with the goal. This a positive aspect to student perception, as students who believe they are cognitively prepared and believe they are good at school tasks will perform better in school (Bandura et al., 1996; Gumora & Arsenio, 2002). Gumora and Arsenio (2002) supported this in the results of their work finding that students with a more positive mood or perception had higher grade point averages and achievement scores.

Steps should be taken to keep them connected to the school and its culture, considering the critical role student perception plays in a student's resilience and persistence to stay in school and graduate. Fan et al. (2011) reported that males and minority students, students from a single parent home, and those who repeated a grade had less favorable perceptions of school and relationships with their teachers. If adolescent development means declines in academic gains and connectedness, the best response is to surround them with supportive and caring adults (Neild, 2009). This belief is supported by the work of Steinberg and McCray (2012) who reported in their results that students wanted teachers who care about them and are willing to work with them as individuals. Their work further revealed that students needed teachers who are willing to develop meaningful relationships based on respect and trust.

Students need to be involved in decisions that affect them in order to increase a

student's perceptions of their own ability and their self-efficacy. Steinberg and McCray (2012) reported that students need to be engaged in the decision-making process in order to be part of the school community and to feel competent. Students desire the opportunities to talk with adults about their education; they feel empowered when viewed as knowledgeable participants. Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) supported this view in their work, reporting that students who perceived their social context as supportive of their autonomy had a higher degree of academic self-efficacy and it positively affected their decision to remain in school.

### **Self-Efficacy: Factors That Affect and Influence It**

The transitions to middle school or high school present many challenges that students face; and they must be able to navigate these, at times, stressful environments in order to be successful and graduate. As teens transition physically and emotionally, they are caught between being a child and developing into an adult (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). During this time, a student's belief in their efficacy to regulate their own learning can affect their motivation and achievement. Further, their efficacy beliefs can impact their career choices during early formative years (Bandura et al., 1996). Bandura et al. (1996) contended that "unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions they have little incentive to act" (p. 1206).

O'Connor and Yballe (2007) discussed in their study of Maslow's hierarchy of needs that good self-esteem is based on real capacity and respect from others. The satisfaction of self-esteem builds one's self-efficacy and leads one to feel necessary. Dropping out is a process rather than a single event, and a student's view of their self-worth must be considered (Alexander et al., 2001; Archambault et al., 2009; Bergeson

2006; Neild et al., 2007).

At higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy, self-actualizers engaged their world (through talents and likes, etc.) and that allowed them to transcend their experiences and see beyond the immediate (O'Connor & Yballe, 2007). Through a gradual process of disengagement and disconnectedness, dropouts need redirection. O'Connor and Yballe (2007) reported that Maslow indicated for one to focus on internal growth and, in turn, one's self-efficacy which includes seeing life as a series of choices, taking responsibility, and being honest with oneself. O'Connor and Yballe stated Maslow reported that to reach self-actualization with others, you need to

1. Be honest with others and be not afraid to tell the truth.
2. Help others to be self-actualizes and develop peak capacity for peak experiences.

Bandura et al. (2008) supported these ideas in his work on social cognitive theory, stating that the ability to regulate thoughts, motivation, affect, and action through self-reflective influence is a core property of the principle. Bandura et al. (2008) indicated that during the transition from middle to high school, students experience a sense of loss of personal control, are less confident, and suffer a decline in self-motivation. They have to reestablish a sense of efficacy and social connectedness.

Efficacy beliefs have an impact on growth and development and such effects can affect beliefs about commitment, motivation, resilience, and thinking (Bandura et al., 1996). The impact on a student who is making the transition to high school can be influenced early in their formative years, considering their efficacy beliefs impact their career aspirations (Bandura et al., 1996). Bandura et al. (1996) stated, "children's

intellectual development cannot be isolated from the social relations within which it is imbedded and from its interpersonal effects” (p. 1207). Fan et al. (2011) supported this view in their work, indicating student perceptions are shaped by features in the school environment and their own experiences. Kortering et al. (1998) also discussed the impact of social relationships, reporting that dropping out of school was seen as a lack of meaningful relationships which led to school serving as a source of frustration which hurt a student’s self-efficacy.

Alderfer (1969) in his ERG theory, like Maslow’s hierarchy, discussed the effect of desires and satisfaction of desires that are rooted in existence needs, relatedness needs, and growth needs. Arnolds and Boshoff (2002) described relatedness needs as those that relate to one’s desire to maintain important relationships, social acceptance, and belongingness and growth needs as those that relate to personal development, self-fulfillment, and self-actualization. In a school setting, students who did not fit in or reported a lack of care are those who could be led to drop out (Meeker et al., 2008). Poor student choice, to include being disruptive to skipping school, interfered with student success and played a role in the students not completing school.

Alderfer (1969) addressed the impact of relatedness needs indicating that when these needs are not met, individuals cannot progress to growth needs resulting in frustration and regression to relatedness needs. The regression occurs in order for the individual to satisfy a need, such as growth and relatedness, to find clarity and support; and once the relatedness need is met, the individual can share more complex parts of their life. Happel (2006) indicated that reasons for dropping out included feeling unsupported; it was reflected in her survey where less than 50% of students knew a teacher or

counselor whom they felt comfortable talking to about personal problems.

Social psychology indicates that external rewards do little to affect behavior if there is no internal desire for the reward, and individual attributes such as personality and one's self-concept are more important determinants of performance (Arnolds & Boshoff, 2002; Schein, 1971). Bandura et al. (2008) reflected this in his work, indicating that the greater the decline in self-efficacy, the greater the probability of dropping out; and the higher the self-efficacy, the lower the probability of dropping out. This is a dilemma, creating for students a progressive decline in self-efficacy as they progress through the education system; and as a result, they reassess their self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2008).

Gist and Mitchell (1992) also addressed ability or the belief of ability and indicated that it can be affected by those in the environment. Gist and Mitchell stated, "People process, weigh, and integrate diverse sources of information concerning their capabilities and they regulate their choices and effort expenditure accordingly" (p. 186). This is a result of task attributes which determine self-efficacy when individuals are faced with difficult aspects of a task lowering their self-efficacy but increasing it when focused on desirable aspects of a task (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). This reflects self-efficacy affecting choice of activities, effort, and persistence leading individuals to avoid tasks they perceive as exceeding their ability and undertaking tasks they believe they can complete (Bandura et al., 2008; Harrison, Rainer, Hochwater, & Thompson, 1997; Schunk, 1996).

Alderfer (1969) indicated that failure and disappointment can provide opportunities for growth, provided the person can cope with and face failure. People with low self-esteem who do not have the proper tools adhere to norms of low performance

which limit performance, conflict resolution, and interpersonal relationships which from a dropout perspective can result in a lack of meaningful relationships, unsatisfactory behavior, and a perceived lack of caring (Arnolds & Boshoff, 2002; Kortering et al., 1998; Meeker et al., 2008; Neild et al., 2007). As a result, the belief that is held about ability affects the quality of an individual's functioning (Bandura et al., 2008).

Individuals who perceive themselves to have little or no control over external factors can experience anxiety or learned helplessness, and students with a low sense of self-efficacy tend to avoid completing tasks (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Schunk, 1996). Alderfer, Kaplan, and Smith (1974) denoted that the quality of the relationship of an individual in an organization depends in part on the degree to which the person's needs are satisfied by participation in the organization. Together, these statements create a picture of a need to move students to a place where they can have greater feelings of control through relationships. Gist and Mitchell (1992) revealed distractions and risk of failure may increase anxiety and thoughts of failure. Schunk (1996) and Gist and Mitchell discussed that modeling appears to be an effective strategy as it provides a correct approach when others may not be available, considering self-efficacy can be impacted since individuals partly judge their own abilities in relation to others' abilities.

Individuals make judgments about anticipated performance based on how positively they feel about a task including their own personal attributes and the social supports in the environment. External verbal feedback can affect self-efficacy even though the feedback may not be task specific but instead focuses on emotional or cognitive appeals that the individual can perform at a certain level (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Schunk, 1996). Schunk (1996) suggested that students with a positive sense of

self-efficacy work harder and persist longer with positive feedback, but the effort is temporary if further efforts prove unsuccessful. The students must perceive they are making progress which can include external assistance and persuader credibility using feedback in order to keep the student motivated and enhance self-efficacy (Schunk, 1996).

Bandura et al. (1996) stated self-regulatory skills will do little if students cannot apply them in the face of a difficult situation or competing attractions, producing an impact on student commitment, motivation, and resilience. Gist and Mitchell (1992) provided strategies to provide direction and aid to students who face a difficult situation to provide them tools to find their confidence and build their self-efficacy:

1. Provide information that gives an understanding about the task attributes and how they can be best controlled.
2. Provide training that improves the individual's ability to successfully perform the task.
3. Provide information that improves the understanding of the behavioral or psychological strategies needed to be successful and discuss the effort that will be required to complete the task.

### **Mentoring and Relationships: Caring Adults and Their Influence**

A sense of belonging or connectedness to a school is necessary for students to feel as though they belong, and those who do not receive sufficient positive attention from peers or adults begin to act as though invisible (Testerman, 1996). The key to helping turn this perception is in building relationships so students can see that they can be successful (Zehr, 2010).

McCaslin and Burros (2008) stated that dispositions toward school can inhibit or support classroom engagement, and interpersonal validation is basic to student achievement. A positive adult in a school who shows concern for an at-risk student can have a positive effect on attendance and can improve a student's perception of a teacher's concern for them, which in turn improves their disposition toward school and increases the likelihood they will stay until graduation (Testerman, 1996).

Students who fall in with the wrong crowd and focus on a good time or those who will not do their work struggle to pass and are identified as at risk, which can also be characterized by retention, poor attendance, those who experience behavior problems, living in poverty, or teen pregnancy (Johnson & Lampley, 2010; Zehr, 2010). At-risk students facing these circumstances can begin to form negative attitudes toward school and teachers which impacts their achievement and success. Further, these negative feelings are impacted by a sense of marginalization or powerlessness, creating a perception of alienation from school and teachers (Johnson & Lampley, 2010). Classroom teachers who identify struggling students may not be able to dedicate the time needed to support them, which compounds the negative feelings of at-risk students to be successful in an academic setting (Johnson & Lampley, 2010).

“Not all students go home to nurturing positive environment. In many cases the positive role models and reinforcement they need during adolescence is available only at school” (Hood, 1992, p. 20). Hood (1992) revealed students face the realities of their home life; but educators continue to ask them to be on time, be prepared, act appropriately, and complete research projects reflecting a home life they do not know. Students are not the only ones in the home who face the stressors of their home. Many

parents and their families face economic and social conditions leaving them feeling overwhelmed and disconnected from their children, leaving their children without the help of a caring adult (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005).

Considering what students are facing, they need the presence of at least one caring person – someone who conveys an attitude of compassion, no matter how awful a child’s behavior. The child is doing the best they can with their experience – that provides support for healthy development and learning. (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005, p. 1)

This caring person can be a mentor or caring adult who recognizes the student while showing genuine concern and attention while building trust and then becoming part of the cure to help students deal with these challenging times (Hood, 1992; Testerman, 1996).

Little, Kearney, and Bitner (2010) defined mentoring as “a relationship between an older more experienced adult and an unrelated younger protégé. A relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé” (p. 189). The description of a successful mentor includes appreciating and understanding their mentees and seeking to discover their strengths and capabilities to develop a close relationship; and the most common characteristic of a mentoring program was a one-on-one relationship. Mentors demonstrate flexibility and understand the developmental needs of their mentee, striking a balance between academic needs, goals, and their emotional needs (Johnson & Lampley, 2010; Rhodes, 2006). One must be sensitive to the cultural differences between mentor and mentee, as ignoring these can serve to disempower the mentee from sharing their background or assets (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke., 2015).

Mentors serve several functions with their mentees; and relationships are key, but it is not all the responsibility of the mentor. The mentee must be willing to engage with the mentor; and for this to be successful, it will require consistency and persistence. The relationships are highlighted by the support, structure, and activities the mentors provide, resulting in a sense of connectedness with a listening ear and encouragement, which is key to the mentor-mentee relationship. The relationship must demonstrate an emotional bond between mentor and mentee to generate the positive effects; and as the time investment increases, so does the positive effect. Even accounting for gender or cognitive ability, a student's relationship with their teacher still predicted student success (Little et al., 2010; Rhodes, 2006; Zehr, 2010).

In their results, Little et al. (2010) reported students place an importance on the time their mentor spends with them. In the initial part of the study, the students reported they hoped their mentor would spend more time with them; and by week three, the desire to spend time with the assigned mentor declined and the desire to spend time with a graduate assistant increased as they spent more time with the students. The students appreciated the time given and the treatment by the graduate assistant, demonstrating the impact of time invested and the relationship developed.

Mentors understand that for mentees, the main motivation for students resides in a need for participation and a desire for validation; and they must possess a sense of self-efficacy to believe that they have the ability to change what they do not like (Hood, 1992; McCaslin & Burross, 2008). The mentor can provide guidance, encouragement, and help with personal issues as well as developing a sense of self-actualization by helping the student deepen their own self-knowledge to provide a sense of validation (Roberts, 2007).

Mentees also benefit from their work with mentors to develop goals, activities, an internal locus of control, and positive self-efficacy; enhancing their sense of validation (Rhodes, 2006; Roberts, 2007).

The effectiveness of a mentor can be described by the qualities they demonstrate while working with their mentees. Effective mentors work with their students acting as role models who teach and encourage skills and appropriate behavior. Successful mentors are steady and demonstrate respect for their mentee's point of view, though the mentor does not need to discuss the mentee's personal life to develop a caring relationship (Rhodes, 2006; Testerman, 1996).

Mentorships have demonstrated that they are capable of improving academic performance and self-concept, reducing anti-social behavior, and developing resiliency when paired with a caring adult (Coyne-Foresi 2015; Dappen & Inernhagen, 2005; Johnson & Lampley, 2010; Little et al., 2010). A facet of developing mentorships is developing a sense of connectedness which Coyne-Foresi (2015) indicated occurs when a person is actively involved with another person and that involvement promotes a sense of comfort and well-being. Connectedness can be enhanced or diminished by praise or lack of praise (Helm, 2007). Teachers can also enhance the student's connectedness through their own dispositions and can help reduce inappropriate student behavior through positive praise (Helm, 2007). Roberts (2007) stated that mentors can also serve to teach self-determination that is described as a desire to be in control of one's fate.

Coyne-Foresi (2015) described the impact of a positive school climate creating cooperative peer environments and developing an attachment to school and positive feelings concerning student perceptions of teacher support. Coyne-Foresi (2015)

contended that this positive school environment is a result of bonding opportunities within a school which promotes prosocial behavior and counters a decline in connectedness as the year progresses. Dappen and Insernhagen (2005) found that mentoring results in students who

1. Trust teachers.
2. Achieve a positive disposition toward school.
3. Maintain better attendance and grades.
4. Possess higher self-esteem.
5. Experience improved relationships with peers and adults.
6. Demonstrate fewer incidences of hitting or violence.

### **Characteristics of Effective Mentors and Building Relationships**

A mentor is defined as a nonparental adult who is paired with a youth (Anastasia et al., 2012; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). The research had demonstrated that there are characteristics that mentors possess or practice to build close relationships with their mentees in order to provide positive outcomes for the youth. DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) stated that a relationship with a nonfamilial adult provides opportunities for the youth to build social capital through exposure to a new social network that may not have been available within the family. In a recent study by the Boys and Girls Club, it was shown that the perceived quality of the relationship with their mentor had linkages with self-esteem and life satisfaction greater than with closest family members, providing further evidence of the influence of a relationship with a mentor (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

The impact of the role of mentor is powerful, but identifying those characteristics

that set the stage for the relationship must be identified to allow mentors a guideline for practice. The first characteristic is the duration of the relationship. Raposa, Rhodes, and Herrera (2016) stated that unrelated adults and youth can develop meaningful relationships but must have the time to establish a relationship. The longer the commitment to the relationship, the greater the positive influence the mentor can have on the youth they are mentoring. Youth who develop a close relationship overtime feel comfortable sharing personal problems, indicating that overtime, a close relationship can be developed. The opposite is also true when the mentoring relationship is ended after a short period of time, creating feelings of loss or rejection (Dang & Miller, 2013; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Kupersmidt, Stump, & Stelter, 2016).

Frequency of contact was another factor identified as necessary for the relationship of the mentor and mentee to grow and become close. Frequency of contact can influence process of change through role modeling and meaningful dialog. Frequency of contact was strongly associated with closeness and creating the environment and opportunities for the relationship to develop. The reliability of the contact is the foundation of trust, considering many youth experience significant disruptions in important relationships. Greater opportunities for contact increase the chance for positive change to occur (Anastasia et al., 2012; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Deutsch & Spencer, 2009).

There are interpersonal factors that also create a depth in the relationship, or relationship quality, between mentor and mentee that provide positive outcomes for the youth. The importance of empathy and accepting the mentee where they are emotionally and developmentally is significant in developing a deep connection by understanding the

mentee's emotional experiences from their perspectives. Mentors who are accepting and nonjudgmental build trust without creating feelings of rejection. Mentors should communicate hope and optimism, which is a critical ability to convey that the mentee is capable of overcoming challenges to accomplish great things (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Rowley, 1999). This helps develop a close relationship and begins fostering within the mentee a sense of mattering, strengthening their self-esteem and improving their disposition. "Ratings of greater relationship closeness were a significant predictor of an increased likelihood of reporting relatively high levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction" (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005, p. 81).

Mentors can continue to deepen the closeness of the relationship and increase trust by demonstrating respect for a mentee's familial class and culture. This can be done through relationship building strategies such as providing support, modeling, and engaging in mutually enjoyable activities that allow the mentor to provide support and demonstrate an openness to the life experiences of the youth (Anastasia et al., 2012). Providing challenge within the context of social support allows the mentor to challenge the mentee, tapping into the youth's internal motivation where they feel ownership to promote positive development and build their sense of self-worth by showing interest in and valuing the mentee's thoughts and feelings (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009).

### **Summary**

The research has demonstrated that dropping out of school will have negative effects over the lifetime of the dropout and the community in which they live. The literature supports that dropping out is a process that develops over time and that student perceptions of the school community and their own self-efficacy play a critical role in

their decision to stay in school or to drop out.

The literature also demonstrates that caring adults within the school who develop a relationship with the student can help prevent the students served from becoming disconnected and making a decision to drop out. This phenomenological study of the impact of the graduation coach's relationship strategies is beneficial because it explored the influence they have on student perceptions of school and themselves. A deeper understanding of the relationship that is developed between the student and graduation coach, in this study one of the caring adults who will play a role in developing a mentoring relationship with the students they serve, will be beneficial to increasing student achievement and possibly providing school systems with another tool to use to deter student dropout.

Chapter 2 presented a review of the literature and research regarding high school dropouts and factors that influence the decision to drop out or remain to graduate, factors that affect self-efficacy, student perceptions of their ability, and mentors or caring adults and their influence on students. The theoretical foundation in this study was research on mentoring and relationships, Bandura's research on self-efficacy and social cognitive theory, and Alderfer's ERG theory. This study will also provide the basis for further study and deeper exploration of the phenomenon of the influence of graduation coaches' relationship building strategies.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

Chapter 3 presents the methodology that was used to complete this study. This study followed a qualitative, interpretive approach that focused on the researcher's interpretation of what was observed during interviews and observations which cannot be separated from their own prior knowledge, history, or background (Creswell, 2009). Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological research design was selected because it outlines specific methods to collect and analyze experiences as observed and interpreted by the researcher.

The impact of graduation coaches' relationship building strategies on student relationships and self-efficacy was the focus of this study. The research was conducted at two of the four high schools within the school district in which the study took place. The data collection methods used were individual interviews with each participant, observations of the mentor and their mentees, and a student survey.

In this chapter, the researcher describes the research methodology in detail for each question in the study. The details included are the researcher's selection process for the participants, methods that were used to collect data, and the methods of data analysis. The researcher addressed his role in the research, the reliability and validity of the study, and any problems which arose during the data collection process.

#### **Overview**

A student dropping out of high school faces significant challenges that include increased criminal activity, a greater reliance on illegal drug use, and life in poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). A student's own experience and features within the school can shape the student's perception, creating a feeling of a lack

of caring which can create a process of gradual disengagement from the school and an increased likelihood of the student dropping out (Archambault et al., 2009; Fan et al., 2011; Meeker et al., 2008). The necessity of caring relationships is realized in light of these factors that affect a student's choice to remain in school.

### **Problem Statement**

The district in which this study took place understands the critical role that relationships play in keeping students connected to schools. The district has implemented graduation coaches to work at each high school in the district. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover, understand, and describe the essence of a caring relationship shared between the students and the graduation coaches in the district in which the study was conducted. At this stage in the research, the essence of relationship was described as the way in which two or more people are connected. This study focused on two attendance zones within the district in which the study was conducted.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is significant because the findings may provide valuable insight into local school districts' graduation coach initiatives and the impact they have on student relationships and student self-efficacy. School systems that are discussing nontraditional approaches to meet the needs of potential student dropouts may find this study relevant. Also, for the school district, the effectiveness of the relationship building strategies of the graduation coaches may inform district leadership of the value of the program. The schools in this study may learn the effectiveness of the graduation coach initiative. If students remain connected to the school and their achievement increases, students have

an improved chance of succeeding in high school and earning a high school diploma which can increase their chance for success in life.

### **Data Collection**

This study adhered to the phenomenological research methodology as outlined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2009), and the outcomes of this study focused on the following three research questions.

**1. How do the relationship building strategies used by the graduation coach influence students to remain in school?** This research question sought to explore the major components of how and influence. The term how demonstrates an openness to anything that presents as the research is conducted in interviews and surveys with selected students and the graduation coach. The second term, influence, is used to signify any possible influence observed in field observations, Likert-type surveys, and individual interviews (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The data were utilized to determine any influence that may arise with the student as a result of interaction with the graduation coach. Instruments for data collection for this research question with the participants were a Likert-type survey for students and individual interviews with students and graduation coaches. The researcher also performed field observations of interactions between the students and the graduation coaches. The researcher functioned as a complete observer during field observations, scripting the interaction between the student and the graduation coach with no interaction with the participants (Creswell, 2009). The researcher recorded interviews using a recording device and scripted answers to gather data (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Reliability and validity were addressed utilizing the following methods. The

researcher reviewed transcripts to check for obvious mistakes to ensure reliability. (Creswell, 2009). The researcher also utilized the recorded interview compared to the scripted responses to further ensure reliability. The researcher used coding and bracketing to isolate the epoche or the essence of each facet of the phenomenon observed and continually referred back to the codes to increase reliability by reducing the risk of the definition drifting during data collection (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Validity was addressed by using member checking after interviews to be certain that the meaning or description of their experience was accurately reflected by the researcher (Creswell, 2009). The researcher provided rich descriptions of the observations to draw a clear picture for the reader of the setting and the experiences shared during observations (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used triangulation by looking for common themes or experiences from the interviews, surveys, and field observations. As common themes developed from the data, it provided greater validity to the study (Creswell, 2009).

**2. How do mentees perceive and describe their relationship with the graduation coach?** This research question sought to explore the major components of how the mentee perceives and describes the relationship with the graduation coach. The first part of this question explored the perception of the mentee. This phrase demonstrated that the researcher was open to the experience of the mentee by separating from preconceived judgements or thoughts about relationships and discovered through the mentees experience the nature of the relationship shared with the graduation coach. The researcher sought to understand through the eyes of the mentee. The second part of note in the question was describe. The researcher sought to understand how the mentee

described the relationship with the graduation coach. The researcher examined the feelings and descriptive words given by the mentee to determine the nature of the relationship in order to discover how the student felt about the influence of the graduation coach.

Multiple methods were utilized to gather data in order to reveal the perception of the relationship with the graduation coach on the mentee. Data were gathered using field observations, Likert-type surveys, and individual interviews (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The data were used to determine any perception the student had of the relationship with the graduation coach. Instruments for data collection for this research question with the participants were a Likert-type survey and individual interviews. The researcher also performed field observations of interactions between the students and the graduation coaches. The researcher functioned as a complete observer during field observations, scripting the interaction between the student and the graduation coach with no interaction with the participants (Creswell, 2009). The researcher recorded interviews using a recording device and scripted answers to gather data (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Reliability and validity were addressed utilizing the following methods. To ensure reliability, the researcher reviewed transcripts to check for obvious mistakes. The researcher also utilized the recorded interview compared to the scripted responses to further ensure reliability (Creswell, 2009). The researcher used coding and bracketing to isolate the epoche or the essence of each facet of the phenomenon observed and continually referred back to the codes to increase reliability by reducing the risk of the definition drifting during data collection (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Validity was addressed by using member checking after interviews to be certain that the meaning or description of their experience had been accurately reflected by the researcher (Creswell, 2009). The researcher provided rich descriptions of the observations to draw a clear picture for the reader of the setting and the experiences shared during observations (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used triangulation by looking for common themes or experiences from the interviews, surveys, and field observations. As common themes developed from the data, it provided greater validity to the study (Creswell, 2009).

**3. How has the graduation coach's relationship building strategies affected the student's perception of their own self-efficacy?** In this question, the major components were the how and perception. The term how demonstrated an openness to anything that presents as the research was conducted in interviews and surveys with selected students and the graduation coach. The term perception revealed itself in the student's belief in their own ability to be successful and the influence, if any, of the graduation coach. The significance of this question revealed the graduation coaches' influence in creating a sustained perception of academic success.

To determine the how and the perception of the students, multiple methods were utilized to gather data in order to reveal the perception of the student regarding the graduation coaches' influence on their self-efficacy. In order to gather data, a Likert-type survey and individual interviews were utilized (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). The data were used to determine any perception the student had of their self-efficacy and any influence the graduation coach may have had on their belief of their academic ability. The researcher recorded interviews using a recording device and scripted answers to

gather data (Creswell, 2009).

Reliability and validity were addressed utilizing the following methods. To ensure reliability, the researcher reviewed transcripts to check for obvious mistakes. The researcher also utilized the recorded interview compared to the scripted responses to further ensure reliability (Creswell, 2009). The researcher used coding and bracketing to isolate the epoche or the essence of each facet of the phenomenon observed and continually referred back to the codes to increase reliability by reducing the risk of the definition drifting during data collection (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Validity was addressed by using member checking after interviews to be certain that the researcher had accurately reflected the meaning or description of their experience (Creswell, 2009). The researcher used triangulation by looking for common themes or experiences from the interviews and surveys. As common themes developed from the data, it provided greater validity to the study (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 2009).

### **Participant Selection**

Moustakas (1994) indicated there are no in-advance criteria for selecting participants but stated essential criteria include that “the research participant has experienced the phenomenon” (p. 107) and “is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and grants the investigator the right to tape record the interview and publish the data in a dissertation” (p. 107).

The researcher for this study, along with the graduation coach, identified students from each school served on the graduation coach’s caseload to participate in the study.

The number of graduation coaches and students selected for the study was restricted due to the means of data collection which included long interviews with follow-

up interviews that involved member checking (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

In order to conduct the research in the selected school district, the superintendent of schools was contacted for permission. Participants, once selected, were contacted personally and a letter followed confirming their participation. Student selected for this were at least 18 years old. The researcher gained permission from their parents and provided them a complete description of the research and its purpose.

### **Instruments**

**Surveys.** The first data collection instrument that was used was a survey developed by the researcher. The survey was based on current research in best practices for mentoring. The focus was the impact of the relationship building strategies of graduation coaches and the effect the relationship has on student dispositions and self-efficacy. The survey allowed the researcher insight into student perceptions of the nature and quality of the relationship and student perceptions of the graduation coach on their own self-efficacy.

The questions were set up to measure the following aspects of the mentoring relationship that were identified in the research literature: Questions 1 and 2 measured student perceptions of respect and trust. Questions 3 and 4 measured student perceptions of appraisal support and positive attitude. Questions 5 and 6 measured expectations and acceptance. Questions 7 and 8 measured student perceptions of modeling and persistence. Questions 9 and 10 measured student motivation and influence. Questions 11 and 12 measured student perceptions of caring and frequency of contact. Questions 13 and 14 measured student perceptions of feedback and importance of the graduation coach. Questions 15 and 16 measured student perceptions of student ability and honesty.

Questions 17 and 18 measured student perceptions of modeling and successful completion of tasks. Questions 19 through 23 were short answer response questions to allow the participants to discuss their perceptions of the impact of the relationship in greater detail.

The survey was arranged with 18 questions set up as a Likert-style scale with answer choices ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Questions 19 through 23 were designed to allow students to go into further detail about the mentor-mentee relationship (the survey is in Appendix A).

The surveys were reviewed and validated by three experts from within the district where the study took place. The individuals who validated the study were the director of career and technology education, the director of the adult learning center, and the director of assessment and evaluation. The experts reviewed the survey in December and January and suggestions for changes were included in the final survey. The experts determined that the survey was valid and aligned to the research questions and was appropriate to measure the research questions.

After the surveys were administered and collected, the data findings were placed in a table which shows the cumulative data and the percentage of each response choice responding with strongly agree. These results allowed the researcher insight into student perceptions as to which mentor/relationship building strategy was used most often or was most effective from the student's perspective. A frequency table was used to represent the themes, and how often they appeared, that emerged from the student short answer portion of the survey. From the sample results gained, the researcher was able to make claims or generalizations about the population and gain potential insight into the

phenomenon of the strategies used by graduation coaches to develop and maintain relationships with their students (Creswell, 2009).

**Interviews.** Both selected students and graduation coaches were interviewed during this research. The questions that were asked of each participant were focused on themes identified in the literature review. The graduation coaches were asked about their practice; and the data were used to explore how they developed and maintained relationships, helped improve student self-efficacy, and how they influenced connectedness for students. The interview questions for students explored their perceptions of their relationship with their graduation coach and how they believed the graduation coach had affected their connectedness to school and their self-efficacy. The interviews were face to face; and the researcher, both by hand and by audio taping the interviews, recorded answers (Creswell, 2009). The interview protocol for graduation coaches can be found in Appendix B, and the interview protocol for the students can be found in Appendix C.

**Field observations.** Field observations were conducted at the two upstate South Carolina high schools that had been selected for this study. Each high school is unique with one rural and one urban school. The field observations observed the interaction between the graduation coaches and the selected students. The observations occurred in the school in a location where the graduation coach and their students normally meet. The researcher scripted the observation utilizing a form that allowed for both descriptive and reflective data, and the researcher used voice recording to allow for further exploration of the observation. The field observation instrument can be found in Appendix D.

## **Procedures**

In order to participate in the research study, participants were first asked to sign a consent form. Any potential participant who did not sign a consent form was eliminated from the study. The consent forms are found in Appendix E. Data, once gathered through the interviews and field observations, were transcribed to capture the first-person accounts of the participants and their perceptions of their experiences. The transcribed data were analyzed, bracketed, and coded to look for initial patterns which were further classified or descriptive coded into themes or specific patterns. The themes were described in detail to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon observed. The themes were identified and detailed, allowing the researcher to interpret the meaning of the themes to determine what was learned from the interviews in relation to the perceptions of both the graduation coaches and the students. The themes and their supporting areas were presented in a frequency table demonstrating the frequency with which each theme and supporting area appeared (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Once collected, survey data were analyzed to further describe the phenomenon and further reveal the perceptions of the students and their perceptions of the effect of the graduation coaches' influence on them. The data were organized as follows.

The data collected from each survey were analyzed and placed into a table to provide insight into student perceptions of the graduation coach and their relationship building strategies. The table represented the percentage of students who strongly agreed with each question.

The themes derived from careful examination of the short answer portion of the survey were reported in a frequency table to reflect the number of times the theme

appeared in the student responses. These responses were combined with the themes that emerged from the student interviews in the frequency table.

Once all information had been gathered and analyzed, the researcher compared the results of the surveys, interviews, and observations along with field notes the researchers had scripted to tie themes that emerge together to provide a thorough description of the phenomenon observed. Creswell (2009) described qualitative research as a means to explore and understand multiple levels of meaning that can be derived from a single problem or phenomenon. The analysis of data progresses from specific to general themes, allowing the researcher to draw valid conclusions from the data.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Introduction**

High schools receive students from middle schools and within 4 years must have them prepared to graduate and prepared to either enter the workforce or college. ACT (2008) reported that students who are not prepared to enter high school are less likely to be prepared to graduate from high school. The school system and schools in this study understood the need to support those students who were not prepared through the use of graduation coaches.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of the impact of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies on student dispositions and self-efficacy. Graduation coaches were placed 6 years ago in high schools in the county in which the study was conducted. The graduation coaches' role was to develop strong relationships with their students in order to help them graduate.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

This study was qualitative in design, utilizing a phenomenological approach in order to capture and explore the essence of the relationship building strategies of the graduation coaches and the influence it has on student dispositions and the student's sense of self-efficacy. In order to capture the experience of both the graduation coach and the perception of their students, the data collection tools used were student surveys, graduation coach and student interviews, and field observations. These tools produced a collection of themes that are presented in this chapter.

The data collection was utilized to collect data on the phenomenon that occurred when graduation coaches met with their students. The graduation coach interviews

allowed the researcher insight into the experiences and perceptions of the graduation coaches and their perceptions of the relationships they formed with their students and the strategies they used to connect with them. The student surveys, student interviews, and field observations allowed insight into the perceptions and experiences of the students about their opinions of the graduation coaches, the relationship they formed, and the influence of the relationship on them.

The study participants included two experienced graduation coaches and 10 students who had experience with the graduation coaches. Moustakas (1994) indicated there are no in-advance criteria for selecting participants but stated essential criteria include that “the research participant has experienced the phenomenon” (p. 107) and “is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and grants the investigator the right to tape record the interview and publish the data in a dissertation” (p. 107).

The data analysis section of this qualitative study reports the data that were collected and is organized according to a phenomenological study approach. The qualitative data that were collected were used to explore and examine the phenomenon that occurred between the graduation coach and their students to provide an understanding of the nature and influence of the relationship that developed.

The students were asked to complete a survey that consisted of 18 questions that were measured using a Likert scale for student response. The questions used a scale of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree (Creswell, 2009). The student survey included questions that identified aspects of relationship building based on mentoring characteristics. The questions in the survey were determined using the characteristics of self-efficacy, mentoring, and building relationships that were discussed

in the literature review. There were also four short answer questions at the end of the survey to allow students to further describe the perceptions and experiences of their relationship with their graduation coach.

In Table 1, the questions are paired from the work cited from which the questions were generated.

Table 1

*Student Survey Questions and the Works Cited from Which They Were Generated*

Survey Question	Work Cited to Develop for the Question
My graduation coach treats me with respect.	Anastasia et al. (2012)
I trust my graduation coach.	Hood (1992); Testerman (1996)
My graduation coach gives me positive feedback to support and motivate me.	Gist and Mitchell (1992); Schunk (1996)
My graduation coach is positive when they meet with me.	Rowley (1999); Deutsch and Spencer (2009)
My graduation coach sets high expectations for me.	Roberts (2007); Rhodes (2006)
My Graduation coach makes me feel like I belong.	Testerman (1996)
My graduation coach models how I can be successful at school.	Gist and Mitchell (1992); Schunk (1996)
My graduation coach does not give up on me.	Little et al. (2010, p. 189)
My graduation coach motivates me to do my best.	Hood (1992); McCaslin and Burross (2008); Roberts (2007)
My graduation coach can influence and persuade me.	Schunk (1996)
My graduation coach cares about me.	Hood (1992); Testerman (1996)
My graduation coach meets with me regularly.	Little et al. (2010); Raposa et al. (2016)
I value the feedback given by my graduation coach.	Gist and Mitchell (1992); Schunk (1996)
My graduation coach is an important person in my life.	Dubois and Silverthorn (2005)
My graduation coach helps build my confidence in my ability to learn.	Gist and Mitchell (1992)
I believe my graduation coach is honest with me and helps me take responsibility for my choices.	O'Connor and Yballe (2007)
When I do not feel successful at school my graduation coach models how I can be successful.	Gist and Mitchell (1992); Schunk (1996)
My graduation coach helps me understand tasks and how to successfully complete them.	Gist and Mitchell (1992)

Table 1 shows each survey question and the cited work used to develop the

question. Each question is designed to provide insight into the perceptions and experiences of the students who took the survey.

Survey data were collected from all 10 students in the study. The open-ended questions were coded and themes identified using the topics from the interviews.

Table 2

*Student Survey Results*

Question	Student (n=10) Percentage Response That Strongly Agree
My graduation coach treats me with respect.	100%
I trust my graduation coach.	100%
My graduation coach gives me positive feedback to support and motivate me.	100%
My graduation coach is positive when they meet with me.	90%
My graduation coach sets high expectations for me.	80%
My Graduation coach makes me feel like I belong.	100%
My graduation coach models how I can be successful at school.	80%
My graduation coach does not give up on me.	90%
My graduation coach motivates me to do my best.	100%
My graduation coach can influence and persuade me.	70%
My graduation coach cares about me.	90%
My graduation coach meets with me regularly.	70%
I value the feedback given by my graduation coach.	90%
My graduation coach is an important person in my life.	80%
My graduation coach helps build my confidence in my ability to learn.	90%
I believe my graduation coach is honest with me and helps me take responsibility for my choices.	90%
When I do not feel successful at school my graduation coach models how I can be successful.	100%
My graduation coach helps me understand tasks and how to successfully complete them.	90%

Table 2 represents student responses from the student survey. The answers were from a Likert-style scale with response options from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The percentages in the table represent the percentage of students who strongly agreed with each question. The student survey was intended to capture student perceptions of

their relationship with their graduation coach. The areas that were scored at 100% strongly agree seem to demonstrate that the students on their caseload feel that their graduation coach is meeting their needs for relationship or building their sense of self-efficacy. Areas where students strongly agreed their graduation coach had a positive influence included areas such as trust, motivation modeling, and feeling a sense of belonging. All students did not feel as confident in all areas as seen in some of the questions that involved frequency of contact which was at 70% strongly agree which seems to indicate that students would have preferred more time with their graduation coach. Another question that came in at 70% strongly agree was in the areas of persuasion and influence. There were students in their interview responses who indicated they enjoyed the company of the graduation coach but they further stated that they had strong opinions about school that the graduation coach could not change. This question with its lower percentage of strongly agree responses supports the student interviews where students held strong opinions about school.

Table 3 displays the theme and the survey question to which it relates. The survey was designed based on mentoring characteristics and designed to provide insight into student perceptions of their experiences with the graduation coach. Table 3 shows the alignment of the survey developed and the themes identified.

Table 3

*Survey Questions Aligned with Interview Question Themes*

Theme	Survey Question
Frequency of contact	8/12
Quality of relationship	1/2/4/6/10/11/14/16
Self-efficacy	3/5/7/9/13/15/17/18

Table 3 demonstrates that the survey questions aligned with identified themes

from the graduation coach and student interviews. Table 2 represents the questions in the survey and how they aligned to themes that were identified from the student and graduation coach interviews. The questions, upon comparison to the themes, reflected a strong alignment with the quality of relationships and self-efficacy. The themes identified from the student and graduation coach interviews can be found in Table 4.

After the survey was given, the students and graduation coaches participated in an interview that consisted of 13 questions for students, with follow-up questions for clarification for the researcher. The graduation coaches' interviews consisted of 10 questions. The questions were open ended to allow the researcher to capture the essence of the student and graduation coach experience and their perceptions of their interactions. The interview questionnaire was designed to take 45 minutes, with both initial and follow-up questions. The students and graduation coaches were interviewed over the course of several months depending on their availability. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

The transcribed notes were labeled and coded with students and graduation coaches given pseudonyms to protect student and graduation coach identity. The initial readings of the transcripts involved the researcher reading the transcripts multiple times and utilizing reflective notes and thoughts in the margins. Upon reading the transcripts further, codes began to emerge; and from these individual codes, themes began to emerge. The themes were recorded and student comments that supported the themes were written under each theme. The researcher, in this type of research, searches for meaning or common themes in the narratives of the participants and connects the essence of the meaning found within the narrative to create a rich description of the experience of

the participants supported by the data (Moustakas, 1994).

Field observations were also utilized to collect data for this study. The researcher conducted 12 hours of field observations. The observation form was designed to align with the themes of the student survey that aligned with relationship building based on mentoring characteristics. The purpose of the field observation was to allow the researcher the opportunity to observe the graduation coach and their students in a natural setting to further capture the essence of the phenomenon that occurred when they met. The nature of the observations, however, were not as the researcher had expected. The graduation coaches had open offices and multiple students present in their rooms at any given time when observations were completed. The students shared their thoughts and feelings openly in front of the researcher and other students who were present in the room. Other students often joined in the conversations that were taking place between the graduation coach and their student. There were times the graduation coach asked other students to step away from the students involved in this study, but they were never in a confidential location and the discussions were in the open offices.

### **Field Observation Delimitation**

The researcher had to change the methodology of the observations due to the nature of how the graduation coach met with students and the design of their rooms. The graduation coach at each site had multiple students in the room, including students in the study, throughout the day of the observations. There were students in the room who were not study participants, and the researcher did not want to audio record their interactions with the graduation coach without their consent. To allow for field observations to be included in the study, the researcher did not audio record students but shifted his focus to

the graduation coach and their actions and behaviors while meeting with students. The observer took anecdotal notes on the graduation coach only. Asking the graduation coach to alter how they met to fit the initial study design would have disrupted the natural flow of their meetings and introduced bias into the observations. Data provided through field observations were based solely on the graduation coach's actions and behaviors and anecdotal notes of students who agreed to be in the study.

The data collected through interviews and the short answer section of the surveys were coded, and the themes and components of the themes are depicted in Table 4. Through careful reading and examination of the transcribed notes from both graduation coaches and student interviews and the short answer portion of the student survey, the themes in Table 4 emerged.

Table 4

*Themes Derived from the Transcribed Notes*

Theme	Components of Themes
Frequency of Contact	Persistence and Frequency of Contact
Quality of Relationship	Emotional Closeness, Acceptance, Positive Attitude, Trust, Respect and Honesty
Self-efficacy	Encouragement, Goal Setting, Modeling, Taking Responsibility

In Table 4, the themes and support areas are listed that were identified after bracketing and coding the graduation coach and student interviews. The themes and supporting areas emerged as the transcripts were read, bracketed, and coded. The overall themes of frequency of contact, quality of relationship, and self-efficacy repeated throughout the transcripts. The next step was determining the supporting areas. What was it that made the quality of the relationship a theme that recurred? Each theme had

multiple areas that, upon digging deeper into the transcripts, revealed the deeper areas of meaning that were the areas that comprised the themes. Upon examining each area for the essence of the experience for each participant, the areas were placed with the theme with which they most closely aligned.

To further explore the overall themes and provide insight into the students' and graduation coaches' perceptions and experiences of their relationship building strategies, frequency tables were included. The purpose of the frequency tables was to provide detail as to the number of times the themes and supporting areas were identified in the surveys and in the interviews. Table 5 reports the data collected from the graduation coach interviews.

Table 5

*Frequency Table of Themes and Supporting Areas from Graduation Coach Interviews*

Theme and Supporting Area	Frequency Coded in the Transcript
Frequency of contact	6
Frequency of contact	3
Persistence	3
Quality of relationship	31
Acceptance	6
Emotional closeness	4
Positive Attitude	4
Trust	12
Honesty/Respect	5
Self-efficacy	20
Encouragement	7
Goal setting	8
Modeling	5

The data in the graduation coaches' themes point to two major areas that were identified after careful reading and examination of the transcripts. The graduation coaches put less emphasis on the frequency of contact in their responses; and in the interviews, they indicated that meetings were spontaneous and organic versus organized.

The graduation coaches had established relationships with the students in this study in prior years, creating less organized structure or formal meetings. The area that stood out the most in the transcripts was the quality of the relationships with an emphasis on trust and acceptance.

In the interviews, the graduation coaches stated that they built strong relationships with their students which was represented with the frequency of responses where they focused on relationships. The theme of quality of relationships was identified 31 times; and the area within quality of relationships that appeared most often in a review of the transcripts was trust, identified 12 times under this theme. The theme that appeared the least for the graduation coaches was frequency of contact which was identified six times in the transcripts. This was reflected in the student surveys where 70% of students strongly agreed that the graduation coach met with them regularly. The graduation coaches stated in their interviews that meetings were not regular and often spontaneous which was also seen in the field observations.

The themes and supporting areas revealed in the student surveys and interviews are Table 6. The data in student interviews and surveys revealed themes and supporting areas that were identified after careful reading and examination of the transcripts.

Table 6

*Frequency Table of Themes and Supporting Areas from Student Interviews and Surveys*

Theme and Supporting Area	Frequency Coded in the Transcript
Frequency of contact	45
Frequency of contact	11
Persistence	34
Quality of relationship	116
Acceptance	23
Emotional closeness	25
Positive Attitude	22
Trust	27
Honesty/Respect	19
Self-efficacy	57
Encouragement	33
Goal setting	14
Modeling	10

The data from student interviews and surveys indicate that students place a great deal of value on the quality of the relationship. The data support the students valued trust and emotional closeness. These areas appeared more often in the review of the data and transcripts and gave support to the value of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies. The theme of frequency of contact, similar to the graduation coaches, was not the theme identified most often but the area supporting frequency of contact, persistence, was identified often in student responses. This demonstrated that the graduation coach, as most students phrased it, will not give up on their students. Another area that stood out was encouragement, which supported the theme self-efficacy. The data demonstrated the graduation coaches' abilities to motivate and encourage students. The data also demonstrated that the students and graduation coaches were aligned in the area of frequency of contact. Formal meetings to establish initial relationships had occurred by the time this research was conducted and less formal meetings served in their place.

## Themes That Emerged from the Graduation Coach and Student Interviews

The data that were gathered from the interviews, surveys, and field observations were placed into three themes about the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies. The themes that were identified were frequency of contact, quality of relationship, and self-efficacy.

An overview of each theme follows, supported by graduation coach and student narratives from the interviews and short answer portion of the student survey and from field observations of graduation coaches.

**Frequency of contact.** The frequency of contact that the graduation coach has with their students can have an impact on the quality of the relationship they share with their students (Rhodes, 2006). Mentoring relationships become closer over time; and as the length of the relationship increases, the positive outcomes for youth also increase (Dang & Miller, 2013; Kupersmidt et al., 2016). These findings are supported by both graduation coaches and students in the interviews. The graduation coaches describe the nature of their meetings with and the time they spend with their students.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Frequency of contact.* GC1 (Graduation Coach 1) describes meetings they have had with their students as,

There is never a set time. It depends on the student and on the day. I was with one student for two hours because we sat her with DSS filling out her SNAP application. For other students it may simply be a walk by my door to say hey or ask a question. Others may be in here for an entire day. It depends on the student and depends on the need.

GC2 describes their meetings as,

There are some students who I see every period, every day that they are here. They come by before class, after class, they come to tell me they have their book bag. I have some students that come by, leave their stuff just so they want me to hold their stuff, and then I see them later. I see them every day. There are about 30 to 35 students that I see at least 2-3 times a week. And there are some I have to kick out. “Ok, guys, you have to go to class.” They’re welcome to sit in here every period they have study hall or Recovery but if they have class, they need to go. I know there will be times there are pop ins. I don’t schedule them, but I send for them. Most of the kids I see are pop ins. But that’s simply because a lot of the kids already know they need help and they know before I do, sometimes. The door is always open. The drop-ins are there but if I have to meet someone, I just tell them I’m busy this period and come back another time. There are times we meet for an hour and a half in a small group talking and visiting with each other. If they’re in crisis, that could be all day. It varies based on the needs. I have small groups, we’ll meet together. Everything that happens here is very organic. It’s very natural. There’s not a prescription and there’s not a course that we go through and I think a lot of times these kids see through that – the prescriptions or the courses that are designed ... therapeutic groups that are designed to be resilient. One of the strategies is hand-scheduling. Once I have a student and identify they have certain needs I try to hand-schedule them as much as possible. Not just pick the teachers but pick the times of the day they have classes.

*Student interview transcripts: Frequency of contact.* Students report a wide range in the frequency of contact they have with their graduation coaches. Some students

report they simply pop in, where others report they spend most of a day with their graduation coach. The students report that it can be as little as 10 to 15 minutes or as long as a full academic day. The students' accounts align with the graduation coaches in the length of the meetings and in the open-door policy that allows them to "pop in" when needed.

Student 2 stated,

I meet with her every day and I usually just pop in and most of our talks are just about grades. In the beginning it was more sit down meetings but now it is more pop in meetings. The pop in meetings can turn into sit down meetings.

Student 10 reported,

I went there every day and every class. Going to class didn't help. I like being in a small room with four to five people because if you are in a class and try to get help from the teacher it's hard.

Student 3 indicated,

The first two years of high school I met with her often like every other day because I was going through some troubles and I needed someone to talk to and she was there. The second two years everything was calming down and I didn't need her so much until I was struggling academically then I started meeting with her once a month.

*Field observation: Frequency of contact.* In the researcher's observations, the meetings with students were not as expected. The room was normally full of students, ranging from four to eight students. The students were either working or talking to the graduation coach. The room was designed not just for meeting with students but they

were set up for productivity. The meetings observed were usually 10-30 minutes at the longest during the observation periods. There was an open-door policy and students flowed in and out of the room and often stopped by, receiving a greeting and a smile. The graduation coach was open and welcoming to each student. The graduation coach at each school did call students from classes to meet with them, but the meetings were in a semi-formal setting. The students met with her in the open room with other students. Students who were part of this study were among the number who came by or were working in the room.

Student 7 was working in the room, and discussion flowed between the graduation coach and Student 7. There were times they were laughing, and at other times the graduation coach took a more serious tone to focus him back on his work. Student 4 stopped in and out of the room to talk to the graduation coach with a focus in part on his grades but mostly to talk for a few minutes about non-school items such as the prom. The graduation coach moved from student to student in the room either listening with a smile or discussing graduation and seat time. The meetings were natural and flowed easily between student and graduation coach.

**Frequency of contact: Persistence.** In reviewing the transcripts, another area that aligned with frequency of contact was persistence. Deutsch and Spencer (2009) indicated that the reliability of the contact is the foundation for building trust, considering many youth have experienced disruptions in important relationships. Rowley (1999) reported that the good mentor is committed to the relationship with their mentee and helping them find success, and in this role persistence is important. In this respect, the time devoted to students is important and persistence in helping them succeed is essential.

*Graduation coach transcripts: Persistence.* GC2 reported,

When we meet there is no agenda. For students I have known longer I nag more frequently and I have to step back and tell the students I have gone into momma-mode because I want you [the students] to see the urgency in whatever is going on. With graduation or exams approaching I can see the mountain of work that is coming and need to let them own it and I want them to understand the urgency.

Not all students respond to the graduation coach, and GC1 is aware of this but is committed to getting the student the help they need. GC1 stated,

When working with boys some respond well to women and others do not and if that is the case, I need to find a way around it. That's the key to it. If they do not respond well to me, I have to find that person who can meet their need.

*Student interview transcripts: Persistence.* In the review of student transcripts, the area of persistence also appeared. Students relate that the graduation coach does not give up or quit on them. Student 4 stated,

She is always there if I need help. She is always there for me and helps me to the best of her ability. There were so many times I went to the office to get my drop out papers but she would call me into her office and gave me positive feedback and set me back on the path to graduate. She never let me quit.

Student 9 said, "She took the drop out papers out of my hand and threw them in the trash. I was ready to give up but she was not ready to give up on me."

*Field observations: Persistence.* The graduation coach demonstrated persistence with the students in the room. Student 7 was off task on several occasions and the graduation coach continued to redirect the student and remind him of his graduation

goals. The graduation coach also discussed seat time for graduation with him reminding him that he had missed a day and that time would need to be made up prior to graduation and time was running out. The student was positive in his response and went back to work. The graduation coaches spent a great deal of time in their more formal meetings discussing credits and seat time. They were insistent with students and demonstrated understanding when reasons that were given for struggles in a class or an absence but they quickly shifted the focus back to the student and the need to earn seat time and their credits. The meetings seemed supportive but firm with students responding favorably to the graduation coach.

**Quality of the relationship.** Another theme that emerged from the student and graduation coach surveys was their perception of the quality of the relationship when they met. Rhodes (2008) reported that the best outcomes from mentoring is when strong relationships develop. Within each theme there were categories that stood out and within quality of relationship several were recurrent: acceptance, emotional closeness, honesty, positive attitude, trust and respect.

**Quality of relationship: Acceptance.** Rowley (1999) stated the good mentor is accepting, showing empathy which includes accepting the mentee without judgement. Accepting mentors to not judge or reject their mentees. The graduation coaches reflected this statement in their interviews.

*Graduation coach transcripts: Acceptance.* GC1 reported, “It’s really just getting to know them on their level and actually knowing that you genuinely care about the person first. Not what their grade is, not what their behavior is in class but them in their life.”

Graduation coach 2 said,

Before spring hits, the sense of belonging is that they're here, they're welcome, they need something there are no questions, no expectation, we can try to get it accomplished. As the year progresses like the fall and the winter, I can be a little bit more laid back with just being here and listening and allowing students to talk and spending time together during the day if that's something that they need.

In the reviews of the students' transcripts it was also seen that their perception is that they are accepted by their graduation coaches.

*Student interview transcripts: Acceptance.* Student 1 said,

There were some things I went through and she was there for me. Someone being there and you not having to ask for it feels good for a student to have that kind of person. No matter what she was by your side for everything.

Student 3 reported, "I always felt comfortable going in. We have had a relationship since junior year and I have gotten real comfortable talking with her. She always understands and wants to help when she can." Student 7 said, "She made me feel I was there for a reason. She would ask about my family and she was compassionate about stuff going on in my life. She actually cared about what was going on in my life."

*Field observations: Acceptance.* Students entered the room and spoke with the graduation coach about a variety of topics and the graduation coach would listen intently with a smile on their face or a look of concern or appreciation depending on the topic of discussion. The graduation coach at both schools welcomed all students into their room without judging. They shared their thoughts on topics that ranged from the prom to problems at home. The graduation coach only pushed students on to class when the

discussions were general and social in nature. The graduation coaches wore many hats dealing with graduation questions, grades and seat time to personal victories or personal problems. What stood out was each student was welcomed and made to feel welcome in their classes.

**Quality of the relationship: Emotional closeness.** Deutsch and Spencer (2009) reported that striving to be empathetic and understand the youth's experiences conveys that the mentor cares and understands deepening the relationship. Dubois and Silverthorn (2005) stated that the development of an emotional bond is necessary for mentors to have a positive influence on youth.

In the review of the transcripts, another facet of the quality of relationships emerged: emotional closeness. The experiences shared by both graduation coach and students they serve supported their perception of an emotional bond.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Emotional closeness.* GC1 reported, I think a lot of them see me as the mother figure that they can go to. Some of them see me as the friend they can confide in. I kind of have to change the approach depending on the student so some need that and some don't respond well to that, to any kind of authority so they want you more as a friend they can come to and confide in and get help. Just depends on the personality.

GC2 reported,

I hope that they feel like we have a good relationship. I think the majority of my students do feel that way. I think the majority of them feel I care about them and their success. They keep coming back. They share their success with me. If they have a problem, I think about it like children, when they are starting to become

more independent momma is not as important, but when they fall and get hurt they re-appear. So not only do they tell me the good things but if they have something going on, they come and tell me. The fact that not only do they self-report but they have friends that come and let me know something's going on makes me think they have a positive relationship because kids are brutally honest.

*Student interview transcripts: Emotional closeness.* Student 3 said, "She is like a family member, somewhat like a mom. She puts it out there for you and doesn't sugar coat it." Student 6 stated, "She has built a one-on-one relationship with me. She knows her students on a personal basis and cares about each one." Student 8 reported,

I don't see her as a teacher or a graduation coach I see her as a second mother figure because I went to her with everything. Any issues at all: emotional, academics, or issues with friends. I never went to a counselor or a principal. We spent a lot of time talking for my well-being and to build a bond that was based on more than just school.

*Field observations: Emotional closeness.* The graduation coaches welcomed each student in the room and this was accompanied with some hugs for some students or a high five for others. The discussions that occurred ranged from social to personal, but students spoke freely to the graduation coach. The graduation coaches when speaking with students were, it appeared, maternal in nature; where at times, their voice was soft and gentle when listening to students share personal concerns or firm when discussing the necessity to focus on their seat time and grades as the date for graduation was approaching. The graduation coach demonstrated caring for each student who walked in the room.

**Quality of the relationship: Trust and honesty.** Dappen and Insernhagen (2005) reported that building trust with a caring adult can help students cope with challenging times as they mature. Through review of the transcripts, another category that was included under the theme of quality of relationship was trust and honesty.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Trust and honesty.* GC1 shared,

If a child doesn't know you genuinely care about them in my role a lot of times that's where I find out what the needs are. Do we have food, do we have power at home, are we not able to take a shower because we don't have running water right now? That's where I find out what the needs are that aren't being met and what's keeping them from being successful in the classroom because a large percentage of the students I work with I have to start making sure their basic needs are being met. If they don't trust you, they're not going to open themselves up to you due to some cases of embarrassment because of the situation. The interesting thing is after 6 years they refer each other. The one I worked with today with DSS came in probably 3 months ago and said "A student told me that I needed to come find you, that you would help me." The student that told them to come to me graduated last year. They are referring each other at this point.

GC2 shared,

In the case of some of these kids I've worked with them since 7th grade. I just sit down and tell them to get it done. Sometimes we're so close to each other there's a trust there that I wouldn't put them in a position to not be successful and I remind them of that. I remind them ... "Trust me, this can get done, I wouldn't put you in a position where you would fail." I think the biggest thing that's been

helpful toward them is I don't tell them it's good when I know that they're struggling. I know that they're miserable and I know that they don't like it but I do let them see opportunities and remind them this isn't me that wants to get a diploma, this is something they've said they wanted. So often in our district I feel like the AP kids get a lot of the recognition for what they've achieved. They've achieved a lot and I'm not saying they haven't. But the kids who have come back from being disciplined constantly, where they're made fun of, where the work is hard – those are the heroes of our district. Because there aren't very many AP kids who would face those odds and keep coming back.

*Student interview transcripts: Trust and honesty.* Student 2 shared,

Every time I needed someone to talk to, I would go to her. I have anxiety and I go to her whenever I feel anxious and she will talk to the teachers for me and help me with the class so I don't fail. I feel no anxiety in her room. She worries about me both academically and personally. We are very close.

Student 3 shared,

Outside of school she has helped me a lot. I was living on my own and she helped me get what I needed. She helped me get Medicaid and EBT. She pushes me and tells me what I need to hear and it has built my confidence.

Student 4 said,

I can go to her with anything. It's like a friendship. Anything that happens in my life I can go to her and get positive feedback. She helps me focus on what needs to be done for me to be my best.

*Field observation: Trust/honesty.* Both graduation coaches were honest with their

students especially in relation to seat time and grades. At the time of the observations, the date of graduation was approaching and discussions were focused on meeting the requirements for graduation. The graduation coaches were honest but kind when speaking about these items with students. Students 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10 had similar discussions with their graduation coaches at both schools. The students had to make up seat time or grades or they would not graduate. The graduation coaches were firm with each student and the students seemed upset by the discussion but after a few minutes of discussion accepted the situation and asked what they could do to graduate. The students demonstrated trust in their graduation coach having these discussions in the presence of the researcher. There seemed to be an atmosphere of trust and honesty in the interactions with the students and their graduation coaches. The researcher noted that students came to the graduation coach throughout observed times and openly talked with her with others in the room.

**Quality of the relationship: Positive attitude.** Rowley (1999) reported that the good mentor communicates hope and optimism. A critical characteristic of a mentor is the ability to communicate mentees are capable of overcoming challenges to accomplish great things. A category of quality of relationships that emerged in reviewing the transcripts is the positive attitude of the mentor.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Positive attitude.* GC1 reported, I like them. I mean I enjoy them as people and I need to remember that more because I get discouraged sometimes on the decisions they're making outside of school or even in school. But I don't think they can make better decisions if they don't feel appreciated, valued and loved. They make me laugh. Sometimes I feel

like I shouldn't even be paid ... just when the day is going to be miserable and you think "I don't even want to come back" one of them will come by and visit and they're happy and what to tell me they're doing well. Or they have insurance. I like them ... in spite of their bad decisions I like them.

GC2 reported,

When I first started teaching, the media specialist said you really need to teach a professional development on classroom management. I thought someone's going to have to tell me what I'm doing right first. I don't know any other way to do this. Sometimes it just happens. I do think you start building confidence by making sure they have access to those clothes so they fit in with the rest of the students and they feel like they are part of the student body. And sometimes it's pairing them with someone who they're going to be able to help themselves, if that makes sense. We have one who is very, very quiet; she's always by herself and we told her you are doing phenomenal in English. I have this student over here who really needs help. But, in all honesty, we were just trying to find her a friend. And it worked, they now are friends. We have to get creative with these things. And we're lucky enough we're a small enough school that we genuinely know our students well enough to do something like that. For the most part, our students have someone in the building who knows them and they can rely on.

*Student interview transcripts: Positive attitude.* Student 6 reported, "It's usually me coming to her because she doesn't know all of my issues. I have never had a bad meeting with her. It's mainly informative or her helping me." Student 9 stated,

She acted like she didn't have anything in the world to do but meet with me. She

made me feel important. You were her only priority no matter what was going on. She took a personal interest to try to find out what was going on with you. Student 10 stated, “She is an inspiration. I want to be successful like she is.”

*Field observation: Positive attitude.* The graduation coaches were positive with their students during the observations. At times when the discussions took a serious tone, the graduation coaches were still positive. The graduation coaches at both schools would tell students, “it’s a lot to do but you can do this” and “I am in this with you, you are going to make it.” The graduation coaches were also supportive and positive in relation to social discussions. Student 4 shared his prom plans, and both the graduation coach and the student laughed and smiled when discussing the night. Student 8 shared his plans for entering the military, and the graduation coach and student sat down and discussed it as a positive alternative for him as opposed to college. Student 2 and the graduation coach discussed after graduation plans that did not involve college, and the graduation coach talked to a company and the state about employment for the student. The student was part of these discussions, and the graduation coach indicated this was a positive direction for him.

**Quality of the relationship: Respect.** Steinberg and McCray (2012) stated in order to develop meaningful relationships, students need adults who are accessible and willing to create relationships based on respect and trust. Rhodes (2006) stated that successful mentors are steady and involved in the mentee’s life, demonstrating respect from the youth’s viewpoint. In the review of the transcripts, a final category that emerged from the experiences of the students and graduation coaches was respect.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Respect.* GC1 stated,

The first thing I do is just start a conversation especially if I know their home life situation and see where are we at with that. Are we in a good place or are we not in a good place? If we're not then we need to talk about that and deal with it. If we're feeling good about that we start looking at grades or attendance depending on if one or both is an issue. And I try to find something positive ... even if it's "we went from a 40 to a 45 this week."

GC2 reported,

I like them. I mean I enjoy them as people and I need to remember that more because I get discouraged sometimes on the decisions they're making outside of school or even in school. But I don't think they can make better decisions if they don't feel appreciated, valued and loved. They make me laugh. Sometimes I feel like I shouldn't even be paid ... just when the day is going to be miserable and you think "I don't even want to come back" one of them will come by and visit and they're happy and want to tell me they're doing well. I like them ... in spite of their bad decisions I like them.

*Student interview transcripts: Respect.* Student 10 stated, "She looked at my academics and tried to see how I feel, how my emotions are and if I was upset, she would ask about it. If I didn't want to talk, she would leave it alone." Student 2 said,

She lowers my anxiety. She is the only adult that understands it. She noticed that during some activities I had a lot anxiety but she would push me to do it anyway. She would never let me not finish. Sometimes she would go with me to complete activities if she knew I absolutely could not do it on my own but she never pushed me too far.

*Field observation: Respect.* The graduation coaches demonstrated respect for each of the students in discussion and how they treated students. The graduation coaches would listen intently, not interrupting the students as they spoke. The graduation coaches did not pass judgement on the students or their decisions but did share the outcomes or possible outcomes of their decisions. The graduation coaches provided guidance when students asked for it to resolve concerns they shared and reminded them they would understand any decision made after meeting with them. Student 5, in speaking with the graduation coach, was visibly upset and ended the discussion with the graduation coach. The graduation coach did not pursue the discussion, only reminding her that if she wanted to continue with her talk, she was welcome to come back. Prior to the end of the observation period, the student returned to finish her discussion. The graduation coach respected her decision to end the talk and return to it when she was ready.

**Self-efficacy.** The last theme that emerged from careful review of the transcripts from both graduation coaches and students was that of self-efficacy. Bandura et al. (1996) defined self-efficacy as the belief in one's ability to learn or perform a task at a certain level. It also reflects an individual's confidence in their ability to exert control over their motivation, behavior, and social environment.

This definition is supported by research from Happel (2006) when she reported that less than 50% of the students in a survey reported that they knew a teacher or counselor they felt comfortable talking with about personal problems. Archambault et al. (2009) reported that dropping out is a process resulting from a gradual psychological disengagement from school and its related demands. Considering that self-efficacy is defined in part by a person's belief in their ability, the gradual disengagement will result

from various factors within the school environment that the graduation coach must focus on to keep students in school in order to graduate. The areas that supported the theme of self-efficacy that emerged were encouragement, goal setting, and modeling.

**Self-efficacy: Encouragement.** The first category that was revealed upon reviewing the transcripts was the perception of encouragement by the student and the perception of encouragement provided by the graduation coach. Gist and Mitchell (1992) reported that ability or perception of ability can be affected by those in the environment and information gathered from external feedback can influence self-efficacy. Other feedback may not be academically directed but focuses on convincing the individual they can perform at a certain level.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Encouragement.* GC1 reported that at times, to build confidence,

sometimes it's a matter of stepping back and giving them a couple days and then approaching it in a way that lets them think it's their idea to start with.

Sometimes it's finding the person in this building that they do relate to and working with that adult.

GC1 also reported, "I think the biggest part of my job and the most important part to me is making sure they feel confident about themselves and their basic needs are being met."

GC1 stated that encouragement at times means fighting family perception:

I think for this area our biggest challenge is combatting that cycle in the family of dropping out, having a seriously low paying job, and depending on the government. That constant cycle or having children when they're in high school, overcoming that so that they see there is a better life out there and how do I get to

it. And it's not as far away as it seems. I have one sweet child who has plans and is already accepted to nursing school. She is already looking at houses online. She looked at me and said "I can never afford a house like that." I told her you're going to be a nurse and that is well within the realm of possibility for you without ever getting married, just you, you're going to be a nurse. Just seeing they can get there ... that it's not impossible.

GC1 reported,

We pull on past experiences where they've accomplished something. A lot of it goes back to there are very few students who are incapable of completing the work that is in front of them simply because we offer a lot of different types of classes. We track the students, so the students are placed in classes based on ability. So, we do a pretty good job of placing them correctly. So most of it has been not that they can't do it, it's just they have a perception they can't finish it, it's too much in a short period of time. So, we pull up a time in their life where they felt overwhelmed before, what were some things they had done to feel successful in that situation? In the case of some of these kids I've worked with since 7th grade I just sit down and tell them to get it done. Sometimes we're so close to each other there's a trust there that I wouldn't put them in a position to not be successful and I remind them of that. I remind them ... "Trust me, this can get done, I wouldn't put you in a position where you would fail."

*Student interview transcripts: Encouragement.* Student 1 said,

You can't do anything without your education. That's the main thing and no one can take that away from you. I hated school but working with my graduation

coach made my senior year the best I had. I finally got the help I needed. No matter what she was by my side.

Student 5 reported,

She shows me every time I improve, she is happy to tell me, “I told you that you can do it.” She continues to push me. She sets me on the right path pushing me to find it myself, shows me what I need to do and what I can do to go farther than I thought.

Student 7 said, “She is there to help us graduate and motivate us and push us harder. This is to help us have a good job and be productive in the workforce.”

*Field observation: Encouragement.* The graduation coaches encouraged the students they met with during the observations. The graduation coaches were positive and reminded students that they could still graduate and make up seat time. Students 1, 7, 9, and 10 during the observations had expressed concern that they would not graduate due to grades or work that needed to be made up or seat time. The graduation coaches sat with them and discussed options for them to be able to complete their work or fill their seat time, and it was accompanied with comments such as “you can do this” or “you are closer than you think.” Other comments were that they were not giving up on the student and they would not let the student give up. The statements were positive and encouraging; and through their efforts, the students each agreed to a plan to finish their requirements. The graduation coaches were also encouraging when directing students to talk to teachers at the school. They assured the students the teachers would listen to them and guided them in how to approach the teachers. The discussion was again positive as the teacher discussed the student’s role and responsibility and their need to reach out to

staff. The encouragement provided seemed to serve as an avenue to provide students the confidence to talk with staff other than the graduation coach to complete requirements for a course.

**Self-efficacy: Goal setting.** Another category that emerged from the perceptions of the students and graduation coaches was goal setting. Schunk (1996) reported that self-efficacy is enhanced when students perceive they are making progress toward their goals, and Rhodes (2006) reported that mentees benefit from being involved in determining goals and activities and this sense of empowerment will predict greater relationship quality and duration.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Goal setting.* GC1 reported, We start looking at grades or attendance depending on if one or both is an issue. And I try to find something positive ... even if it's "we went from a 40 to a 45 this week." We need something to celebrate and I try to send them away from me with step-by step "here's what you need to do to continue to improve and I want you to come back and let me know how this is going." Even if it's just breaking down "hey you're missing these 3 assignments. Do these 3 minor ones and then we'll look at this test. Let's do these 3 small ones really quick." Then we've had some success before we study for the test. These kids dig themselves a hole and can't figure out how to get out and we have to establish goals they can work toward. Sometimes part of that discussion is countering what they hear at home. Because they're hearing "you might as well drop out, you're never going to graduate, you're not going to pass that, you might as well go to work." I spend a lot of time countering failure at home. That can be up uphill battle. That is one of

the biggest challenges of this job. Battling what they hear over and over from the people who are supposed to care about them.

GC2 reported,

A lot of times if ... it varies from student to student. I have one student who gets very overwhelmed with the amount of work that has to be finished. So, a lot of times we will create a calendar or plan of attack. Like I have a senior right now who has to finish one virtual school class. He got kicked out of his second so he's having to start Odysseyware and he still has recovery for class so we make a plan and an agenda. But it depends on the student. It depends if they're feeling overwhelmed because there's too much to do or they can't do it. "Do this 1st, do this 2nd and do this 3rd." It depends on how long I've known the students, what their problems are, are they dealing with anxiety or family issues? There are times where family environment and home environment is the issue so we can even rearrange their schedule.

*Student interview transcripts: Goal setting.* Student 2 said,

I had a lot of stuff going on at home and so I stopped caring and I stopped showing up. She met with me and helped me set up a plan to graduate. She put it in my head it was possible to graduate. She has given me confidence that I can do things even when I am scared.

Student 4 stated,

I lack motivation in school. Having a graduation coach to set boundaries that I can stay inside of and follow helps me be successful. Since I started working with her, I have gone from the bottom of my class and moved up 40 or 50 spots.

Student 6 said,

She informs me of things I might not know like my grades or am I getting credit for a class. She gets me beforehand and helps me make a plan like contacting the teacher to get my work or getting extra credit.

Student 7 stated,

She sat me at a desk and talked with me about what I had to do to graduate. She helped me lay out a format of what needed to get done and when and built a one-on-one relationship with me that encouraged me to graduate.

*Field observation: Goal setting.* The graduation coaches at each school were involved with goal setting with students they met with during the observations. The graduation coaches met with students to set both personal goals for after graduation and goals to help them graduate. The graduation coaches worked with Students 7 and 10 to set goals for meeting requirements for graduation. The graduation coaches worked with the students to set up online classes to complete some credits, worked with the student and a staff member to complete either work or seat time, and helped them set up the time line to complete the requirements. The graduation coaches utilized comments such as “you can’t do it all at once. We are going to have to prioritize what needs to be completed first.” The graduation coach also worked to set up goals with students to help them with life after graduation. The graduation coach worked with a student (Student 2) to help him with jobs after high school. Student 2 worked with his graduation coach to work with the school district for a possible position and with the state for a possible position. During their discussion, the student stated he did not intend to attend college.

**Self-efficacy: Modeling.** The next category that emerged from review of the

transcripts was modeling by the graduation coach and the student and graduation coach perceptions of modeling. Rhodes (2006) reported that effective mentors must be able to model and encourage skills and appropriate behavior. Little et al. (2010) indicated that mentors serve as role models, and Schunk (1996) indicated that self-efficacy can be impacted by multiple factors to include modeling and assistance received.

*Graduation coach interview transcripts: Modeling.* GC1 stated,

A lot of times the teenagers here who think they can't do something it's because they feel overwhelmed by it so a lot of times, we break things down. We chunk it into smaller portions that can be easily accomplished that and once they can see that quick success in something, they can move on to something a little bit bigger. Like Dave Ramsey's Snowball Effect if you start with something and you have to see that quick success or you're not going to keep going so we do that a lot especially with seniors this time of year where they're all overwhelmed. That's something I've always done. Even when I was in the classroom. Sometimes it was the truth and sometimes I would lie to them. This is something that I'm going to tell 6th graders: All my 8th graders accomplished this last year so I know ya'll can do this. It's just building that "oh, we accomplished that and 8th grade had a hard time with it last year" so when I give them the next thing it's "oh, we got this, we've already mastered that." We do a lot of skill building. I see a lot with my kids on how to approach an adult to get help. Because a lot of these kids are coming from families who don't know how to do that appropriately. So then my kids go to their teacher and they have the same attitude their parents have always had and their teachers don't take it well and they get offended and it just

builds that negative relationship in the classroom. So, we do a lot of “how do you ask a teacher, show me how you’re going to ask for this” or I’ll tell them “now this is how you do it. You can throw me under the bus on this one, blame it on me.”

GC2 said,

We do a lot of meetings about grade recovery and those meetings are short. We do some graduation planning, those tend to be longer. And then there are times we meet for an hour and a half in a small group talking and visiting with each other. Sometimes they tell me they’re going to drop out when they’re 17. But I say “in the meantime why don’t we do this and talk about the positive of passing and making good grades.” Then when they’re finished, they say “I only have one more year and it’s not so miserable.” Most of it is being very trauma-informed and what I do, trauma-informed care or best practices in dealing with trauma is compassion, choice to allow them to ... gain empowerment. Three things that I try to basically always operate on: choice, compassion and there’s a 3rd one and I try to do it but I can’t remember the actual term. Being very trauma-informed, providing them with a safe environment, and giving them support without threatening their boundaries so they feel safe.

*Student interview transcripts: Modeling.* Student 10 said,

When it gets close to graduation if your grades aren’t there, she meets with you and talks with you teacher and sets up a plan to help us graduate. She shows us how to talk with the teacher. She explains the work to us without giving us the answers and we can talk with her if we don’t understand the work and cannot ask

the teacher.

Student 7 reported,

She sits me down one on one and lays out what I need to do and would motivate me to get it done. She breaks it down. “Get economics today and government tomorrow then we will work on English.” When I completed the smaller sections, it did feel like a sense of success.

Student 4 stated, “She is my role model in what I need to do. She showed me what I needed to do and how I needed to do it. She put the ball in my court.” Student 3 reported, “She shows me my options and shows me what I have access to both in school and after school. She has shown me if I can do this, I can do that next.”

*Field observations: Modeling.* The graduation coaches worked with their students modeling for them how to meet academic requirements and also how to approach and work staff to meet course requirements. The graduation coach listened to the students and considered the concerns, at times complaints, they had about courses or course work. The graduation coach worked with students helping them prioritize their work, finishing classes where they would have a chance at getting credit, and discussing with them how to approach staff in classes they needed but might not pass. The graduation coaches demonstrated through conversation how to talk with staff, especially where there was tension from the student’s perspective. The graduation coaches also worked with students when they did not understand their course work. The graduation coaches worked with staff to help explain course work or worked with the student on how to use search engines to find solutions. Once the graduation coaches modeled for the students, the students were then responsible to complete the course work or meet with

a staff member.

## **Findings**

In order to present the findings, the researcher will present the data collected by addressing each research question investigated. Each research question will provide insight into the essence of the interaction between the graduation coaches and their students. The experiences and perceptions shared in interviews and surveys combined with the field observations will provide an understanding of the phenomenon that occurs during the time shared between graduation coach and student.

**1. How do the relationship building strategies used by the graduation coach influence students to remain in school?** Dropping out is a gradual process of disengagement from school and its related demands and is a result of a lack of meaningful relationships and acceptance that served as a source of frustration (Archambault et al., 2009). One of the functions of the graduation coach is to develop relationships with students that will encourage them to stay in school. In the short answer portion of the survey, students were asked if the graduation coach changed their attitude toward school; and 80% of the students responded that the graduation coach had changed their perception of school to a positive perception of school.

Respondents to the short answer portion of the survey reported the following. Student 9 reported that “she made it easier by being helpful and understanding.” Student 7 reported, “she won’t leave me alone about it and she won’t give up on me.” Student 1 stated, “Yes, I was never wanting to come to school or even do the school work until she explained nothing can take my education away from me. My senior year was my best year because of my graduation coach.” Student 5 stated, “Yes, she helped me deal with

my anxiety about school and encouraged me throughout high school. She helped me find ways to deal with my anxiety.”

Students in school who receive mentoring, creating a positive relationship, show improved attendance and a positive disposition toward school. A key to the mentoring relationship is building a sense of connectedness to the mentor; and students who have a positive relationship with their mentor desire more time with them, decreasing the chance of dropping out (Lan & Lantheir, 2003; Little et al., 2010). In the survey taken by the students, Questions 6 and 11 represent student perceptions of acceptance and caring. One hundred percent of students strongly agreed that the graduation coach made them feel like they belonged, and 90% of the students reported the graduation coach cares about them. These data support that the graduation coach is creating for these students a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Question 11 addressed student perceptions of the graduation coach’s ability to influence or persuade them. Ninety percent of the students strongly agreed that their graduation coach could influence them. Question 14 addressed the students feeling that the graduation coach was an important person in their lives. Eighty percent of the students strongly agreed that the graduation coach was an important person in their lives. Question 12 addressed the frequency of contact with their graduation coach, with 70% of students indicating they strongly agreed that their graduation coach meets with them regularly.

**2. How do mentees perceive and describe their relationship with the graduation coach?** In order to develop a sense of influence in the students, they must feel that the quality of the relationship is positive with an unconditional regard for them.

They need to feel they can trust their mentor, in this case the graduation coach, to feel a sense of connectedness to develop strong relationships (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Rhodes, 2008; Rowley, 1999).

Results from the survey reveal from Questions 1 and 2 that the students felt they could trust their graduation coach. Of the students surveyed, 100% of the students strongly agreed that they were treated with respect and felt they could trust their graduation coach. Results from Question 4 revealed 90% of the students strongly agreed the graduation coach was positive when meeting with them, and Question 16 revealed 90% of students strongly agreed their graduation coach was honest with them.

Respondents to the short answer section of the survey reported positive relationships. Student 8 reported that “she is kind, patient, understanding and personable. She always made sure I was OK emotionally. She cares about me beyond the paper work.” Student 2 reported,

She has been with me for several years and we have grown closer. She encourages me when I feel like I cannot go on or school gets the better of me. I believe her because she helps me find better ways of dealing with school.

Student 6 reported, “She tells me like it is and is my rock. She is like a mother to me. She helps me when I cannot go to anyone else.” Student 4 reported, “She always listens and finds a way to help me no matter what.”

**3. How has the graduation coach’s relationship building strategies affected the student’s perception of their own self-efficacy?** Researchers have shown that mentoring programs produce positive outcomes for youth including self-perception, academic performance, and social acceptance. Tapping into students’ internal motivation

by engaging in challenging tasks where they can take ownership can promote positive development (Anastasia et al., 2012; Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). Alderfer (1969) discussed in his ERG theory the importance of relatedness where acceptance, confirmation, understanding, and influence are part of the process of performance, and Arnolds and Boshoff (2002) stated individual attributes like self-concept are more important determinants of performance. Self-efficacy refers to what a person believes they can do on a certain task, a person's judgement of their ability, and where they will avoid tasks they deem too difficult and attend to tasks they believe they can accomplish (Bandura et al., 2008; Harrison et al., 1997).

Graduation coaches, through their relationship building strategies, can have an impact on student perceptions of their ability to successfully complete tasks. They do this by utilizing recognition, confirmation, and influence to guide students to improve their concept of their self-efficacy.

**Results from the survey.** Question 3 revealed that 100% of students believed the graduation coach provides positive feedback to support and motivate. From Question 7, 80% of students strongly agree the graduation coach modeled how to be successful at school. From Question 8, 90% of students perceived the graduation coach does not give up on them. From Question 9, 100% of the students strongly agreed the graduation coach motivates them to do their best. From Question 10, 70% of the students strongly agreed the graduation coach can influence or persuade them. From Question 13, 90% of students strongly agree that they valued the feedback given by the graduation coach. From Question 15, 90% of students strongly agree the graduation coach helped them build confidence in their ability to learn. From Question 17, 100% of the students

strongly agreed the graduation coach helped them understand tasks and how to complete the tasks.

Respondents to the short answer section of the survey replied: Student 1 reported, “She will go out of her way to help any student and she will be sure you have what you need to be successful.” Student 6 stated, “She has changed my mind about school. She has shown me my options and helped me graduate by getting me to stick with school.” Student 5 reported, “She doesn’t let me slack or doubt myself in any way and she is always there when I need her.” Student 9 stated, “She is very encouraging, and she goes over my goals and accomplishments. She helps me set up my plans to achieve my goals.” Student 4 reported, “She motivates me and tells me how well I can do and pushes me to do my best.” Student 10 stated, “She helps me with work in school I don’t understand. She helps me understand the work that I couldn’t do on my own and helped me plan for my career.”

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the findings from the data collected from interviews with graduation coaches and students, surveys of students, and field observations. The data collected from this study yielded insight into the phenomenon that occurred when the graduation coach met with their students. The perceptions and experiences of both the graduation coaches and the students provided a window to view the phenomenon. The descriptions of perceptions and experiences provided by both added to the rich descriptions that were in the analysis of the data. After thorough review of the data collected from the interviews and the surveys, the data were coded and three main themes emerged: frequency of contact, quality of the relationship, and self-efficacy. Each of the

themes were critical in understanding the perceptions and experiences of both graduation coaches and students in the role the relationship building strategies played in student dispositions and self-efficacy. The three research questions were addressed and supported by the data collected.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Summary**

Due to the significant challenges faced by those students who do not graduate and gain a diploma, it is essential that each student is provided with the needed supports to graduate with a diploma. Those students who do not achieve a diploma or drop out create challenges for themselves and the community in which they live. They have an increased chance to face incarceration and become addicted to drugs and have higher health care costs with limited access to health care (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Today's students also face ever-increasing competition for jobs in a global society where information technology demands that the students graduate from high school with a diploma with the necessary skills to enter college or the work force (Canton, 2006; Cornish, 2004; Wagner, 2008). Local and state policy makers and educators must recognize this challenge and work to reduce the dropout rate to provide our students with the opportunity to gain meaningful employment or a chance to attend college to further their education.

The district under study has implemented an initiative to utilize graduation coaches to provide personalization of the school environment and enable students to be known by at least one caring adult who can positively influence student dispositions toward school and the student's self-efficacy. Kortering et al. (1998) reported that dropping out was seen as a lack of meaningful relationships and a lack of acceptance at school which led to school serving as a source of frustration and a place that hurt a student's self-efficacy. Testerman (1996) supported this view in her research which held that student self-esteem improved after dropping out. This view by students indicates a

need for a personalized environment where at least one caring individual is there to support them without judging them and respecting who they are and the challenges they face to create a sense of connectedness to the school to decrease the chance of the student dropping out (Coyne-Foresi, 2015; Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005; Lan & Lantheir, 2003).

This phenomenological study is a qualitative design based on the work of Moustakas (1994) and was used to investigate the effect of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies on 10 students selected from their caseloads. Based on the theoretical framework of Maslow and Alderfer's concept of systems of need, Bandura's social cognitive theory with a focus on self-efficacy and research models of mentoring, the study was designed to hear the voices and explore the experiences of graduation coaches and students. Hence, the researcher was able to capture the essence of the impact of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies on the students and their influence on the students' dispositions. These findings were the result of descriptive narratives from interviews and surveys from graduation coaches and students that were transcribed providing insight into the experiences of both. The findings from this study indicate that the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies had an impact on student decisions to stay in school and demonstrated the effect of those strategies on student dispositions and self-efficacy.

### **Findings from Surveys, Research Questions, and Conclusions**

**Research Question 1 discussion.** The first research question focused on the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies and their influence on students to remain in school. The data were gathered through student interviews and student surveys and provided insight into student perceptions. Questions that specifically addressed this

area were student survey short answer Question 21, where 90% of students felt that the graduation coach had changed their views of school and student interview Question 10, where 80% indicated that the graduation coach had influenced their disposition about school. The students indicated that the graduation coach helped them see the importance of graduating and how it could affect their future. They also indicated that the graduation coach motivated them to do their best. In the student survey, Questions 9 and 10 asked specifically about motivation and influence. Question 9, “my graduation coach motivates me to do my best,” to which 100% responded strongly agreed and Question 10, “my graduation coach can influence and persuade me,” to which 70% strongly agreed indicate that the graduation coaches’ relationship building strategies can and do influence their dispositions. The data found that the graduation coach had an influence on them and their decision to stay in school.

**Research Question 2 discussions.** The second research question focused on how students perceive and describe their relationship with their graduation coach. Through the survey and interviews with the students, two overarching themes emerged, quality of the relationship and frequency of contact. Quality of the relationship was comprised of five components: emotional closeness, acceptance, positive attitude, trust, and respect/honesty. Frequency of contact was comprised of two components: persistence and students take responsibility. Each student had their own experiences that were shared due to individual circumstances that affected their interactions with the graduation coach. The data indicated that the graduation coach, through their relationship building strategies, was able to connect to students on a personal level to provide them a sense of emotional closeness and connectedness with them.

**Research Question 3 discussion.** Research Question 3 examined the graduation coach's relationship building strategies and the effect they had on student sense of self-efficacy. Through the survey and interviews with the students, the overarching theme of self-efficacy emerged comprised of three components: encouragement, goal setting, and modeling. Though each student described the graduation coach's influence differently based on their own circumstances, the data indicate that the graduation coach was able to help them work through their own circumstances and improve their sense of self-efficacy.

The overarching themes identified in this study (emotional closeness, frequency of contact, and self-efficacy) demonstrated the effect of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies with each student. Alderfer (1969) indicated that as one finds support in relatedness needs, one no longer lacks support and the relationship allows one to find support and share the complex parts of life. Bandura et al. (2008) stated the beliefs that one holds about their abilities affect the quality of their functioning. Gist and Mitchell (1992) reported that people weigh diverse sources of information about their abilities and regulate their choices accordingly; and when one feels they have little or no control over external forces, it can lead to anxiety or learned helplessness. It is here the effect of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies can be observed when they make the personal connection to their students and provide opportunities for growth.

### **Relationship to Other Literature**

The value of this study can be seen in other literature that is available to be examined. This section will bridge this current study to other literature and demonstrate the need for further research on graduation coaches' relationship building strategies to

help students succeed in the education setting. This section will connect the identified themes to the current literature on each topic.

**Frequency of contact.** Frequency of contact was a theme that emerged from this study and serves as the foundation to build relationships with students. Two areas identified as areas of frequency of contact are persistence and students taking responsibility. Deutsch and Spencer (2009) reported that the foundation of mentoring relationships lies in the frequency of the contact and the closeness of the connection with the mentor. Greater opportunities for contact create greater opportunities for positive change. Mentoring relationships become closer over time and mentees feel comfortable disclosing personal problems. The frequency of contact can influence processes of change through modeling desired behavior, meaningful dialogue, and conversation (Dang & Miller, 2013; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005). Rowley (1999) reported that a good mentor is committed to the role of mentoring in helping mentees find success in their work where persistence is important. Ninety percent of students in the student survey strongly agreed that the graduation coach did not give up on them, demonstrating persistence; and 90% of students in the student survey strongly agreed that the graduation coach helped them take responsibility for choices. Students in both the student survey and the student interview reported that the graduation coach was persistent, stating, “she won’t leave me alone and she won’t give up on me.” Their graduation coach is always there when they need them, and they do not allow them to slack off in any way.

**Quality of relationships.** Quality of relationships was a theme that emerged in this study and serves as a powerful strategy for building and maintaining relationships with students. The research on the impact of student dropouts on students and their

communities is clear as described in current research and the outlook is grim for those who do not graduate. Fan et al. (2011) reported that student perceptions of school are shaped by features in the school environment and by their own experiences, and Neild et al. (2007) reported that students send distress signals that indicate they are a dropout risk as early as sixth grade. This suggests that dropping out is a process over time that can be corrected. It becomes important in this light that the school experience is personalized for the student both academically and socially.

Several areas identified as components of the quality relationships that can impact a student's decision to stay in school are emotional closeness and acceptance. Dubois and Silverthorn (2005) stated that "the development of an emotional bond characterized by mutuality and empathy is a necessary condition for mentors to have a positive influence on youth" (p. 71). As adolescents develop, they may experience a decline in feelings of connectedness, and the best response is to surround them with supportive and caring adults where the development of a close relationship with a mentor may strengthen feelings of well-being (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Neild, 2009). This emotional closeness was described in this study as students referred to their graduation coach as a mother figure and that they were kind and understanding and they were always there when students needed them. Acceptance was another component of quality relationships, which was reported to be an essential feature of a caring adult. Rowley (1999) stated that the good mentor is accepting, showing empathy without judging the mentee. The caring adult should also demonstrate respect for family, class, and culture of the mentee (Anastasia et al., 2012). One hundred percent of the students in the student survey strongly agreed that their graduation coach made them feel like they belonged. Students

reported in the student survey and in the student interviews that their graduation coach is welcoming, talks to them when needed, and helps them with both academic and personal concerns.

Other areas identified as components for the theme of emotional closeness that impact the quality of the relationship also include a positive attitude, trust, and respect/honesty. Rowley (1999) indicated that a good mentor communicates hope and optimism, and an essential characteristic is the ability to communicate mentees are capable of overcoming challenges to accomplish great things. Ninety percent of students reported in the student survey that their graduation coach was positive when meeting with them. Students reported both on the student survey and in the student interviews that their graduation coach was positive, always smiling, and helped them through both personal and academic problems while helping students remain positive about their future.

Trust and honesty/respect were also identified in the current study as essential to the quality of relationship. Happel (2006) reported that in a survey, less than 50% of students knew a counselor or teacher they felt comfortable talking with about personal problems. This speaks to issues of trust and honesty; for those students, the lack of one caring adult at the school they could talk with about personal problems. When one caring adult is available and there is a reliability in the contact with the student, the foundation of trust is developed considering many at-risk students have experienced disruptions in important relationships. Providing challenge within the context of support helps build trust and respect. This trust and respect is demonstrated by showing interest in and valuing the student's thoughts and feelings (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). One

hundred percent of students in the student survey responded that they strongly agreed the graduation coach treated them with respect, and 100% of students in the student survey indicated they strongly agreed they trust their graduation coach. Ninety percent of students in the student survey indicated they strongly agreed that their graduation coach was honest with them.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy was a theme that emerged in this study, and building a student's capacity to believe they can succeed in the school setting empowers the student to graduate. Considering the study focuses on relationships, there is evidence in the literature that relates to the effect of relationships on self-efficacy identified in this study: encouragement, goal setting, and modeling. Bandura et al. (2008) defined self-efficacy as the belief that one holds about their abilities affects the quality of their functioning. Watching others can impact one's self-efficacy since people partly judge their ability in relation to others, but modeling appears to be an effective strategy in providing correct strategies. Verbal feedback was also shown to influence self-efficacy including nonspecific feedback provided that focuses on convincing the individual through emotional or cognitive appeal that they can perform a specific task (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Learning goals and progress toward those goals also leads to higher task orientation which was determined through skill acquisition allowing a student to measure their progress against past performance and their perceived performance (Schunk, 1996). Referenced in ERG theory relatedness needs are one's desire to maintain important relationships, social acceptance and belongingness; and if one's relatedness needs cannot be met by a significant other, the need will be transferred to another (Alderfer, 1969; Arnolds & Boshoff, 2002). Eighty percent of students in the student survey strongly

agreed that their graduation coach modeled how to be successful in school; 100% of students in the student survey strongly agreed their graduation coach provided them positive feedback and motivated them to do their best; 90% of students in the student survey strongly agreed the graduation coach builds their confidence in their ability to learn. The students in both the student survey and the student interviews commented that 100% of students strongly agreed the graduation coach models how they can be successful in school when they do not feel successful, and 90% of students strongly agreed the graduation coach helps them understand tasks and how to successfully complete them.

The research and the literature have shown students staying in school are influenced by the relationships developed in the school setting and for the purposes of this study the relationship building strategies of the graduation coach. A deeper understanding of the effect of the relationship building strategies of the graduation coach is beneficial to student achievement and student graduation. This study added to the literature by providing an examination of the influence of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies which involved an understanding of the experiences of their students and the indicators and influences that may lead to student dropout.

### **Implications for Change**

This study provided evidence that the relationship building strategies of the graduation coaches were effective and had a positive impact on student dispositions toward school and their self-efficacy. Findings of this study provide information on the relationship building strategies of graduation coaches and the efficacy of these strategies to keep students in school on track for graduation. The use of the results from this study

will assist the schools involved in the study and the district to support at-risk high school students and develop and implement relationship building strategies to help improve student dispositions toward school and to help students graduate. The findings in this study will also allow the schools of study and other high schools to improve the educational outcomes of high school students by providing insight into the effect of the relationship building strategies by graduation coaches helping students graduate and earn their diploma.

The graduation coaches presented multiple strategies that can be implemented in schools in this district and others that read this research. The first strategy that can be implemented is an increase in the frequency of contact with at-risk students in the schools with a caring adult committed to working with them. There is a necessity for the students to be connected to a caring adult. Kortering et al. (1998) reported that school dropouts were seen as a lack of meaningful relationships and acceptance that created the perception that high school was a place of frustration for a student. Little et al. (2010) reported that students placed importance on the time their mentor spent with them. This combination of a commitment to spending time with the student and providing a sense of caring creates a positive experience for students, keeping them in school.

Another strategy for schools is having a caring adult working with students to enhance their desire to remain in school and succeed by focusing on student self-efficacy. Bandura et al. (2008) reported that teachers observed a decline in student performance across grade levels in student self-efficacy, and this decline was magnified if the teacher doubted the student's ability. The need to build and support student feelings of self-efficacy is evident. Strategies that were highlighted in this research were utilizing

positive feedback, modeling the proper skill, and the ability to influence the student.

Schunk (1996) supported these practices in his work stating positive feedback can enhance self-efficacy but can be limited if continued attempts at a task end in failure.

Schunk further contended that self-efficacy can be impacted and improved by external assistance, modeling, and perception of ability influenced by persuader credibility. The research in this study demonstrated that the caring adult who works with them, their graduation coach, could influence students and their self-efficacy.

Building emotional closeness was a strategy that students in this research valued with their graduation coach. They reported a sense of belonging and sense of caring that connected them to the graduation coach. GC1 stated it was an organic process that took time and the student had to know you were invested in them and cared about them.

Research supports the view that dropping out is a gradual process of disengagement over time that is impacted by not fitting in, a perception that no one cared, and having the feeling that there is no one in school they could talk to about their problems

(Archambault et al., 2009; Happel, 2006; Meeker et al., 2008). Having the sense of emotional closeness for the students in this study for more than academic reasons provided the students the opportunity to talk with a caring adult about not only school but also personal matters.

Graduation coaches or district personnel can implement these recommended changes. The impact for students can be seen in this study and the supporting research. Students who receive a sense of belonging and connectedness by a caring adult with support in building their own self-efficacy are better positioned to be successful in school and to graduate. Although this study focused on the effects of the graduation coach,

these same practices of forming a close personal relationship between a student and a significant adult in school could be replicated with counselors, teachers, and other adult role models in the school.

One approach to district-wide implementation that can affect student outcomes is to establish communication among key stakeholders to share the practices that have been developed and utilized by the graduation coaches. The insights gained by the graduation coaches in developing relationships could prove valuable to students' core teachers by creating a shared understanding of the student's social emotional well-being within the school and across the school district. The experience the graduation coaches will be able to share will be insights they have gained from the strategies used for frequent contact, caring, and emotional closeness. This applied research will support collaboration among administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers by providing authentic strategies that are supported by research and have been proven effective by the graduation coaches in practice with students. This can demonstrate to district and school leadership and teachers in the classroom that these best practices utilized by the graduation coaches can make a difference one student at a time.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Recommendations for further study arise from the study findings and the limitation in the study design.

Recommendation: Due to the small sample size of this study from two high schools in the district studied, replication of the study should involve a greater population size involving multiple grade levels and multiple schools.

Recommendation: In the schools studied, both graduation coaches were female in

gender. Replication of this study should also include males in the role of graduation coach to determine if there is a difference in how the relationships are developed and to determine how the relationships are experienced with males in the role of graduation coach.

Recommendation: Restructuring the methodology to reflect a longitudinal study design would provide greater insight into the impact of the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies. The study should follow students from ninth grade to graduation to better determine how the relationships are developed and how the relationship evolved up until the student graduates.

Recommendation: The study methodology could include students who have had no contact with the graduation coach and compare their experiences with students who were served by the graduation coach. The researcher would try to identify other sources that served in the place of the graduation coach and how relationships evolved to support those students not served by the graduation coach.

## **Conclusion**

The need for students to graduate with a diploma in order to have the best opportunities beyond high school has been stressed throughout this study. As students transition from middle school to high school, the bonds formed in middle school are lost and they must navigate the new social relationships, practices, and routines of a new school. Student perceptions are formed by factors in the school environment and their own perceptions. As a result of these perceptions, school dropout was seen as a lack of meaningful relationships and acceptance which led to school serving as a source of frustration (Kortering et al., 1998; Neild, 2009; Neild et al., 2007).

The need for a sense of belonging and a personal connection was necessary for students to have a sense of connectedness and develop strong relationships that would serve to help them build their own self-efficacy and change their dispositions about school to support them until graduation. It is evident that students need at least one caring adult in the school setting who will accept them without judgement and work with them to build their sense of efficacy and help influence their dispositions. In this role, the research demonstrated the graduation coaches were successful.

The graduation coach as a position was implemented 6 years ago in the school system in which the study was conducted and has evolved in the implementation in subsequent years. This study was needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the relationship building strategies of the graduation coaches to determine their impact on their students' decisions to graduate. The conclusions from this study are based on the qualitative data analysis through the use of a phenomenological model in which student and graduation coach experiences were examined.

The study produced several major findings that positively impacted students that related to the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies. The students reported their perceptions and experiences through surveys and interviews that the quality of the relationship with their graduation coach was positive. Ninety to 100% of students in the student survey strongly agreed that they felt they had a sense of emotional closeness with the graduation coach and felt accepted. They also felt their graduation coach trusted and respected them and when meeting with them were honest. Seventy percent of the students, however, strongly agreed that the graduation coach could influence them. One student in particular reported that they did not like school and did not fit in but through

meeting with the graduation coach saw the benefits of earning their diploma. Several students reported that they had the dropout paperwork in their hand, but the graduation coach took it from them and threw it in the trash. The best outcomes for students occur through the development of strong relationships where the mentor accepts the student without judging them, developing respect and trust between mentor and student (Anastasia et al., 2012; Rhodes, 2008; Rowley, 1999). Although for these students, their disposition about school had not changed, but the graduation coach was able to influence their decision to graduate and this was a positive result for the student.

Another finding of the study was the desire of students for frequency of contact with their graduation coach. One hundred percent of students in the survey strongly agreed the graduation coach would not give up on them, demonstrating the graduation coach's persistence. Several students reported that if they were not in school, the graduation coach would call or show up at their homes; and if they were behind in their classwork, the graduation coach would follow up with them, with one student reporting "She won't leave me alone about it." Seventy percent of the students in the survey strongly agreed that the graduation coach meets with them regularly. This was one of the lowest student response areas, but the nature of the meetings play a role in some students feeling they needed more time with the graduation coach. The graduation coaches reported that initial meetings were longer; but unless there was a need, meetings were 10-20 minutes in length or students popped in to meet with them. An enduring and reliable frequency of contact is reported to set the foundation for trust. This provides opportunities for positive change through modeling and conversation, developing relationships that become closer over time with positive outcomes for the student (Dang

& Miller, 2013; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Kupersmidt et al., 2016). The reported data indicate positive impacts on the students based on the graduation coaches' persistence and availability.

Another finding of the study was the effect graduation coaches' relationship building strategies had on student sense of self-efficacy. Eighty to 100% of students strongly agreed that the graduation coach provided positive feedback, motivating them to do their best while setting high expectations and making them feel successful in school. The students also reported in the survey that the graduation coach builds their confidence to learn by modeling how to be successful and helping them understand tasks and how to complete them. Students reported their graduation coach will not let them doubt themselves and that they are very encouraging. They also reported their graduation coach helps them set up goals and helps them understand work that they cannot complete on their own. Bandura et al. (2008) reported that the belief that one holds about their ability affects their quality of functioning and that students with higher self-efficacy set high expectations for themselves and achieved better academically. The reported data indicate positive impacts on student self-efficacy based on the graduation coaches' intervention.

This study suggests that the graduation coaches' relationship building strategies had positive impacts on student dispositions and self-efficacy. The graduation coaches' knowledge of their students, the quality of the relationships built with their students, their availability, and the development of student self-efficacy were all positively impacted as indicated in the student surveys and interviews. The positive impact on the students will provide them a pathway, through the relationship developed with their graduation coach, to graduation and enhanced opportunities for their future.

## References

- ACT. (2008). *The forgotten middle*. Iowa City, IA: Author.
- Alderfer, C. (1969). An empirical test of a new theory of human needs. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 4(2), 142-175.
- Alderfer, C., Kaplan, R., & Smith, K. (1974). The effect of variations of relatedness need satisfaction on relatedness desires. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 19(4) 507-532.
- Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Kabbani, N. (2001). The dropout process in life course perspective: Early risk factors at home and school. *Teachers College*, 103(5), 760-822.
- Alivernini, F., & Lucidi, F. (2011). Relationship between social context, self-efficacy, motivation, academic achievement, and intention to drop out of high school: A longitudinal study. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 104, 241-252.  
doi:10.1080/00220671003728062
- Anastasia, T., Skinner, R., & Mundhenk, S. (2012). Youth mentoring: Program and mentor best practices. *Journal of Family and Consumer Science*, 104(2), 38-44.
- Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Morizot, J., & Pagani, L. (2009). Adolescent behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school: Relationship to dropout. *Journal of School Health*, 79(9), 408-415.
- Arnolds, C. A., & Boshoff, C. (2002). Compensation, esteem valance and job performance: An empirical assessment of Alderfer's ERG theory. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 13(4), 697-719.  
doi:10.1080/09585190210125868

- Arslan, A. (2012). Predictive power of the sources of primary school students' self-efficacy beliefs on their self-efficacy beliefs for learning and performance. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 12*(3), 1915-1920.
- Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, V., & Pastorelli, C. (1996). Multifaced impact of self-efficacy beliefs on academic functioning. *Child Development, 67*, 1206-1222.
- Bandura, A., Caprara, G., Fida, R., Vecchione, M., Del Bove, G., Vecchio, G., & Barbaranelli, C. (2008). Longitudinal analysis of the role of perceived self-efficacy for self-regulated. learning in academic continuance and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 100*(3), 525-534.
- Becker, B. E., & Luther, S. S. (2002). Social-emotional factors affecting achievement outcomes among disadvantaged students: Closing the achievement gap. *Educational Psychologist, 37*(4), 197-214.
- Bergeson, T. (2006). Helping students finish school: Why students drop out and how to help them graduate. Retrieved September 13, 2016, from <http://www.k12.wa.us/research/pubdocs/dropoutreport2006.pdf>
- Bowers, A., & Sprott, R. (2012). Why tenth graders fail to finish high school: A dropout typology latent class analysis. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk, 17*(3), 129-148.
- Canton, J. (2006). *The extreme future*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Cornish, E. (2004). *Futuring*. Bethesda, MD: World Future Society.
- Coyne-Foresi, M. (2015). Wiz kidz: Fostering school connectedness through an in-school student mentoring program. *ASCA/Professional School Counseling, 19*(1), 68-79. doi:10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.68

- Creswell, J. (2009). *Research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dang, M., & Miller, E. (2013). Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships from the perspectives of homeless youth. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 26*, 246-253.
- Dappen, L., & Isernhagen, J. (2005). Developing a student mentoring program: Building connections for at-risk students. *Preventing School Failure, 49*(3), 21-25.
- Deutsch, N., & Spencer, R. (2009). Capturing the magic: Assessing the quality of youth mentoring relationships. *New Directions for Youth Development, 121*, 47-70.  
doi:10.1002/yd.296
- DuBois, D., & Silverthorn, N. (2005). Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and adolescent adjustment: Evidence from a national study. *The Journal of Primary Prevention, 25*(2), 69-92. doi:10.1007/s10935-005-1832-4
- Fan, W., Williams, C., & Corkin, D. (2011). A multilevel analysis of student perceptions of school climate: The effect of social and academic risk factors. *Psychology in the Schools, 48*(6), 632-648. doi:10.1002/pits.205749
- Gist, M., & Mitchell, T. (1992). Self-efficacy: A theoretical analysis of its determinants and malleability. *Academy of Management Review, 17*(2), 183-211.
- Gumora, G., & Arsenio, W. (2002). Emotionality, emotion regulation, and school performance in middle school children. *Journal of School Psychology, 40*(5), 395-413.

- Happel, T. (2006). New report illuminates America's "silent" dropout epidemic. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Retrieved July 11, 2015 from <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Press-Releases/2006/03/Americas-Silent-Dropout-Epidemic>
- Harrison, A., Rainer Jr., R., Hochwarter, W., & Thompson, K. (1997). Testing the self-efficacy: Performance linkage of social-cognitive theory. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 137*(1), 79-87.
- Helm, C. (2007). Teacher dispositions affecting self-esteem and student performance. *The Clearing House, 80*(3), 109-110.
- Hood, M. (1992). Mentoring program provides nurturing atmosphere for all adolescents. *Schools in the Middle, 1*(3), 20-22.
- Johnson, K., & Lampley, J. (2010). Mentoring at-risk middle school students. *SRATE Journal, 19*(2), 64-69.
- Kortering, L., Konold, T.R., Glutting, J. (1998). Comparing the reasons for coming to school among high school dropouts and nondropouts. *The Journal of At-Risk Issues: A Joint Publication of the National Dropout Prevention Center and Network, 5*(1), 10-15.
- Kupersmidt, J., Stump, K., Stelter, R., & Rhodes, J. (2016). Mentoring program practices as predictors of match longevity. *Wiley Journal of Community Psychology, 00*, 1-16. doi:10.1002/jcop.21883
- Lan, W., & Lantheir, R. (2003). Changes in students' academic performance and perceptions of school and self before dropping out of schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk, 8*(3), 309-332.

- Little, C., Kearney, K., & Britner, P. (2010). Students' self-concept and perceptions of mentoring relationships in a summer mentorship program for talents adolescents. *Roeper Review*, 32, 189-199. doi:10.1080/02783193.2010.485307
- Lyman, L. L. (1996). Creating a caring school environment: An administrator's story. Retrieved on July 3, 2017 from <https://ezproxy.gardner-webb.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED396413&site=ehost-live>
- McCaslin, M., & Burross, H. (2008). Student motivational dynamics. *Teacher College Record*, 110(11), 2452-2463.
- McCoy, D., Winkle-Wagner, R., & Luedke, C. (2015). Colorblind mentoring? Exploring white faculty mentoring of students of color. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 8(4), 225-242.
- McWilliams Jr., A., Everett, P. C., & Bass, M. L. (2000). A model of underlying influences on students' decisions to drop out. *The Journal of At-Risk Issues: A Joint Publication of the National Dropout Prevention Center and Network*, 7(1), 42-50.
- Meeker, S., Edmonson, S., & Fisher, A. (2008). The voices of high school dropouts: Implications for research and practice. *The International Journal on School Disaffection*, 40-52.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2011). The condition of education. Retrieved September 20, 2015, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011033.pdf>

- Neild, R. (2009). Falling off track during the transition to high school: What we know and what can be done. *Future of Children*, 19(1), 53-76.
- Neild, R., Balfanz, R., & Herzog, L. (2007). Early intervention at every age: An early warning system. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 28-33.
- O'Connor, R. (2005). Mentoring in America 2005: A snapshot of the current state of mentoring. Retrieved September 30, 2015, from <https://teammates.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Mentoring-In-America-2005.pdf>
- O'Connor, D., & Yballe, L. (2007). Maslow revisited: Constructing a road map of human nature. *Journal of Management Education*. doi:10.1177/1052562907307639
- Raposa, E., Rhodes, J., & Herrera, C. (2016). The impact of youth risk on mentoring relationship quality: Do mentor characteristics matter? *American Journal Community Psychology*, 57, 320-329. doi:10.1002/ajcp.12057
- Rhodes, J. (2006). Fostering close and effective relationships in youth mentoring programs. *Research in Action*, 4, 1-25. Retrieved September 30, 2015 from [https://www.mentoring.org/new-site/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RIA\\_ISSUE\\_4.pdf](https://www.mentoring.org/new-site/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RIA_ISSUE_4.pdf)
- Rhodes, J. (2008). Improving youth mentoring interventions through research-based practice. *American Journal Community Psychology*, 41, 35-42. doi:10.1007/s10464-007-9153-9
- Roberts, J. (2007). Gaining self-determination skills through peer mentoring between students with similar physical impairments: A case study. *Northern Lights Special Education Cooperative*, 26(1) 9-29.

- Rowley, J. (1999). Supporting good teachers: The good mentor. *Educational Leadership*, 56(8), 20-22.
- Schunk, D. H. (1996). Self-efficacy for learning and performance. Retrieved September 25, 2015 from <https://ezproxy.gardner-webb.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED394663&site=ehost-live>
- Stearns, E., & Glennie, E. (2006). When and why dropouts leave high school. *Youth & Society* 38(39), 29-57. doi:10.1177/0044118X05282764
- Steinberg, M., & McCray, E. (2012). Listening to their voices: Middle schoolers' perspectives of life in middle school. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(68), 1-14.
- Testerman, J. (1996). Holding at-risk students. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(5), 1-5.
- Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Zehr, M. (2010). Rural "dropout factories" often overshadowed. *Education Week*, 29(27), 1-6.

## Appendix A

### Survey Protocol and Student Survey

## **Survey Protocol for Students**

### **Welcome**

Thank you for participating in my research. The purpose of our meeting today is for you to complete a survey that will allow me insight into the relationship you share with your graduation coach. The survey will have 33 questions with a mix of short answer and multiple choice. If you have any questions while taking the survey please ask.

### **Introductions**

Explain to participants the purpose of the dissertation, the goal of the dissertation, and what will be done with the data when collected. My purpose today is to provide you a survey. The survey will ask your opinion on multiple topics and there are no right or wrong answers. Your opinion/perception is what is important. The results of this interview will be used for my dissertation data. You were selected because you are a student served by a graduation coach at your school.

### **Guidelines**

There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

We're on a first name basis

I ask that you turn off your phone if you have it with you

My role today will be to provide you the survey and to collect it when you have completed it.

When you are ready please let me know and I will give you the survey, so you can begin.

When you feel you have completed the survey to your satisfaction I will collect it.

Begin survey

### **Student Survey**

(To be used in conjunction with interview questions and field observations.)

Please complete the following confidential questionnaire. Circle the best choice for each comment.

1. My graduation coach treats me with respect.
  - a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
  
2. I trust my graduation coach.
  - a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
  
3. My graduation coach gives me positive feedback to support and motivate me.
  - a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree

- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

4. My graduation coach is positive when they meet with me.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

5. My graduation coach sets high expectations for me.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

6. My Graduation coach makes me feel like I belong.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree

- e. Strongly Disagree
7. My graduation coach models how I can be successful at school.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
8. My graduation coach does not give up on me.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
9. My graduation coach motivates me to do my best.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree

10. My graduation coach can influence and persuade me.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

11. My graduation coach cares about me.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

12. My graduation coach meets with me regularly.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly Disagree

13. I value the feedback given by my graduation coach.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
14. My graduation coach is an important person in my life.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
15. My graduation coach helps build my confidence in my ability to learn.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree

16. I believe my graduation coach is honest with me and helps me take responsibility for my choices.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
17. When I do not feel successful at school my graduation coach models how I can be successful.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree
18. My graduation coach helps me understand tasks and how to successfully complete them.
- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neutral
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly Disagree

Please answer the following questions. All responses will be kept confidential.

19. Describe the best characteristics of your graduation coach.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
20. What has your graduation coach done to make you feel successful?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
21. Has your graduation coach changed your attitude toward school? If so how?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
22. What has your graduation coach done to develop a positive relationship with you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
23. What do you want me to know about your graduation coach that I have not asked?

Your participation is greatly appreciated.

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol: Graduation Coaches

## **Interview Protocol for Graduation Coaches**

### **Welcome**

### **Introductions**

Explain to participants the purpose of the dissertation, the goal of the dissertation, and what will be done with the data when collected.

### **Our topic is**

The results of this interview will be used for my dissertation data.

You were selected because you are the graduation coach at your school.

### **Guidelines**

There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

I will be tape-recording our interview

We are on a first name basis

I ask that you turn off your phones

My role as interviewer will be to guide the discussion

### **Beginning Questions**

Please tell me your name and what you do at your school?

Date:

Location:

Interviewer:

**Questions for Graduation Coaches**

1. Describe strategies you use to build relationships with your students.
2. What is your perception of how your students feel?
3. How do you help improve the self-efficacy of students to help them believe they can be successful? Describe the strategies you feel are successful.
4. How do you create a sense of belonging for your students?
5. How often do you meet with your students? How long do you meet with them?
6. How do you identify students to work with on your caseload?
7. What is the most important thing you do for your students?
8. Have you changed student perceptions about school? What strategies do you use?
9. Describe your meetings with your students.
10. What is the greatest challenge your students face? How do you work with them to help them overcome these challenges?

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol: Students

## **Interview Protocol for Students**

### **Welcome**

### **Introductions**

Explain to participants the purpose of the dissertation, the goal of the dissertation, and what will be done with the data when collected.

### **Our topic is**

The results of this interview will be used for my dissertation data.

You were selected because you are a student served by a graduation coach at your school.

### **Guidelines**

There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

I will be tape recording our interview

We're on a first name basis

I ask that you turn off your phones

My role as interviewer will be to guide the discussion

### **Beginning Questions**

Please tell me your name:

Date:

Location:

Interviewer:

**Questions for Students**

1. Why do you think you have a graduation coach?
2. Describe your relationship with your graduation coach.
3. How does your graduation coach make you feel when you meet? What characteristics or activities with your graduation coach have a positive effect or negative effect on you?
4. How does your graduation coach meet your needs?
5. Describe the meetings you have had with your graduation coach? Do you feel they have made a difference in your decision to complete high school?
6. What does your graduation coach do to make you feel they care about you?
7. What does your graduation coach do to make you feel you can be successful in school?
8. What do you feel is the most important thing your graduation coach has done for you?
9. How often do you meet with your graduation coach?
10. Since working with your graduation coach have your views about school changed?
  - a. Probe: How have they changed and what did your graduation coach do to help change your perception?
11. Do you believe you can be successful in school?
  - a. Probe: Did your graduation coach influence your belief you can be successful?

12. What was your greatest challenge in school? Did your graduation coach help you overcome your challenge? What did they do to help you overcome your challenge?
13. Have you always felt like you belong in school?
  - a. Probe: How has it affected you?

Appendix D  
Field Observation Protocol

## **Field Observation Protocol**

### **Initial Observation/Meeting**

The researcher will be introduced to the student by the graduation coach.

### **Observation Site and Duration**

The observation site will be at each high school represented in the study. The specific site within each school will be coordinated with the graduation coach. The length of the observation will depend on the service provided the student.

### **Who Will Be Observed**

The graduation coach and a selected student will be observed during fields observations to capture the essence of their interactions.

### **Recording Data**

Data will be recorded in two ways. The first method will be using a tape recorder or voice-recording device. This will allow the researcher to revisit the interaction between graduation coach and student to explore the phenomenon in detail. The second method will be scripting the interaction of the field observation and utilizing a checklist measuring observed relationship building strategies using the following form.

**Field Observation Form**

Name of site:

Location:

Participants Observed:

Duration:

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

### Field Observation Instrument

This instrument is designed to be used during field observations to measure characteristics of the mentoring relationship. The front will be a checklist used to measure characteristics of effective mentoring and the back will be used to Take field notes.

1. The graduation coach demonstrates respect toward the student.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
2. The graduation coach demonstrates trust with the student.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
3. The graduation coach provides the student positive praise.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
4. The graduation coach demonstrates a positive attitude toward the student.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
5. The graduation coach sets goals with/for the student.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
6. The graduation coach models appropriate behaviors for the student.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
7. The graduation coach does not give up on the student during the observation.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
8. The graduation coach and student demonstrate emotional closeness.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
9. The graduation coach and student have developed a positive quality relationship.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
10. The graduation coach demonstrates honesty with the student.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
11. The graduation coach demonstrates how the student can successfully complete tasks.  
SA    A    N    D    SD
12. The graduation coach helps the student take responsibility for their decisions.  
SA    A    N    D    SD

## Appendix E

### Student and Graduation Coach Consent Form

**Gardner-Webb University IRB****Student Informed Consent Form**

Title of Study the Impact of Graduation Coach's Relationship Building Strategies on Student Dispositions and Self-efficacy.

Researcher: Mr. Rick Strickland, graduate candidate at Gardner-Webb University.

**Purpose**

Studying the phenomenon of a graduation coach's relationship building strategies and how they may influence a student's dispositions and self-efficacy to influence the decision for a student to remain in school until graduation is the purpose of the research study.

**Procedure**

What you will do in the study: As part of the study, you will be audio-taped during an interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Many of the questions will be open-ended which will allow you to answer them as you wish. At the conclusion of the interview, a survey will be distributed that comprises a total of 23 questions that should take no more than 40 minutes. You will also be directly observed in regards to your contact with the graduation coach during the day throughout the time of data collection. The researcher will record non-verbal behaviors displayed during the interaction (if any). The data from the interview, survey, and direct observation will be used to determine the influence of the graduation coach on relationship building strategies and your self-efficacy. Upon completion of each of the procedures, data collected will be disclosed to each participant and checked for accuracy. You may choose not to answer any question asked on the survey or during the interview.

**Time Required**

It is anticipated that the study will require about 4 hours of your time.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

**Confidentiality**

All information will be confidential and shared with you. Data for this study will be collected through interviews, surveys and observations. Any type of written report given as a result of this research will not identify you personally using only a code number and will be kept private; tape recordings will be available only to the researcher. Data from this study will be kept in a locked cabinet, for paper copies, and electronic data, such as voice recordings, will be kept on a private computer only. After all data is analyzed and reported, it will be destroyed. Paper copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be deleted. You will be given a copy of this confidentiality agreement.

**Data Linked with Identifying Information**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a locked file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. After all data has been analyzed and reported the audio tapes from our sessions will be destroyed.

**Anonymous Data**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.

**Risks**

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand the relationship building strategies of the graduation coaches and how they impact student dispositions and self-efficacy. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

**Payment**

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**Right to Withdraw From the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your audio (or video) tape will be destroyed.

**How to Withdraw From the Study**

- If you want to withdraw from the study, tell the researcher you no longer wish to continue in the study. You may at that time, during the interview or survey, leave the room.

- There is no penalty for withdrawing.
- If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact Rick Strickland. See contact information below.

If you have questions about the study, contact the following individuals.

Rick Strickland

College of Education

Gardner-Webb University

Boiling Springs, NC 28017

XXXXXXXXXX

Dr. Jim Palermo

College of Education

Gardner-Webb University

Boiling Springs, NC 28017

XXXXXXXXXX

If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.

Dr. Jeffrey S. Rogers

IRB Institutional Administrator

Gardner-Webb University

Boiling Springs, NC 28017

XXXXXXXXXX

### **Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the confidential survey.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the confidential survey.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the interview session(s). I understand that this interview may be audio recorded for purposes of accuracy. The audio recording will be transcribed and destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the interview session(s).

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree for my student to participate in the research study. (Required by the district in which the study will take place.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Printed Name

---

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

## Gardner-Webb University IRB

## Graduation Coach Informed Consent Form

Title of Study the Impact of Graduation Coach's Relationship Building Strategies on Student Dispositions and Self-efficacy.

Researcher: Mr. Rick Strickland, graduate candidate at Gardner-Webb University.

**Purpose**

Studying the phenomenon of a graduation coach's relationship building strategies and how they may influence a student's dispositions and self-efficacy to influence the decision for a student to remain in school until graduation is the purpose of the research study.

**Procedure**

**What you will do in the study:** As part of the study, you will be audio-taped during an interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Many of the questions will be open-ended which will allow you to answer them as you wish. You will also be directly observed in regards to your contact with the students on your caseload during the day throughout the time of data collection. The researcher will record non-verbal behaviors displayed during the interaction (if any). The data from the interviews and direct observations will be used to determine the influence of your relationship building strategies on your student's self-efficacy and disposition. Upon completion of each of the procedures, data collected will be disclosed to each participant and checked for accuracy. You may choose not to answer any question asked on the survey or during the interview.

**Time Required**

It is anticipated that the study will require about 4 hours of your time.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

**Confidentiality**

All information will be confidential and shared with you. Data for this study will be collected through interviews, surveys and observations. Any type of written report given as a result of this research will not identify you personally using only a code number and will be kept private; tape recordings will be available only to the researcher. Data from this study will be kept in a locked cabinet, for paper copies, and electronic data, such as voice recordings, will be kept on a private computer only. After all data is analyzed and reported, it will be destroyed. Paper copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be deleted. You will be given a copy of this confidentiality agreement.

**Data Linked with Identifying Information**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a *code number or pseudonym*. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a *locked file*. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. After all data has been analyzed and reported the audio tapes from our sessions will be destroyed.

**Anonymous Data**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.

**Risks**

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand the relationship building strategies of the graduation coaches and how they impact student dispositions and self-efficacy. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

**Payment**

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**Right to Withdraw From the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your audio (or video) tape will be destroyed.

**How to Withdraw From the Study**

- If you want to withdraw from the study, tell the researcher you no longer wish to continue in the study. You may at that time, during the interview or survey, leave the room.
- There is no penalty for withdrawing.
- If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact Rick Strickland. See contact information below.

**If you have questions about the study, contact the following individuals.**

Rick Strickland  
College of Education  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

Dr. Jim Palermo  
College of Education  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

**If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.**

Dr. Jeffrey S. Rogers  
IRB Institutional Administrator  
Gardner-Webb University  
Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
XXXXXXXXXXXX

**Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the confidential survey.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the confidential survey.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the interview session(s). I understand that this interview may be audio recorded for purposes of accuracy. The audio recording will be transcribed and destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the interview session(s).

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree for my student to participate in the research study. (Required by the district in which the study will take place.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Date:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Date:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.