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## Sophomores Reign On!: A Sophomore Student Success Model for Old Dominion University

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**Sophomores Reign On!:**  
**A Sophomore Student Success Model for Old Dominion University**

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Education in the Department of Educational Leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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## Abstract

The Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services at Old Dominion University (ODU) submitted a Request for Assistance to examine the challenges sophomore students face that can lead to attrition. A doctoral research team conducted an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods study consisting of a literature review, focus groups and interviews with current ODU juniors and seniors, surveys of current ODU sophomores, staff, and faculty, and interviews with benchmark institutions that have successful sophomore student programming at their schools. The team explained the commonly found needs and barriers that sophomore students face, and specifically examined the expressed sophomore student challenges as revealed by ODU students, staff, and faculty. Findings indicated that there is a lack of transitional support, sophomore student development training, and a defined sophomore student experience at ODU. In response to these findings, the team created a sophomore student success model that recommends developing a sophomore orientation program, training staff and faculty on sophomore needs and development, creating a streamlined mentoring program, evaluating current academic advising models, and designing a Sophomore Year Experience (SYE).

*Keywords:* sophomore students, identities, development, needs, barriers, student success, thriving, organizational attributes, military-affiliated students, first-generation students, students of color, transfer students

## **Chapter One: The Sophomore Student Experience**

Over the past few decades, researchers have begun to realize that one particular cohort of students gets less attention than others (Hunter et al., 2010; Nelson, 2018; Schaller, 2005; Schreiner et al., 2012; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). According to Sterling (2018), higher education institutions historically have dedicated extensive resources to helping freshmen students transition into college and providing junior and senior students with career advising and planning. Sophomores, however, are left to navigate their second year of college mostly on their own. Colleges and universities often focus so much of their efforts on the first-year student experience that sophomores may feel “abandoned” entering their second year and discover a sudden lack of support (Gahagan, 2018; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). Consequently, a growing interest has occurred in examining the personal and professional developmental stages and satisfaction levels of sophomore students (Hunter et al., 2010; Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Perez, 2020; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011, 2015; Schaller, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Schreiner, 2010a, 2010b, 2018). As a result, higher education institutions have begun to create programs and initiatives to improve the sophomore student experience.

Large public universities across the country have invested in programming to illuminate the importance of sophomore students on their campuses. For example, Purdue University offers sophomore student living learning communities where like-minded students live together, take classes together, and conduct year-long research together, all while earning a stipend for the experience (Stainburn, 2013). Institutions such as the University of Texas at Dallas, Minnesota State University, Mankato, and Colorado College offer ‘sophomore jump’ programs aimed at assisting sophomores in developing career readiness skills, such as resume building, networking, and job interview preparation (Pinchuk, 2017). These programs also encourage sophomores to

apply for internships and explore study abroad opportunities as a means to become more actively engaged and excited about college life. Recognizing that sophomore students are often overlooked nationwide, the University of South Carolina created the Institute on Sophomore Student Success. This organization offers attendees from inside and outside the university the opportunity to examine trends and practices to build “a comprehensive and intentional approach to ensure the success of sophomore students” (University of South Carolina, n.d.).

Research in this area remains limited despite growing interest in the development of sophomore success programs. While institutions that implement programs to assist sophomores must acknowledge nationwide trends, they must also tailor their programs and initiatives to the expressed needs of their student bodies (Gordon et al., 2008; Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Nelson, 2018; Pitstick, 2018; Schreiner, 2018; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Failure to address the needs of sophomore students can negatively impact retention and persistence (Blekic et al., 2020; Kranzow et al., 2015; Virtue et al., 2017; Webb & Cotton, 2018). Enrollment in colleges and universities in the United States reached a peak of 21 million students in 2010, but, subsequently, saw an overall decrease of 7% between 2010 and 2018 (United States Department of Education, 2021). With projections of a 10% national decline in two- and four-year college enrollment over the next five years, retention initiatives can combat attrition and generate increased enrollment by attracting more students to return (Grawe, 2021). Therefore, it is a pivotal time for institutions to engage in comprehensive examinations of a cohort of students that all too often gets overlooked.

### **Significance**

In a study of over 5,000 second-year college students nationwide, Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015) found that sophomore students expressed their lowest level of satisfaction with

communication from academic advising and the availability of service learning opportunities, internships, and career-related experiences. Sophomores also expressed concern related to having the appropriate financial resources to finish college. However, the same study showed that nearly all sophomore students from private and public institutions were strongly dedicated to earning their degrees (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015). The relationships that sophomore students have with their faculty, staff, and other students to navigate these challenges is critical to their success as well as their overall senses of belonging (Schreiner, 2010b). As sophomores move away from past identities to future-oriented senses of self, the meaningful relationships they have with others in the campus community have holistic impacts on their academic, financial, and personal dimensions and their overall commitments to persist (Schaller, 2010a).

Sophomore students experience significant transitions from the first year to the second year of college that often pose challenges in several dimensions of student life, including academics, interpersonal relationships, and senses of belonging (Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). Compared to the high level of institutional support in the first year of college, sophomores often find themselves less satisfied with institutional support when navigating critical decisions during their second year (Gregg-Jolly et al., 2016; Hunter et al., 2010; Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Nelson, 2018; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011, 2015). Additionally, challenges for sophomore students and pathways to their success can be different for underrepresented student populations such as minority students and first-generation college students (FGCS), who are often the least likely students to be retained by an institution (Blekic et al., 2020; Cuseo, 2020; Miao & Li, 2021; Schreiner, 2018).

Major declarations and career choices have been shown to be some of the primary concerns of sophomore students (Schaller, 2005, 2010b; Schreiner, 2010a, 2018; Sterling, 2018).

While Perez (2020) found that the academic dimension of college may have the greatest impact on sophomore student satisfaction, social connectedness and finding a sense of belonging were also vitally important to sophomore students (Miao & Li, 2021; Schreiner et al., 2012; Virtue et al., 2017). Therefore, while quality academic support helps address important sophomore student concerns, an overall institutional awareness must exist about sophomore student development along with sophomore-specific support programs to assist with the transition from the first year to second year of college.

Like broader research on post-secondary students, thriving, persistence, and retention are predominant themes in the literature on sophomore students (Blekic et al., 2020; Gregg-Jolly et al., 2016; Miao & Li, 2021; Schaller, 2010b; Schreiner, 2010b, 2013, 2018; Virtue et al., 2017). With a strong first year to second year retention rate, but a lower six-year graduation rate, Old Dominion University (ODU) believes it is time to analyze the sophomore student experience to determine what strategies could improve second- to third-year retention. Understanding what affects sophomore student retention and persistence to graduation is essential in understanding and addressing the barriers these students face in their higher education journeys.

### **Problem Statement**

The terms ‘retention’ and ‘persistence’ are often used interchangeably, but they are actually different concepts. Retention refers to the actions an institution takes to help students progress toward their degrees at the institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). Persistence refers to what students do in order to complete their college education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015).

Retention has a profound impact on institutions as well as students (College Transitions, 2021). Institutions feel the impact of students leaving in several ways. Institutions lose over \$16

billion in revenue each year when students disenroll (EducationData, 2021). Those students are also four times more likely to default on their student loans than their peers who completed their degrees. Students defaulting on their loans will cost taxpayers \$31 billion over the next 10 years (EducationData, 2021). Students who do not achieve their college degrees have higher unemployment rates than their educated peers. Dropout rates in colleges cost higher education institutions \$3.8 billion a year (EducationData, 2021). Students who do not complete their degrees are often saddled with loans that they cannot pay off, causing high levels of stress (EducationData, 2021).

Employers are also affected by low student retention rates. Seventy-three percent of college graduates will be gainfully employed after earning a four-year degree, while only 57% of those individuals with a high school diploma will be employed (EducationData, 2021). These numbers impact employers because they rely on skilled and educated workers. Employers tend to pay hourly rates of about one dollar less to those individuals who have attended but not graduated college compared to those individuals with two-year degrees, and about \$5 per hour less than those individuals who have earned four-year degrees (EducationData, 2021). On average, individuals who dropped out of college will earn \$21,000 less a year than individuals who completed their degrees (EducationData, 2021). Considering the impact of attrition on long-term professional success and future earning potential, higher education institutions must ensure that students are engaged and motivated to continue their education.

Student motivation can be influenced by experiences and interactions within the college environment. Increased positive experiences of self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and perceptions of the value of higher education further support increased persistence (Tinto, 2017). The more a student integrates into the college environment, the more likely the student is to stay

motivated, develop self-efficacy, and persist to graduation, which leads to higher completion rates (Arnekrans, 2014; Tinto, 2017). Tinto (2017) explained that high self-efficacy helps individuals engage and endure despite adversity; however, low self-efficacy leads to feelings of discouragement and being disengaged in and out of the classroom. Further, self-efficacy also affects how students perceive their abilities to manage additional responsibilities, such as jobs, family responsibilities, and military commitments (Tinto, 2017).

A sense of belonging further supports persistence. Students who see themselves as valued members of the college community can develop bonds that anchor them to the institution even during times of struggle (Tinto, 2017). An increased sense of belonging fosters increased motivation, reducing student attrition and increasing student persistence (Tinto, 2017).

Institutions must recognize that the support offered in the first year to assist students establishes a sense of belonging that should be continued and strengthened throughout the sophomore year.

Furthermore, thriving (Schreiner, 2018) is a theory of student success that maintains that, with optimal functioning in academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being, students have a better chance to be successful and persist toward graduation. If sophomores cannot thrive, then they will find it challenging to persist. To adequately address whether a problem of practice with the sophomore student experience exists at ODU, we chose to focus on thriving, retention, and persistence.

### **Institutional Context**

ODU looks to the future, while being proud of its past and present, especially its ongoing research and teaching programs. ODU is home to a diverse student population, including transfer students, military-affiliated students, distance learners, and historically marginalized groups (i.e., Black and Hispanic/Latinx students). As a result of its efforts to assist FGCS, ODU has been



named a First Forward Institution (Garvey, 2021). Awarded by the Center For First Generation Student Success in partnership with National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, the First Forward Institution designation recognizes institutions that are committed to supporting first generation student success. ODU has strived to help make a difference in the lives of its students, the region, and the nation throughout its history.

Like many other institutions, ODU has begun to focus on some specific efforts to assist sophomore students. For example, ODU has a Sophomore Retention Subcommittee to organize events and outreach activities to assist second-year students in overcoming barriers (Old Dominion University, 2020). Together with campus partners, the committee carries out a comprehensive outreach and call campaign and designed success programs for transfer students, including sophomores. The subcommittee acknowledged existing opportunities to assist sophomore and transfer student success, such as the Mane Connect Success Coaching team's sophomore success coaching, and discussed topics for further exploration, such as creating additional student outreach, a "Finish-In-Four" subcommittee, and additional opportunities for sophomores to participate in the 'Week of Welcome' activities.

In March 2021, ODU submitted a Request for Assistance (RFA) to the Department of Educational Leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) School of Education (see Appendix A). In their RFA, the Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services (SEES) expressed curiosity over their 80% freshman to sophomore retention rates when compared to their 53% six-year graduation rate. While ODU's freshman to sophomore retention rate is on par with the national average (78%), it is lower than many other four-year public institutions in Virginia such as University of Virginia (97%), Virginia Tech (92%), James Madison University (91%), and Christopher Newport University (85%) (CollegeTransitions,

2021; State Council of Higher Education for Virginia [SCHEV], 2021a). Further, their six-year graduation rate for students in the entering cohort of academic year 2015-2016 ranked among the lowest of all traditional four-year public institutions in Virginia (SCHEV, 2021b). As the client during this process, SEES identified a need to examine the challenges that sophomores face that may contribute to attrition, so that it can provide these students with the necessary support to succeed. SEES is also interested in a proposed plan for sophomore success that includes organizational practices, student success plans, college-wide strategies for putting sophomores in positions to participate in current events and outreach activities, and ways to remove barriers to sophomore success.

### **Study Purpose and Research Design**

In response to the RFA, the purpose of this study will be to examine the sophomore student experience at ODU and the ways by which organizational culture impacts this experience. We completed a comprehensive literature review and used an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods research design to gain a greater understanding of the ODU organizational culture and sophomore student experience. The following research questions served as the guide for this study and study methods:

1. What is the sophomore student experience at ODU?
  - . What are the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience at ODU?
2. What are the organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence at ODU?
3. What strategies can ODU implement to increase second- to third-year retention and help sophomores thrive and persist?

To answer these research questions, we used an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods research design.

In this research design, we completed two phases of data collection. In the first phase, we conducted focus groups and interviews with current ODU juniors and seniors to obtain feedback on their sophomore student experiences at the institution. We also interviewed administrators from benchmark higher education institutions that have successful sophomore student programming to discover best practices to assist sophomores. In the second phase, we collected quantitative data through web-based surveys administered to current ODU sophomores as well as faculty and staff who work with sophomore students at the institution. We also reviewed enrollment data and current sophomore program initiatives provided by ODU to gain additional information on the current sophomore student experience at the institution.

We believe that our findings and recommendations will help SEES and the greater ODU community develop best practices for working with sophomore students. Moreover, these findings should contribute to our community of practice of higher education leaders interested in improving persistence, retention, and graduation rates at their institutions. We begin our study with a literature review that will highlight the foundational groundwork and latest research on the needs of sophomore students and potential barriers to their success.

### **Definitions**

To provide context for the terms that will be used throughout this study, we have compiled the following list of definitions. Unless noted otherwise, these definitions are based on ODU policies.

- **First-Generation College Students (FGCS):** Individuals for whom neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree

- **Freshmen Students:** Undergraduate students who have earned up to 29 credits
- **Junior Students:** Undergraduate students who have earned at least 60 credits, but no more than 89 credits
- **High-Impact Practices (HIPs):** Opportunities for student engagement, including, but not limited to, living learning communities, service learning, research with faculty mentors, study abroad enrollments, internships, and culminating senior experiences (National Survey of Student Engagement, n.d.)
- **Living Learning Communities (LLCs):** Opportunities for students to live and engage with other students who have similar academic, professional, and/or co-curricular interests; LLCs require enrollment in specific courses.
- **Military-affiliated Students:** Individuals who have some type of connection to military service, such as active duty service members or veterans of the armed forces and/or dependents of active duty service members or veterans of the armed forces
- **Organizational Culture:** Characteristics of an institution's environment that include, but are not limited to, shared values, beliefs, traditions, policies, and behavioral norms (Ott, 1995)
- **Persistence:** "the individual phenomenon of persisting to a goal" (Reason, 2009, p. 660); for our study, the term 'persistence' will be defined as the goal of earning a college degree, whether at ODU or another institution.
- **Retention:** When a student re-enrolls at the same institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015); for our study, the term 'retention' will be used specifically for sophomore students at ODU re-enrolling for their third year of post-secondary education

- **Senior Students:** Undergraduate students who have earned 90 credits or more
- **Sense of Belonging:** Students' feeling that they are accepted, cared about, respected, and valued by the institution; belief that they are supported by the institution, faculty, staff, and peers; perceptions that they are valued members of the campus community (Strayhorn, 2012)
- **Sophomore Students:** While ODU categorizes undergraduate students who have earned at least 30, but no more than 59, credits as sophomore students, we will define sophomore students in this study as students entering their second year of post-secondary education.
- **Thriving:** Theory of student success, which represents students achieving optimal functioning in academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being, three key areas that lead to student success and persistence (Schreiner, 2018)
- **Transfer Students:** Undergraduate students who have previously attended a regionally accredited college or university after graduating from high school or receiving a GED prior to attending ODU

### COVID-19

It should be noted that our study was conducted during the second and third years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducting research within higher education during a time of great stress, serious physical and mental health concerns, and practical logistical considerations was a great challenge to our team. However, the pandemic gave us the opportunity to view the needs of sophomore students through the lens of how a worldwide health crisis affects student thriving, persistence, and retention. As such, we expanded upon much of the literature on sophomore students' needs and barriers by designing our research instruments to include questions on how the pandemic has affected academic engagement, access to resources, interpersonal relationships,

and a sense of belonging and community. The data we collected on this topic allowed us to not only address the historic barriers and needs of sophomore students, but also new and future needs as well.

### **Chapter Summary and Organization of Capstone Study**

Sophomore students face different challenges than freshmen, juniors, and seniors, while often receiving less attention and intentional support from the schools they attend. Over the past few decades, interest in the sophomore student experience has continued to grow among researchers and higher education practitioners. In the RFA, ODU identified a potential sophomore student problem of practice at their institution by highlighting a high freshman to sophomore retention rate (80%), but a much lower six-year graduation rate (53%). ODU requested our team review their current sophomore success events, develop a model of sophomore success, and provide recommendations for sophomore programming and support. In response, our capstone study will provide a comprehensive literature review of seminal as well as recent research and studies on sophomore students, a detailed outline of the research methods we used to complete our study, and the major findings and analysis from our data collection. Finally, we will present specific recommendations and a model for sophomore student success that ODU can implement to help sophomores successfully transition from their second to third year, thrive, and persist toward graduation and future professional and personal goals.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize information from seminal and recent studies, articles, and reports on the needs and challenges of sophomore students (Blekic et al., 2020; Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Luke & Diambra, 2017; Schaller, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Sterling, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). At the outset of this chapter, we will provide a definition for sophomore students and address the sophomore slump phenomenon. Our review of the literature will also highlight the importance of understanding additional student identities to provide support for sophomore students. We will then delve into the common needs and barriers that the literature has revealed exists among sophomore students. Finally, we will offer examples from the literature of relevant student success models and strategies that practitioners can use to effectively serve the sophomore student population at Old Dominion University (ODU).

### **Defining the Sophomore Student: An Overview**

To address ODU's Request for Assistance (RFA), we first need to define sophomore students as individuals entering their second year of post-secondary education. The general public, campus offices, and students themselves may define sophomore students similarly, but institutions usually determine official sophomore student status by accumulated credit hours (Schreiner, 2018). Like many other four-year institutions, ODU classifies students as sophomores after earning more than 29 credits (Old Dominion University, 2021c). However, it is important to acknowledge the nuance of how students achieve official sophomore status.

With the increase in the participation and success of high school students in Advanced Placement (AP) exams and the rapid growth of International Baccalaureate (IB) programs worldwide, many first-year students achieve official sophomore status by the end of their first

semester in college based on the number of transferable credits earned prior to matriculation (CollegeBoard, 2020; International Baccalaureate Organization, n.d.). High school students also have opportunities to earn college credits through dual enrollment programs with colleges and universities prior to official post-secondary matriculation. Conversely, freshman students that do not successfully complete all of their first-year coursework may begin their second year of college below the threshold of official sophomore status. Hunter et al. (2010) stated that “whether a student has crossed the credit threshold to be a sophomore or not when they begin their second college year, they are likely to face similar issues” (p. 7).

One of the most famous phrases connected to sophomore students is the *sophomore slump*. Plominski and Burns (2018) noted the sophomore slump is brought on by a combination of increased academic expectations along with more challenging course content than the freshmen year, leading students to doubt themselves and question their competency. This phenomenon is commonly viewed as a regression that sophomores may experience from any positive academic and personal developments experienced during their freshman years. Kennedy and Upcraft (2010) recommended redefining the sophomore slump as a multidimensional phenomenon that can occur as early as a first-year student’s second semester if it involves academic deficiencies, disengagement, career indecision, development confusion, or dissatisfaction with the college experience.

According to Schreiner (2018), sophomores face two categories of barriers to success. The first barriers noted are internal and individual: (a) academic struggles, (b) lack of academic motivation, (c) identity confusion, (d) degree and career uncertainty, and (e) difficulty identifying meaningful campus participation that relates to their interests. Additional barriers were identified and classified by Schreiner as external and institutional: (a) a lack of focus on



service excellence, which disproportionately affects sophomores, (b) difficulty connecting with faculty in meaningful ways, (c) insufficient academic advising to address meaning and purpose, the most pressing developmental issue for sophomores, (d) campus policies and regulations that hamper minority students and sophomores in general from flourishing, and (e) the elimination of nearly all types of campus support after the first year. Colleges and universities that proactively address these barriers, whether they are internal or external, will be able to effectively help sophomores. Recent studies suggest that implementing sophomore learning communities, creating summer enrichment programs, and supporting students with resources and positive connections to the campus community can help combat the sophomore slump (Miao & Li, 2021; Perez, 2020; Virtue et al., 2017).

ODU currently has several programs and initiatives aimed to help sophomore students avoid the sophomore slump. As part of a student success committee at ODU, the Sophomore Retention Subcommittee exists to:

create and implement a yearlong calendar of events and outreach activities to assist second-year students with overcoming hurdles and obstacles, implement a comprehensive outreach and calling campaign in collaboration with campus partners, [and] develop success initiatives focused on transfer students (Old Dominion University, 2021d).

ODU's *UNIV 111 Sophomore Seminar* is a non-credit course offered every fall semester that is described in the undergraduate course catalog as a seminar that "provides resources and opportunities for students to build relationships with other sophomores and faculty and to explore individual strengths, values, skills, and interests" (Old Dominion University, 2021c). This course is required for students who did not pass *UNIV 110 Academic Success* during their freshman year and may be on academic probation; when offered, total enrollment is normally

between 30 and 40 students divided among several course sections (C. Moss, personal communication, October 21, 2021).

ODU also has a strategic communication plan that specifically targets sophomore students with information such as major exploration, residence life, and campus wellness. Of particular note, ODU's most recent strategic plan stated its commitment to "improve sophomore success rates" and "expand, enhance, and assess" co-curricular learning programs for second-year students (Old Dominion University, 2014). Yet, after receiving ODU's RFA and meeting with members of the Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services (SEES), a consensus exists that the institution wants to find more ways to promote the sophomore experience because of how critical they feel the year is for retention (J. Dané, personal communication, June 17, 2021). Further, there are concerns that no identifiable sophomore experience exists at ODU and there is a need for more intentional programming (D. Stansberry, personal communication, October 21, 2021). As ODU prepares to begin planning its next strategic plan, a more intentional focus on the institution's sophomore experience will need to be included.

Finally, like all students, sophomores come with different identities beyond their official student status at their school. An institution must understand the different backgrounds and identities of sophomore students before committing to improving sophomore student performance. Understanding the lived experiences of historically underrepresented students will enable institutions to implement sustainable changes to improve the sophomore student experience. To consider approaches to working with sophomore students, we will reflect on the student identities of transfer students, military-affiliated students, students of color, and first-generation college students (FGCS). The following section will examine literature through an

asset-based approach versus a deficit-based system to identify how faculty and higher education administrators work with sophomore students.

### **Importance of Understanding Student Identity for Sophomores to Thrive**

What do we know about sophomores, and how can we design campus environments and our interactions with them to optimize their learning? Schaller (2005) suggested that these are essential questions to answer because understanding that sophomores are in a pivotal developmental stage deserves more attention from our environments, programs, and learning techniques. Schaller (2010a) asserted that freshmen are often immersed in their past identities, while sophomores are focused on their future identities, which leads to increased anxiety. With sophomores searching for their identities and support, an institution seeking to implement creative engagement methods for sophomores to thrive must first gain a clear understanding of who the students are as individuals.

Schreiner's (2018) theory of student success known as 'thriving' refers to students who maintain optimal functioning in academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being, three key areas that lead to student success and persistence. Schreiner recommended that institutions acknowledge the struggle of underrepresented sophomore students and provide the support these students need to develop an authentic sense of self to thrive. Several pathways (major certainty, campus involvement, student-faculty interactions, spirituality, institutional integrity, sense of community on campus) exist to thriving, but these pathways can be different for underrepresented student populations and students of color.

As a result of the pathways to thriving, students' identities must be better understood by colleges and universities in order to address retention problems and provide higher levels of learning assistance. According to Schreiner (2018), sophomores who struggle to declare majors,

balance multiple social identities, endure rejection, and develop cultural and sexual identities struggle with defining and clarifying their senses of purpose and belonging. For example, in a study that examined factors that contribute to the persistence of sophomore students, Blekic et al. (2020) found that contributing factors to retention were statistically different between continuing students and transfer students, calling it a “critical oversight to assume that all sophomores are continuing students, particularly at large, public institutions of higher education” (p. 72). With that said, Blekic et al.’s work is worth highlighting since it takes a positive approach to recognizing students' real identities to help them thrive.

### ***Transfer Students***

If students wish to transfer, they will likely do it during their second year (Sterling, 2018). It is important to focus on sophomore transfer students because research shows that they face greater persistence struggles than students who remain enrolled at the same institution from their first year of enrollment (Blekic et al., 2020). However, little literature exists that focuses on sophomore transfer students (Blekic et al., 2020; Kranzow et al., 2015).

ODU calls itself the most transfer-friendly university in Virginia, with more transfer pathways for incoming students than any other university (Old Dominion University, 2021a). These pathways include, but are not limited to, community college transfers, out-of-state college transfers, guaranteed admission options, and the awarding of academic credit for military training and experience. However, transfer students face unique challenges when they arrive at a new institution.

According to Tobolowsky and Cox (2012), transfer shock occurs when students experience a decline in grades due to social and academic changes to a new school. By interviewing 17 faculty and staff with the potential to influence for students at an institution that

had transfer students account for 20% of their 4,500 new, first-year students, Tobolowsky and Cox discovered two characteristics that make transfer students a demanding population to serve: the significant diversity of transfer students and their frequent false assumptions about the institution. These interviews allowed Tobolowsky and Cox to gain multiple interpretations of the school's response to the needs of transfer students.

Blekic et al. (2020) discovered that factors contributing to continued student success and transfer student retention were statistically different. In their study investigating the factors that influence sophomore retention, Blekic et al. found that students who transferred to an institution as sophomores were 47% less likely to persist to their third year than students who began at the institution as freshmen. Transfer students were also less likely than non-transfer students to complete their bachelor's degree in a six-year timeframe, according to Fauria and Fuller (2015).

### ***Military-affiliated Students***

Military-affiliated students are individuals who have some type of connection to military service, such as students who identify as active duty service members or veterans of the armed forces. This group may also include dependents of active duty service members or veterans of the armed forces (Old Dominion University, 2021b). In a study on invisible cultural barriers contrasting with smooth transitions for student veterans, Lim et al. (2018) found that very few veterans had freshman status even though it was their first semester/year on campus. These students were designated as sophomores at the university because they had taken some postsecondary courses during their military duty or at community colleges before being admitted to their majors. The lack of sophomore-centric transition support at institutions may prevent student veterans in this category from receiving this transitional support when first attending a new institution. Combined with the additional barrier of reintegrating into civilian life (Drebing

et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2018; Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020), student veterans designated as sophomore students in their first year at an institution are placed in precarious positions to suddenly adjust to their new role as post-secondary students.

Further, the number of student veterans enrolling in colleges and universities continues to increase. The United States Department of Veteran Affairs (2020) reported that over 650,000 veterans used military assistance to further their education in 2018. During that same year, 75% of student veterans were enrolled as full-time students. In 2017, 52% of student veterans were enrolled in undergraduate programs, compared to 24% in two-year programs. As a response to increased military enrollment, scholarly research on student veterans has increased and many colleges and universities have created specific programs and services to help veterans succeed in higher education (Drebing et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2018; O'Herrin, 2011; Robertson & Eschenauer, 2020). Additionally, many institutions are enthusiastic, welcoming, and eager to serve military-affiliated students in successfully transitioning back into civilian life. Still, institutions are not always sure how to accommodate student veterans' specific needs due to being unaware of each individual's diverse background and their lack of specific expertise in serving veterans (O'Herrin, 2011). Military dependents, namely children of active duty service members, also face challenging times of transition as they experience deployments, relocations, and their family's separation from the military (Cole, 2016).

### ***Students of Color***

There have been numerous studies regarding Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, and multiracial or biracial students. Data on graduation rates has shown that a disparity exists between students of color and their White counterparts, and that colleges need to address institutional barriers to success for

students of color (Banks & Dohy, 2019; McClain & Perry, 2017; Zanolini Morrison, 2010). Research has also shown that the sophomore slump has been found to be more common among minority and underrepresented students (Miao & Li, 2021). It has also been determined that underrepresented minority students are the least likely to be retained by an institution (Blekic et al., 2020). Accordingly, a school's ability to address institutional barriers for students of color should, in turn, positively impact sophomore student persistence.

Miscommunications between professors or counselors, a lack of awareness about resources, poor access to high-quality mentorships, limited intercultural views of diversity on campus, scarce emphasis on spirituality and religious beliefs, stereotyping, and feelings of isolation are just some of the hurdles that students of color face (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Schreiner, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). Additionally, Banks and Dohy (2019) acknowledged the need for program development to bridge the gap between the deficit-approach model and strengths-based approach, as well as implications for policy and practice, with a focus on enhancing programming that may impede students of color.

In a study on a review of the efforts to improve retention and graduation rates for students of color, Duranczyk et al. (2004) recognized that, notwithstanding the increase in diversity, universities and colleges across the country are struggling to provide, retain, and graduate students of color on par with their White and Asian counterparts. The authors identified higher education opportunity gaps and then analyzed how institutions are addressing these challenges. Duranczyk et al. also found that many students reported microaggressions by faculty regarding institutional support. According to Hunter et al. (2010), institutions should pay close attention to the priorities, values, and obstacles that students encounter and investigate these topics using race and ethnicity as a lens by which to understand sophomore experiences. Formal social ties

are significant in enhancing academic achievement, creating a feeling of belonging, and gaining control over the environment for students of color (Hunter et al., 2010). Additionally, spirituality and religious beliefs have been found to serve as important sources of support that enable students of color, and African-American students in particular, to navigate the second year successfully and thrive (Schreiner, 2018).

### ***First-generation College Students (FGCS)***

Some of the most noteworthy activities that institutions have found to support sophomore student persistence, such as high-impact practices (HIPs), living learning communities, and academic mentoring (Gregg-Jolly et al., 2016; Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Schaller, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Schreiner, 2010a, 2010b, 2018; Sterling, 2018) have also been found to foster success among FGCS (Demetriou et al., 2017). In a study on distinguishing why FGCS are at risk for attrition, Cuseo (2020) indicated that, as FGCS have parents who did not complete college, they lack an understanding of the college experience. Cuseo recognized that just being a FGCS is an independent risk factor that puts them at a greater risk of dropping out. He proposed a retention program to target these underlying issues: lack of college knowledge, doubt about whether college is worth it, self-doubt about whether they deserve college or are college material, and insufficient family encouragement and support. Combined with the sophomore slump experience, as well as COVID-19's disproportionate effect on many individuals who identify as FGCS, this historically underrepresented student population currently faces even greater barriers to persistence and retention (Soria et al., 2020; Vuong et al., 2010).

Institutions must address the challenges that FGCS face, while simultaneously acknowledging the value of their lived experiences. In a study of successful FGCS' activities, roles, and relationships, Demetriou et al. (2017) discovered that little research had focused on



their experiences. These experiences shape the immediate environment of the developing FGCS. Demetriou et al. proposed that universities conduct empirical research into FGCS' lived experiences to improve an understanding of their undergraduate student retention. They also found that degree achievement for FGCS in the United States is especially essential for achieving future labor demands, national economic prosperity goals, and global competitiveness.

Before making a commitment to improve sophomore student success, an institution must understand the needs of its sophomore students and their additional identities beyond their student statuses. The following section will outline Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005), which can help faculty, staff, administrators, students, and other stakeholders understand the common developmental stages of students. Combined with relevant literature on sophomores, this theoretical framework can help illuminate the major needs that must be met for this population to thrive. In exploring these needs, higher education institutions will be able to discover how their current student service practices could be improved and develop new intentional initiatives and programs to help their sophomore students.

### **Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory**

Schaller (2005) recommended that institutions frame the sophomore year in a way that encourages students to take ownership of their learning experiences and determine their own personal and professional directions. In her study, conducted on traditional-aged sophomores at a mid-sized, private institution in the mid-2000s, Schaller found that students moved through stages of *random exploration*, *focused exploration*, *tentative choices*, and *commitment*. These stages comprised her Sophomore Student Development Theory, which has influenced much of the literature on sophomore students in the years since.

*Random exploration* is the initial stage that students experience during their first year of college where decisions, such as major declaration and career choices, are either delayed or made without a large degree of self-reflection; this stage can last even beyond the sophomore year (Schaller, 2005). Interpersonal and social decisions during this stage can also be made without a great deal of self-reflection. This stage can be considered the ‘honeymoon phase’ of college, filled with a sense of exuberance over engagement in new and different experiences. *Focused exploration* traditionally takes place between the freshman and sophomore years (or early in the sophomore year) when students gain a greater awareness about their choices and may begin to express frustration with themselves, their relationships, and/or their academic experience that took place during the random exploration stage. As Schaller discussed, the *focused exploration* stage is when the pressure of selecting a major and thinking about one’s future career and life decisions can result in increased levels of stress and anxiety.

Schaller (2005) found that, even though the *focused exploration* stage is stressful for sophomores, the longer students remained in this stage, the more thoroughly they examined their lives through active self-reflection. Schaller went on to state: “If students are able to examine their developing self, assess the influences that others have had upon them, and evaluate their past choices, [then] this is a sign that students are moving on from an externally defined self” (2010a, p. 73). Schaller (as cited in Pitstick, 2018) found that the majority of second-year students are in the *focused exploration* stage and institutions should strive to facilitate activities that assist sophomores in exploring their strengths, values, and academic and personal goals.

After students move out of the *focused exploration* stage, they enter the *tentative choices* stage where, through increased self-reflection, they begin to make decisions that align closely with their personal values (Schaller, 2005). It is at this point that students can enter the

*commitment* stage where a sense of ownership of their choices begins to develop and plans are made for the future. However, Schaller warned that students can become so resolute in their academic choices within the *commitment* stage, and experience such a sense of relief that important academic decisions have been made, that they may wind up ignoring other academic options that deviate from their plans.

Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) illustrates that students ultimately bear the responsibility for the decisions they make, including interpersonal relationships, major declarations, and career exploration. With an awareness and understanding of Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory, institutions can take specific measures to provide the needed support to encourage sophomores to take responsibility for their learning so that they persist and thrive.

### **Needs of Sophomore Students**

The literature on sophomore students indicates that intentional academic advising, HIPs, institutional integrity, feelings of belonging, sense of community, meaningful relationships, meaning making, and financial literacy are the most common needs among sophomore students (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Kranzow et al., 2015; Plominski & Burns, 2017; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011, 2015; Schaller, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). Academic advising was found to be of paramount importance as it plays a central role in supporting student persistence, retention, and graduation. Alarming, research has shown that sophomores often report high levels of dissatisfaction with academic advising.

### ***Academic Advising***

Academic advising has evolved to address current student development challenges, such as gender identity issues, inclusivity, and the increase in non-traditional students (e.g., FGCS,

military-affiliated students, transfer students) and plays an integral part in the academic and personal development of college students (Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018; Yatzak et al., 2021). Advisors can keep students on track to graduate by communicating the correct program requirements and ensuring that they register for courses on time, but advisors should also serve as mentors by encouraging students to engage in self-reflection, pursue curricular and extracurricular opportunities that align with their interests and goals, and openly discuss academic and personal concerns.

ODU currently follows a decentralized model of advising where students are commonly assigned to faculty advisors from the student's discipline, with additional support from the Center for Advising Administration and Academic Partnerships (D. Cigularova, personal communication, October 21, 2021). For undeclared students, academic advisors within the Center for Major Exploration assist with identifying their interests, skills, and abilities that may translate to specific majors. Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015) reported that sophomores expressed lower levels of satisfaction in communication with their academic advisors than in other categories, such as degree of academic challenge, availability of service-learning, internships, career-related activities, and their overall school experiences. Based on the study, an institution should assess how effective their current advising model may be for sophomore students.

Considering that a student's major declaration was found to be the most prevalent and often most stressful decision sophomores make (Blekic et al., 2020; Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018), comprehensive discussions with advisors about academic plans and program requirements are essential. Yet, students' needs exist beyond clear communication on academic plans and program requirements that must be considered before implementing successful academic advising initiatives. Any improvement to the academic advising experiences

for sophomores should aim to address their developmental needs of gaining senses of belonging, finding meaning and purpose in the college experiences, and focusing on the pursuit of lifelong goals (Schreiner, 2018). To do so, one-on-one relationships with advisors, whether faculty or staff members, are needed to help students make decisions about campus involvement, class engagement, and career planning (Schreiner, 2018). Hence, institutions should be intentional with their academic advising efforts as sophomores share different concerns and face different challenges than freshmen, juniors, and seniors. Accordingly, academic advisors must have a greater understanding about the sophomore experience.

Predictably, upperclassmen with declared majors tend to have stronger faculty connections than sophomores because programs are often designed for the highest student-faculty interactions to occur in the junior and senior years (Schaller, 2010b). Consequently, academic advisors assigned to sophomore students can complement the student-faculty relationship by assisting with the development of strong, decision-making skills that are essential for successfully navigating the stressors that come with the major declaration process.

**Decision-making Skills.** In a study of sophomore students enrolled at a large, urban, public institution in the Northeast, Sterling (2018) found decision-making to be one of the major themes to describe the second-year experience. Sophomores are “pushed by the need to declare a major and develop career goals” (Sterling, 2018, p. 137). Sterling also stated that advising services must encourage sophomores to deeply reflect on their academic plans, educational goals, and selection of majors. Students who feel more confident in their decision-making skills will be more likely to connect their academic lives with their future careers, tightening their connections to their institutions and improving their chances to persist in their career goals (Luke & Dimabra, 2017).

Academic advisors must also challenge students to think critically about themselves and their choices. Spight (2020) explained that advisors must do more than discuss which courses should be taken each term. They need to discuss and consider the students' broader academic career and goals. Spight also suggested that advisors prepare for meetings with advisees similarly to how an instructor prepares for a class by determining the learning outcomes that the students need to achieve to develop the decision-making skills needed to declare majors. This approach could enable non-faculty academic advisors to become true mentors to the sophomore students they advise.

Understanding the needs of sophomores and supporting the development of decision-making skills cannot be understated, especially for historically underrepresented students. Demetriou et al.'s (2017) study, which examined FGCS' retention, highlighted that positive relationships with academic mentors helped the students make critical academic decisions about declaring majors. Like Sterling (2018), Demetriou et al. (2017) agreed that it was vital for advisors to encourage self-efficacy and challenge students to "develop the expectation that college will be challenging and that challenge is a part of learning" (p. 34). Additionally, even for sophomores who have already declared majors or on specific career tracks, academic advising and its role in fostering good decision-making skills remains essential during the second year.

The need for improved cognitive skills among sophomore students is further explained by Luke and Diambra's (2017) study, which defined sophomores as "still new enough to be actively seeking major[s], intimidated by second-level sophomore courses, floundering for their social strata, and struggling with their identity integration issues" (p. 76). To properly assess potentially negative sophomore thoughts and perspectives, Luke and Diambra stated that advisors must first

know that they exist and what signs to look for. The authors also explained that, to build greater critical thinking and decision-making skills, advisors must consider the merits of advising students to register for courses taught by instructors who will challenge them. Although this may be difficult for advisors at larger institutions, the recommendation to encourage sophomores to challenge themselves when selecting courses aligns with Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) on optimizing learning experiences. Selecting challenging courses also aligns with Schreiner's (2010b) emphasis on the academic engagement aspect of thriving where students invest effort in and exhibit the motivation to reach their goals.

**Major Declaration and Career Exploration.** Declaring a major is one of the most important steps in transitioning from the *focused exploration* stage to the stages of *tentative choices* and *commitment* (Schaller, 2005). It is one of the more important milestones in a student's progression toward earning a degree (Blekic et al., 2020), and, therefore, it is not surprising that sophomores can experience elevated stress and anxiety due to the perceived weight of this decision. Major declarations and career explorations have been found to be directly related to sophomore student anxiety and pressure resulting from a lack of confidence in their decision-making skills and the fear of making career decisions that may negatively affect their overall happiness later in life (Pisarik et al., 2017). Academic advising, as it relates to these topics, was found to be one of the most recurrent themes of the challenges that sophomores face (Blekic et al., 2020; Demetriou et al., 2017; Luke & Diamabra, 2017; Pisarik et al., 2017; Sterling, 2018). Before officially declaring their majors, sophomores may not receive major and career advising from faculty members from a specific discipline of interest, which makes campus advising services pivotal to the major declaration process.

In *Attitudes of Second-Year College Students*, Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015) collected second-year student data from 5,101 students at 55 colleges and universities nationwide and found that the students' top requests showed a need for an integrated approach to academic advising and career development. If trained in career theory and provided with academic and career planning resources, academic advisors are in an excellent position to help students establish educational and occupational goals and encourage them to engage in self-assessment and self-exploration activities (Gordon et al., 2008). Lynch and Lungrin (2018) stressed the importance of integrating academic advising and career development as a way for advisors to more clearly connect the curriculum of college majors with careers after graduation. Many campuses invest resources in training and collaboration and have revised their organizational structures to partner academic advising with career advising (Lynch & Lungrin, 2018). As academic advisors can be staff, faculty, or a combination of the two, and because advising expectations among students have grown, the need to identify advising competencies has also grown (Pasquini & Eaton, 2019). Continued investment in professional development for academic advising illustrates a commitment to meeting the growing expectations among sophomore students.

Academic advising for sophomores can also benefit from an honest and informative approach. Schaller (2010a) discussed the need for advisors to define and explain the sophomore experience to students to address the common anxiety and identity issues that second-year students experience. She commented that support should "take the shape of challenging students to engage in the difficult work of learning about one's interests, abilities, and values and connecting a growing sense of self with major, careers, and other learning opportunities" (Schaller, 2010a, p. 79). This challenge is part of the transition process that sophomores engage



in when moving from *random exploration* to *focused exploration* and *tentative choices* (Schaller, 2005), which affects a student's ability to thrive during college.

According to Schreiner (2018), declaring majors and enrolling in major courses are significant transitions that second-year students experience. Schreiner also explained that this academic transition influences the development of meaning and purpose when attempting to align personal interests with declaring majors and making career decisions. Hence, academic advisors must not only provide sophomores with educational information, but also encourage them to engage in self-reflection, critical thinking, and activities that will provide information and knowledge about the connection between major and career decisions and overall happiness and well-being.

### ***High-impact Practices (HIPs)***

In addition to intentional academic advising, another important need of sophomore students is the opportunity to engage in immersive experiences to help determine if major declaration decisions and potential career options align with their senses of self, interests, and motivation. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, n.d.) defined HIPs as “special opportunities for student engagement, such as learning communities, service-learning, research with a faculty mentor, study abroad, internships, and culminating senior experiences” (para. 1). HIPs are normally those experiences outside of the classroom that can influence learning and development. While first-year students are usually offered a wide range of programs that foster commitment to the institution, and juniors and seniors can establish connections through their majors and greater leadership roles in extracurricular activities, few opportunities exist in these areas for sophomores (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013).

The literature has shown that HIPs can increase the students' commitment, not only to

their majors, but also to their institutions, and that HIPs are needed for students to thrive and persist. Kuh (2008), founding director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, explained that HIPs, such as first-year seminars, learning communities grounded in a common topic or experience, undergraduate research, ePortfolios, internships, study abroad opportunities, and service-learning activities, are beneficial for college students from all different backgrounds. Like Kuh, Reason (2009) also categorized first-year seminars as a type of HIP that positively influenced persistence not only between the first and second years of college, but also to degree completion.

Second-year seminars are less common at colleges and universities, which means that engagement in HIPs beyond the freshmen year must be intentionally implemented by institutions. Wang and Kennedy-Phillips (2013), therefore, recommended that institutions create second-year orientation programs to target the needs and development of sophomore students. Additional recommendations by Wang and Kennedy-Phillips included developing more programs geared toward second-year students as well as creating a second-year coordinator position to arrange activities to encourage sophomore involvement in beneficial curricular and co-curricular experiences. While these practices are beneficial for all students, the literature shows that they can be particularly helpful for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

California State University Northridge found that Latinx students who participated in just one HIP were about 10% more likely to earn a bachelor's degree in six years than their counterparts who had not participated in a HIP (Kuh & Kinzie, 2018). In an asset-based study on successful FGCS, Demetriou et al. (2017) found that students who participated in HIPs, such as faculty-mentored research, studying or traveling abroad, community service, and involvement in

student organizations, reported feeling more connected to their major choices and career pursuits and more accepted at their institutions. Of note, students without the normative knowledge of the college experience (i.e., cultural capital) may not be aware of HIPs (Yosso, 2005). Therefore, underrepresented student populations may lack the cultural capital needed to seek out HIP opportunities, making it imperative that institutions encourage students to engage in them.

Kuh and Kinzie (2018) recommended that institutions examine the level of participation of underrepresented students in HIPs and the quality of the experiences. Schreiner (2018) recommended that institutions focus on HIPs that best fit a school's mission, culture, student needs, and faculty expertise, and design the sophomore year intentionally to include at least one HIP each term as a way to allow second-year students the opportunity to connect with faculty. HIPs can also be co-curricular or employment experiences that students participate in while enrolled in college.

Above all else, HIPs require students to become actively involved in their environments during college. For development to occur, an individual must interact with the environment in “a progressively complex manner as the individual becomes more competent” (Demetriou et al., 2017, p. 32). Faculty and administrators, specifically academic advisors, can prepare students to adopt this mindset to meet these challenges, while HIPs provide students the opportunity to meaningfully explore the world around them (Schaller, 2005).

### ***Institutional Integrity, Feelings of Belonging, and Sense of Community***

Students' perceptions of institutional integrity, feelings of belonging, and a sense of community remain connected themes through the literature on sophomore students (Gahagan, 2018; Nelson, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Schreiner, 2013, 2018; Virtue et al., 2017; Webb & Cotton, 2018; Yaczak et al., 2021). What is promised for students by institutions during the

admissions process as well as the first-year experience can make sophomore students feel disappointed during their second-year if expectations are not met (Schreiner, 2018). These feelings of disappointment in the integrity of the institution may be a contributing factor to the greater likelihood among sophomores to transfer during their second year (Sterling, 2018). Moreover, Reason et al. (2009) stated that student persistence is not only tied to institutional integrity, but also institutional culture and the attitudes of the personnel. Nelson (2018) found that sophomores rate the importance of “caring and helpful” (p. 37) campus staff very highly, indicating strong feelings about the attitudes of institutional personnel.

Strayhorn (2012) defined the sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (p. 3). Institutions have the opportunity to improve students’ senses of belonging and other environmental conditions to meet the needs of sophomore students. Some of the noteworthy environmental elements that contribute to a greater sense of belonging include faculty-student relationships and student peer relationships, both of which have positive impacts on persistence and thriving (Schaller, 2005; Schreiner et al., 2012; Webb & Cotton, 2018).

In line with previous research, students’ senses of community have a positive impact on their persistence, graduation, and satisfaction (Schreiner, 2010a). Schreiner declared that creating a sense of community on campus is “the single best way to help all students thrive” (2013, p. 46). A sense of community goes beyond simply being part of an institution’s student body. Perez (2020) defined a psychological sense of community as “the feeling or perception of belonging, sense of making a difference, and [a] shared emotional connection” (p. 12). Schreiner (2013)

broke down a sense of community as a pathway to thriving into four elements: membership (i.e., a sense of belonging), ownership (i.e., a sense of having a voice that contributes to the institution's culture), relationship (i.e., positive emotional connections to others), and partnership (i.e., working interdependently with others toward a common goal).

### ***Meaningful Relationships***

Developing meaningful relationships with peers, administrators, and faculty can help improve a student's sense of belonging and community (Gahagan, 2018; Schreiner, 2010a, 2010b, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). Schreiner (2018) outlined this student-faculty interaction, sense of community, and campus involvement as pivotal pathways to thriving in college. Faculty and administrators alike can help foster environments for students to develop meaningful relationships with their peers. Connected to the research on students' senses of belonging, a review of the literature revealed that students often look to peers with similar values for academic advice, guidance, and academic-related interactions (Sterling, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). In the sophomore year, students tend to redefine friendships as they move away from high school relationships and into smaller communities across campus, including student organizations, residential communities, and academic majors (Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013).

Sophomore students at four-year, public institutions have lower satisfaction rates in feeling at home and having many friends when compared to their four-year, private institutional peers (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015). Roughly 78.8% of the respondents at four-year, private institutions agreed that they felt a strong sense of belonging, while only 65.5% of those students at four-year, public institutions agreed with the same statement. Similarly, four-year, public institutions (5.46) lag their private peers (5.76) in the satisfaction of the general sophomore

student experience on a seven-point Likert scale. Even more alarming, four-year, public institutions also fall behind their two-year, public peers in both the sense of belonging and general satisfaction of the sophomore student experience. Significant opportunities exist for four-year, public institutions to mitigate the risk of student attrition by fostering a stronger sense of connection for sophomores to the institution.

Administrators can support the academic mission of the institution by fostering a culture of comprehensive care and support. In pursuit of student self-discovery, according to Schaller (2010b), student affairs professionals can develop authentic relationships by helping students find their places and voices. The process of self-authorship allows students to define values, articulate goals, and begin moving away from an externally defined self to an internally defined one. When administrators and academic advisors are in alignment with faculty, this situation creates a transformative community of mentoring and support. Furthermore, a culture of comprehensive care and support expands the bandwidth for faculty and administrators to advise students through academic, personal, and career issues. Schaller recommended that faculty, advisors, and student affairs professionals encourage and validate student perspectives throughout their college careers to promote active student engagement. This holistic faculty-staff-administrator advising approach supports critical sophomore milestones, such as declaring majors.

### ***Meaning Making***

Retention, persistence, and completion of a degree are ultimately linked to a student's ability to make meaning and define the purpose for one's journey through an institution (Demetriou et al., 2017; Pisarik et al., 2017; Reason, 2009; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). If institutions can meet the major needs of sophomores, including and beyond academic-related

needs, sophomores may feel more connected and satisfied with their college experiences. Schreiner (2018) discussed that sophomore students often feel abandoned by their institutions during critical periods in their academic careers. The author further explained that the primary concerns of second-year students include building relationships and finding meaning and purpose.

When faculty and administrators engage students in critical reflection, students are able to process experiences and make meaningful connections for self-exploration and development. According to Ash and Clayton (2009), critical reflection in active learning must be continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized in order to be effective in the meaning making process. In the context of Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005), sophomore students can make meaning of *random exploration* and *focused exploration* through their student experiences (e.g., academic, financial, personal). Challenging and continuous reflections in the academic and personal dimensions of their student experiences allow for sophomore students to engage in *tentative choices* and *commitment* stages. Demetriou et al. (2017) described the transformative role that HIPs, such as undergraduate research and study abroad, play in developing senses of purpose, with reflection serving as a foundational element. Through meaningful relationships and quality reflection, sophomore students may be more connected to their institutions during some of the most pivotal periods in their academic careers.

### ***Significance of Financial Literacy***

Another notable challenge that students face as they transition to their second year of college is financial uncertainty to finish college. Approximately 54% of respondents of a nationwide study on sophomores at four-year, public institutions indicated they did not have the financial resources necessary to finish college (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011). Though more recent

studies of a similar nature demonstrate a modest improvement to 56.1% (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015), a review of the literature still highlights the significant impact of financial stress on student health and academic performance. As sophomores engage in major decisions and navigate transitions, opportunities exist for institutions to examine literacy and outreach to address students' financial challenges to advance retention, persistence, and graduation.

Students need proactive institutional support to help them anticipate and plan for the impact of debt over the long term. Poplaski et al. (2019) examined the psychological impact of debt on students and found that students may lack clear expectations regarding future income or living expenses. As sophomores prepare to declare their majors and make career decisions, an exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of career choices, including future income and opportunities, is paramount. Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015) highlighted students' desires for assistance in this area in the second year, including 71% of second-year students at four-year, public institutions. Faculty experts, academic advisors, career counselors, and other student support staff can play critical roles in helping students navigate more effective borrowing processes during college and understand the impact of student debt on their future states (Baker & Montalto, 2019; Zerquera et al., 2017).

Sophomore students may struggle to balance school and work, impacting their abilities to persist and successfully complete college. Trombitas (2012) shared that the top five stressors for all college students include the cost of education and need to repay student loans. One way that many students navigate these stressors is by working while in college. For students at four-year, public institutions like ODU, a part-time job may fill a need to reduce financial strain. Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2011) found that 22.6% of sophomore students at four-year, public institutions worked 11 to 20 hours per week, higher than students at four-year, private institutions (20.7%)



and two-year institutions (15.6%). The need to work while in college may imply a continued tension between balancing school and work.

Baker and Montalto (2019) shared how high levels of financial stress have a negative impact on academic performance. More alarming, the same study showed that high amounts of student loan debt had a disproportionate impact on the academic performance of students of color compared to their White peers (Baker & Montalto, 2019). Without financial literacy education regarding student loan reliance and institutional resources for students to pay for college, burdens related to financial stress and balancing academic performance may prove too challenging for students to complete their degrees. Zerquera et al. (2017) found that institutions can play a greater role in managing student loan debt and financial literacy by adjusting student beliefs and expectations around paying for college; promoting individual meaning making in student financial decisions; and using a holistic, academic-financial advising approach to providing direct feedback to students.

Financial issues can influence sophomore student health and well-being. For example, Poplaski et al. (2019) found that students reporting over \$20,000 in student loan debt scored notably higher on the stress scale. Stress has negative effects on student health, with chronic stress creating a significant barrier to academic performance and mental well-being (Baker & Montalto, 2019; Oehme et al., 2018; Poplaski et al., 2019). At ODU, the median federal loan debt is \$24,500 (United States News & World Report, n.d.). These statistics provide a clear opportunity for ODU to examine the relationship between finances and student well-being related to retention, persistence, and graduation. Additionally, sophomores are receptive to assistance from institutions related to finances. Over 50% of second-year students at four-year, public institutions desire help managing their personal finances, a jump of over 30% compared to

their first year (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015). Financial literacy may prove to be an invaluable opportunity for institutions to take a holistic approach to student persistence.

### **Unique Barriers Faced by Sophomore Students**

Institutions readily recognize that students transitioning from high school to college need support to become acclimated to the new structure and demands. However, institutions often fail to recognize the needs of sophomore students beyond the first year as they continue in their collegiate careers (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Kranzow et al., 2015; Plominksi & Burns, 2017; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011, 2015; Schaller, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). This failure can have the unintentional consequence of causing feelings of abandonment for sophomore students, causing further disconnectedness. While sophomore students have completed the first year of their higher education journeys, they are often overlooked by higher education administration due to many factors. These factors often translate to barriers to re-enrollment.

### ***Curricular and Extracurricular Support***

Institutions that want to cultivate success in sophomore students must understand that support should be multifaceted. While support in and out of the classroom is important for sophomore students, it is essential that institutions also attend to the mental wellness of students (Oehme et al., 2018). Classroom experiences are essential factors in fostering sophomore student success. Institutions that encourage collaborative and active learning techniques within the curriculum have an increased impact on cultural and intellectual openness as well as cognitive growth (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010). Research has shown that certain behaviors from faculty members increase student persistence, including approachability and prompt communications.

Experiences outside of the classroom are essential for students to develop supportive, interpersonal relationships. Peer relationships positively influence numerous factors that encourage student success, including field of study, cognitive development, and critical thinking skills (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010). Kennedy and Upcraft also explained that peer relationships are the most influential factor in development during the undergraduate college years as these relationships offer socialization, support, and self-confidence. As students acclimate themselves to the new demands of college and build new support systems, it is essential to understand that their past experiences and traumas impact their engagement with classmates and administration, and can affect their overall persistence toward graduation.

### ***Trauma and Mental Wellness***

Oehme et al. (2018) found that college students who have experienced a significant number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are at an increased likelihood of self-medicating to manage anxiety and depression that can result from the new demands of attending college. Students can experience mental health issues for the first time while in college, as 75% of mental illnesses materialize by the age of 24. Oehme et al. explained that another study suggested that 35% of students who enroll in college were previously diagnosed with a mental health issue.

The transition from high school to college can be traumatic for students and result in maladaptive coping techniques, such as alcohol use disorders, including binge drinking and substance abuse. Institutions and administrators who support students must also consider that students who come to higher education have experienced stressors and ACEs. Research has shown that ACEs are common, but are a major underreported cause of health problems in adults (Oehme et al., 2018). The 2017 Healthy Campus Report, conducted by Florida State University,

showed that stress and anxiety were barriers to a successful academic performance (Oehme et al., 2018). The report identified that 57% of the students experienced anxiety, and 32% reported suffering from depression (Oehme et al., 2018). Health and wellness were significant focal points for students as almost half of the respondents reported feeling hopeless. Institutions can help students navigate this sensitive time with resources and information that addresses mental health and coping strategies, while also empowering discussions regarding ACEs and resilience.

### *Attrition*

Relevant literature has noted that several factors influence sophomore student retention rates, with faculty interactions acting as the leading factor (Schaller, 2010a). Schaller went on to explain that sophomore students can find it challenging to interact with faculty as they leave first-year advisors and enroll in larger general education classes taught by faculty outside of their fields of interest. Cultivating student-faculty relationships early in the sophomore academic year can lead to increased student engagement. Faculty can encourage this increased interaction through undergraduate research opportunities, faculty interactions in living and learning communities, and having students attend professional presentations and conferences (Groccia, 2018).

Advising is another key factor in supporting sophomore student retention. Advising structures within universities are designed to provide sophomore students with limited advising due to their lower academic positions, while providing juniors and seniors with the highest level of support as they move closer to degree completion. Sophomores who have not declared majors often do not have dedicated faculty advisors. These students often feel increased pressure to choose majors with little guidance from the faculty within their fields of interest (Schreiner et al., 2012). The practice of providing limited advising to sophomores can be detrimental as,

developmentally, sophomore students may need increased interaction with faculty as they complete general education courses (Schaller, 2010a).

Groccia's (2018) model of student engagement stated that students should be engaged across spectrums in teaching, learning, and research. Students should also be engaged with faculty, peers, and the collegiate community. Groccia found that creating a community contributes to student satisfaction and increases retention rates. Students often create communities through living in residence halls and living-learning communities.

Social interaction is another factor that affects sophomore retention rates. Schaller (2010a) explained that students who develop strong social and emotional connections with their classmates are less likely to leave college before completing their degrees. Participation in formal organizations, such as student government, intramural sports, and peer study groups increased the students' likelihood of being academically successful. Evidence has also shown that participation in sororities and fraternities caused increased GPAs and increased retention during the sophomore year (Bowman & Holmes, 2017). Kennedy and Upcraft (2010) found that students show more commitment to their institutions when they believe the administration is invested in their well-being and has created communities that provide social support.

### ***Persistence***

Sophomore student persistence is affected by four areas: academic demands, navigating institutional requirements, developmental concerns, and meeting expectations (Sterling, 2018). Their abilities to obtain their first choice of majors is affected by their first year GPAs. Sophomore students also experience an increased workload during their sophomore years as they start courses within their fields of study. Sterling argued that increased workload coupled with GPA concerns can create an environment of substantial stress for sophomore students.

Traditionally, institutions devote significant resources to assisting freshman students learn to navigate college. First year programs can help students navigate registration, advising, and housing. Sterling (2018) explained that these resources are often not available for sophomore students, which can often leave them feeling frustrated. Developmentally, sophomore students are attempting to make meaning of their choices to attend college and find their purposes. Additionally, sophomore students are developing self-evaluation skills, while redefining relationships and establishing their identities. Finally, sophomore students are grappling with the expectations of their environments, while attempting to redefine their identities and find purposes in their collegiate journeys.

Sophomore students who are unsuccessful in navigating the new demands and expectations of college are more likely to be ambivalent about attending college and experience apathy regarding their second year of college. This year, often called the forgotten year, finds sophomore students returning to campus without the support of first year programs (Sterling, 2018). This lack of support comes at pivotal developmental time as sophomores are still navigating the landscape of higher education. During their sophomore years, students may have not solidified their reasons for choosing to attend college, which can lead to increased levels of stress. Courses during the sophomore year are more challenging and more in line with potential career options and require increased investment. This increased investment can lead to increased stress. A lack of support from faculty and no formal second year experience programming can lead to feelings of apathy or feeling forgotten (Tobolowsky, 2008). These feelings can lead to the sophomore slump, the leading cause of sophomore attrition (Sterling, 2018)

Research has shown as many as one-quarter of sophomore students experience the sophomore slump (Sterling, 2018). Further, research has shown that sophomore students were

the least satisfied with their college experiences. Sterling also stated sophomore students reported being profoundly dismayed at losing the institutional support they received during freshman year. The loss of support and connection during a critical developmental period for sophomore students leads to disconnection and, often, contributes to attrition.

Currently, as stated by College Transitions (2021), the national retention rate from freshman to sophomore year is 78%. Students who have successfully persisted from the first to the second year have increased awareness regarding the institution's ability to meet their needs (Sterling, 2018). Sterling also commented that sophomore students are more evaluative of how institutions meet their needs. High value is placed on course content, accessible and engaged faculty, and the ease of navigating institutional processes, such as registration. Additionally, Sterling noted that an institution's ability to meet the needs of its students is essential to student success; however, institutions offer substantially decreased support for sophomore students. With a 53% six-year graduation rate, it is pivotal that ODU assesses second- to third-year student retention to determine what interventions may need to be established.

### ***COVID-19***

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of higher education. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's Spring 2021 report showed that postsecondary enrollment dropped by over 600,000 students from a year earlier, marking a seven-time larger decline than the previous annual report. Students reported several reasons for their decrease in enrollment, including the inability to afford college, a diminished college experience, and psychological burnout resulting from the pandemic (Sedmak, 2021).

Due to COVID-19, most institutions switched to entirely online modalities to conduct classes. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2020), only 2.5% of colleges

conducted classes entirely in person in Spring 2020, with 15% using a hybrid model. This less personal educational experience was often attached to the same price tag as in-person learning and left some families of college students reluctant to re-enroll (Gailey, 2021). Faced with another year of online learning, some students opted for a gap year (Gailey, 2021).

In addition, students faced other barriers as a result of the pandemic. The closure of residence halls meant that some students did not have access to safe, affordable housing. Rodriguez (2021) explained that the lack of housing also meant a lack of access to other necessities for online learning, including computers and internet access. Lower-income students also found themselves without employment, as many were unable to work on campus due to university closures. Students who were essential workers quit their jobs to avoid exposing family members to possible COVID-19 infections. Due to the pandemic, these students also had increased family obligations, including caretaking responsibilities for their siblings and older family members.

During the pandemic, the lack of housing, employment, and access to other necessities highlighted the inequities that higher education has struggled with since its inception. Stephanie Marken (2020), executive director of education research at Gallup, explained that 56% of students of color, due to the pandemic, expected to have their four-year degree completion journey negatively impacted. Only 44% of their White counterparts believed that their four-year degree completion journey would be negatively impacted.

HIPs, specifically sophomore orientation programs and living learning communities, were deeply impacted by COVID-19 safety measures. Students could not engage in these profoundly beneficial programs as universities closed residence halls and reverted to predominately online teaching modalities. Additional HIPs, such as research, service learning,



and internships, were markedly reduced or completely eliminated in response to COVID-19 safety measures. The loss of these valuable and impactful practices further isolated sophomore students at a pivotal time in their collegiate development.

### **Student Success**

Student success refers to students receiving the benefits that higher education promises, which primarily include increasing the number of students who achieve their postsecondary educational goals (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). This type of success is essential as students determine whether the present-day cost of higher education has valuable future returns. Institutions must show that the current costly investment of pursuing a degree will indeed assist students in reaching their future academic and professional goals. The phrase ‘student success’ can encompass several things: a call for institutions to support students in achieving their goals within higher education, or it can represent persistence from year-to-year, degree completion, or increased literacy and/or reasoning skills. State and federal policymakers also include earning and employment post-college in defining student success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017).

To further support student success, institutions are implementing programming to support students toward graduating. Sophomore success programs are being increasingly implemented to address the needs of sophomore students. Carleton College, Gettysburg College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis, and Ohio State University are several of the schools that were rated in the top 10 best institutions in 2021 for getting students over the sophomore slump by Great Value Colleges (2021).

### ***Sophomore Student Success Examples***

Carleton College is a private, liberal arts college in Northfield, Minnesota, that hosts Sophomorphis (Carleton College, 2021). This two-week program assists students with various

aspects of their sophomore year, including undergraduate research opportunities, resume writing, and interviewing for internships. Carleton sophomore students enrolled in Sophomorphis participate in the Focus 2 Career. This four-module course guides sophomore students through career planning. The first two modules help students assess their interests, skills, and personality to aid in selecting their majors. Then, the students work through the remaining modules with a career coach.

Gettysburg College is a private liberal arts college that has four programs geared toward supporting sophomore students (Gettysburg College, 2021). The first program, a welcome back seminar, is led by senior students in each sophomore residence hall and gives an overview of the sophomore success program and its requirements. The second program, The Sophomore Career Check-In, assists sophomore students in selecting their majors, exploring internships, gaining leadership roles on campus, and reflecting on how these decisions will influence their futures. G-Chats, the third program, is designed to foster student connectedness, between senior and sophomore students. These peer-to-peer sessions provide sophomore students opportunities to ask questions and seek out additional support. The final program is about campus engagement, where students must participate in one campus activity during the fall and spring semesters and write reflections on their experiences.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT's) Undergraduate Practice Opportunities Program (UPOP) is a year-long program that assists sophomore students in building the necessary skills to enter the workforce (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021). Students enrolled in MIT's program participate in one-to-one mentoring with professionals and peer advising with upper-level students and alumni. They also participate in workshops with staff members and employers in the community. Another essential aspect of this

program is that it serves as a pipeline to other initiatives, including the prestigious Gordon-MIT Engineering Leadership Program.

Sophomore initiatives at Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis are housed within their Division of Student Affairs (Thompson, 2019). The university maintains several programs to support sophomore students, including Chew on This, a series of lunch seminars covering various topics, such as financial literacy and stress management. Sophomore Socials are informal get-togethers that foster community and bonding among sophomore students. The Sophomore Explore and Engage Program (SEE) is for second-year students who live on campus. These students complete a series of online assignments that culminates in a service-learning project. Students receive a \$250 stipend for each semester they finish in the SEE program.

The Ohio State University's Second-Year Transformational Experience Program (STEP) provides students with a structured program that culminates in receiving a \$2,000 fellowship to complete a STEP project (The Ohio State University, 2021). Participants can live on campus, at home, or in Greek housing and attend weekly meetings with mentors and peers. They must also complete a financial wellness course, attend a STEP expo, maintain a 2.0 GPA, and submit a proposal and budget on how their fellowship funding will be spent. The students must complete their projects during their sophomore year and return to Ohio State in their third year to report on their experiences.

Currently, ODU has dedicated a committee to support sophomore student success. The committee is focused on developing successful initiatives for students transferring to the institution. ODU has tutoring services and identity-focused mentor services (Old Dominion University, 2021e). What ODU currently lacks, however, is specific sophomore programming.

### **Chapter Summary**

Sophomore students have diverse needs that often get overlooked because of stronger institutional focuses on freshmen students entering college, and junior and senior students preparing to graduate college. ODU's 53% six-year graduation rate indicates that sophomore retention may be an issue of concern at the institution. Institutions of higher education must be knowledgeable about how to provide the services and programs to support student retention, persistence, and on-time graduation. The second year of college requires developing positive, meaningful relationships with peers, administrators, and faculty. Common barriers include financial concerns, lack of adequate institutional support, and trauma and wellness risks. Faculty and staff also need to understand the identities of their students to effectively offer the support they individually require to be successful during the sophomore year. The literature we have reviewed shows that institutions must take a holistic approach to ensuring that sophomore students can successfully navigate common barriers to success. Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) is a theoretical framework that has been found to help institutions understand and respond to the common stages that sophomore students experience. Complemented by Schreiner's theory on thriving (2018), our literature review provides us with the foundational groundwork needed to develop the appropriate research methodology to answer our research questions.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methods**

We revealed in our review of the literature that a comprehensive understanding of the sophomore student experience is essential for student success (Nelson, 2018; Pitstick, 2018; Schaller 2010a; Schreiner, 2018; Virtue et al., 2017). Institutions of higher education should examine academic experiences, academic support services, financial structures, and barriers for students, as well as students' senses of belonging and wellness strategies to improve holistic student life and student success. Colleges and universities are making stronger connections between these key elements of the student experience to advance retention, persistence, and graduation goals. As a public research university with a mission to promote academic rigor and vibrant student life, Old Dominion University (ODU) has identified the sophomore experience as being worthy of examination. ODU Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services (SEES) is primed to connect the institution's strategic enrollment priorities with success strategies that support a diverse student population.

Our study assessed the sophomore student experience and will recommend practical approaches to advance organizational, cultural, and institutional conditions for improved sophomore student persistence. We describe in this chapter the exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods approach used to answer our research questions. As part of an exploratory, sequential approach, a qualitative research phase was conducted to understand the perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2014). Once the data were analyzed, the information gathered was used to build the quantitative phase.

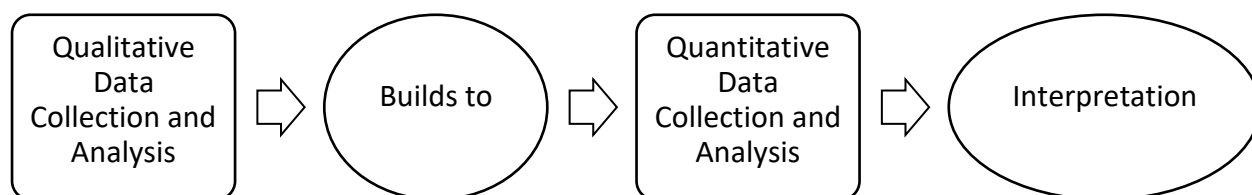
#### **Theoretical Framework**

As discussed in our literature review, sophomore students have a greater chance to persist when institutional conditions meet student needs, address individual and structural barriers, and

advance self-commitment to the significant decisions traditionally made in the second year. The theoretical framework we created combined Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005), Schreiner's (2018) theory of *thriving* as a model of student success, and Berger and Braxton's (1998) organizational attributes for the student persistence theory. This perspective guided how we developed recommendations for new initiatives and programs to enhance ODU's sophomore student experience. Inductively, we formed our recommendations and strategies based on the qualitative and quantitative data we gathered and analyzed. In an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods study, researchers must pay careful attention to the data analysis during the qualitative data phase to determine what findings to build on (Creswell, 2014). Figure 1 illustrates how we went through the process.

**Figure 1**

*Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods*



*Note.* From Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). SAGE. Copyright 2014 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

### **Sophomore Student Development Model**

Schaller (2005) focused on four developmental stages of the student experience: *random exploration*, *focused exploration*, *tentative choices*, and *commitment*. The ability of students to move through Schaller's developmental stages depends on the institution's ability to meet the oft-overlooked needs of sophomores. Schaller's developmental stages are used to analyze and

assess programming for sophomores, typically in the focused exploration phase, moving toward tentative choices. The sophomores' needs can be assessed and prioritized for those students who are most underrepresented, and resources and activities can be designed to help them connect with the campus community and stay academically engaged. Our team held focus group sessions and interviews with current ODU juniors and seniors, and administered surveys to current ODU sophomore students, staff, and faculty to determine which interventions connected to the four developmental stages. Then, we analyzed the gaps critical to sophomore student development.

### **Thriving**

As a model of student success, *thriving* represents the ability of students to achieve optimal functioning in the realms of academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being (Schreiner, 2018). Schreiner suggested that the focus of the second year should be on pathways to thriving, including major certainty, campus involvement, student-faculty interactions, spirituality, institutional integrity, and sense of community on campus. Our study uses these pathways and the theory of *thriving* to guide and inform our focus groups and survey questions. Qualitative and quantitative data collected from ODU students, staff, and faculty enable us to assess sophomore students' *thriving* at the institution and determine the need for additional interventions that could increase retention and persistence.

### **Organizational Attributes that Contribute to Student Persistence**

Relatedly, Berger and Braxton (1998) examined the effects of organizational attributes on student persistence through six variables: *background characteristics*, *initial institutional commitment*, *organizational attributes*, *social integration*, *subsequent institutional commitment*, and *departure decision*. We are particularly interested in *initial institutional commitment*, *subsequent institutional commitment*, and *organizational attributes*. The two institutional

commitment variables examine students' choices of institutions and their levels of personal commitment, confidence, and connection to their institutions, respectively. The concept of *commitment* is present in both Schaller (2005) and Berger and Braxton (1998) and is a critical component to one of our research questions focused on understanding the sophomore student experience at ODU.

The *organizational attributes* variable examines the impact of institutional culture on the academic and social lives of students. Specifically, Berger and Braxton (1998) assessed the impact of institutional communication of expectations, fairness of policy, rule enforcement, and participation in decision-making processes on students' abilities to persist. As part of our study, we also interviewed administrators from institutions that have successful sophomore programming to serve as a practical benchmark. Additionally, our surveying of faculty and staff at ODU helped us better understand organizational culture and practices and their impacts on the sophomore student experience at the institution.

Finally, ODU is interested in improving strategies for individual and collective practitioners to promote sophomore persistence. Berger and Braxton (1998) took an environmental approach to examining how institutions can improve positive student perceptions of strategies, programs, and policies that affect persistence. Further, Schreiner (2018) advised higher education institutions to acknowledge the struggles of underrepresented sophomores and ensure that they received the support they required to succeed. Our framework will directly contribute to one of our research questions focused on understanding the organizational attributes at ODU that contribute to persistence. By using an epistemic framework and relevant literature, we hope to understand the student experience and organizational challenges associated with sophomore student success at ODU.



### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

In their Request for Assistance (RFA), SEES identified a potential problem of practice where sophomore students experienced a myriad of challenges during their second year at the institution, but did not receive the same level of support that first-year students received. While ODU currently offers several sophomore-centric programs and initiatives to support student success, SEES determined a need to examine the challenges that sophomores face that may contribute to attrition. Therefore, we assessed the sophomore student experience at ODU and reviewed how current practices influenced this experience. We also examined the organizational culture of ODU due to the important role it plays in institutional and student success.

Ott (1995) likened organizational culture to the character of an institution. Reason (2009) found that a student's perception of an institution's organizational culture factors into persistence, which he defined as "the individual phenomenon of persisting to a goal" (p. 660). Reason recommended that research on student persistence must explore organizational behaviors, policies, and practices that can create environments where students persist in their goals. Moreover, Craig (2004) stated that an institution's ability to understand organizational culture is important for implementing changes and preparing for future success. In addition to creative leadership, Craig also indicated that transformational change requires internal and external constituency engagement. Relatedly, our study used Ott's (1995) definition of organizational culture, "a combination of beliefs, values, professional traditions, behavioral norms, ways of thinking, and jargon that members of an organization share" (pp. 366-367), to inform our research design.

The purpose of this study is to examine the sophomore student experience at ODU and the ways in which organizational culture impacts this experience. We also provide

recommendations for strategies that can assist with second- to third-year retention and sophomore student persistence. Three questions guided the study:

- 1) What is the sophomore student experience at ODU?
  - a) What are the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience at ODU?
- 2) What are the organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence at ODU?
- 3) What strategies can ODU implement to increase second to third-year retention and help sophomores to thrive and persist?

Our team developed a research design that collected qualitative and quantitative data to assess the sophomore student experience at ODU as well as organizational culture and existing services and practices at ODU that impact sophomore students (See Appendix B). Moreover, we examined relevant practices that impact the sophomore student experience at benchmark institutions to help answer our third research question.

This study defined sophomore students as individuals entering their second year of post-secondary education. To examine students' perspectives and attitudes regarding resources, administration, advising, and programs available during the second year of study, focus groups and interviews were conducted with ODU students who have completed their second year of study. The majority of the focus group and interview participants were from underrepresented groups (i.e., transfer students, military-affiliated students, students of color, first-generation college students) and students who participated in living-learning communities (LLCs). The focus groups and interviews enabled our team to gain narrative qualitative data from the individual experiences of the students.

Data were requested on current ODU students to identify the different biodemographic information and characteristics of sophomore students at the institution. University data, marketing, and communication plans were also reviewed to evaluate messages that were sent to faculty, students, and staff regarding sophomore support programming. In addition to holding focus groups and interviews with current ODU juniors and seniors, our team also administered a comprehensive survey to current ODU sophomore students that assessed satisfaction levels with various services, practices, and initiatives designed to assist students. Faculty and staff were also surveyed from various units at ODU, and we interviewed individuals at other institutions with successful sophomore programming to use in our organizational culture and practices analysis.

### **Research Design**

Our team conducted an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods design. Johnson et al. (2007) defined mixed methods research as:

the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (p. 122).

Mixed methods research is ultimately concerned with heightening knowledge and validity by combining quantitative and qualitative research data to expand and strengthen a study's conclusions and recommendations (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). An exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods approach allows for researchers to use the data collected and analyzed from one qualitative component to inform the data collection and analysis of another quantitative component (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

An exploratory, mixed methods research design also allows researchers to have an

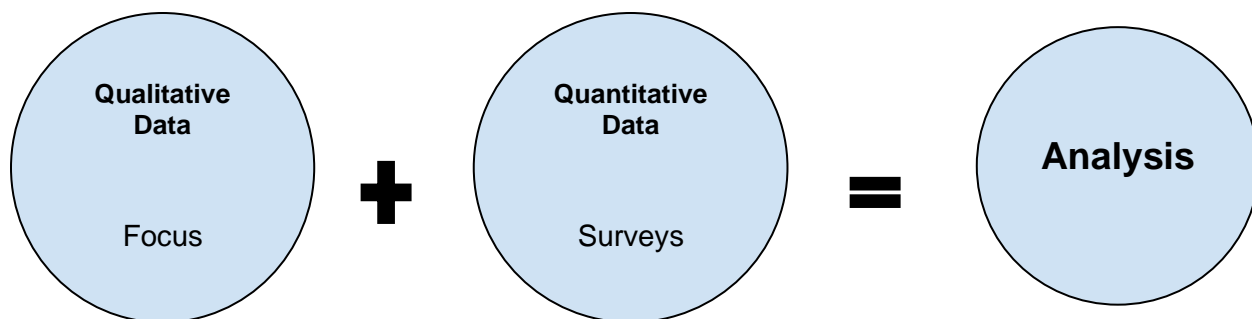
increased understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2014). The first phase, qualitative data collection, helps to identify how the target population understands the event that is being studied (Mihas & Odum, 2019). Our team hoped that feedback from current ODU juniors and seniors who had already completed their second year of study would supplement information gathered from our literature review to better inform the survey we developed for current ODU sophomore students. Focus groups and interviews provide researchers the opportunity to collect qualitative data, gather the views of the participants, and give participants a voice in the research process. The collected data can then be analyzed and coded to determine themes (Mihas & Odum, 2019).

The second phase, quantitative data collection, assesses whether the findings discovered during the qualitative phase can be generalized. Codes, themes, and quotes discovered during the previous phase influence the quantitative data by informing the questions developed for surveys (Mihas & Odum, 2019). Further, data gathered from focus groups and interviews is helpful in drafting questions as it provides language familiar to the target population (Mihas & Odum, 2019).

As illustrated in Figure 2, we collected qualitative data through focus groups and interviews during the first phase, and collected quantitative data through web-based surveys during the second phase.

## **Figure 2**

*Mixed Method Research Design*



During the qualitative phase, ODU juniors and seniors provided a retrospective of their second year including their experiences with advising, faculty, administrators, and high impact practices (HIPs). We used Dedoose to code the qualitative data obtained from the focus groups and interviews. Dedoose is a cloud-based collaborative platform used to code quantitative and mixed methods designed research projects (Dedoose, 2022). The themes discovered from these focus groups and interviews were used to draft survey questions for the quantitative data collection. Quantitative data was gathered through student and faculty/staff surveys.

We examined data collected from our surveys that depicted the students', administrators', and faculty's experiences with advising, HIPs, and sophomore support services. Survey research is a descriptive, nonexperimental method used to collect information through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups (Burkholder, 2020). Our team used quantitative data gathered via surveys to provide statistical baselines and eliminate bias among recipient responses. The survey data were used to evaluate the current level of the programming and perception of the support offered to sophomore students.

The survey instruments we developed were approved for distribution by the capstone chair, and client and consisted of questions about respondent demographics; the level of awareness of ODU's sophomore student initiatives; and faculty, staff, and student experiences that pertain to sophomore student-specific initiatives (See Appendices C and D). Based on the

data gathered from the focus groups and interviews, we designed survey questions to gain quantitative data on the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience. The purpose of the survey instruments was to gather data that could answer our research questions and inform recommendations for sophomore student success initiatives to improve organizational culture and sophomore student initiatives. The data gathered from this study will be used to inform internal processes and program improvement and is not considered experimental research and, as a result, approval from the Institutional Review Board was not required.

Additionally, we reviewed enrollment data from Fall 2016 through Fall 2021, including gender, race/ethnicity, program of study, GPA, transfer student status, residential/commuter, military affiliation, and first-generation college students (FGCS) to evaluate potential trends across student categories. ODU also provided us with a listing of the major welcome back programming that included any specific welcome events related to sophomores, transfer students, students of marginalized identities, and populations that may be at risk of attrition to further understand what programming is currently in place to assist students become informed of available resources to assist with student acclimation and belonging. While reviewing this information was helpful, we chose to primarily focus on data obtained during the qualitative and quantitative phases of our study. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) indicated that by adopting a user-centered approach to data collection that provides stakeholders opportunities to express their perspectives, researchers may stand a better chance at discovering the root cause of a problem.

### **Participants**

Data was collected from three groups: faculty, students, and staff. To identify focus groups and interview participants, ODU provided a listing of students whom the institution had

identified as individuals who had completed their second year of study. Eligible students, staff, and faculty for our surveys were recruited through emails sent by the capstone team and ODU SEES. Although our goal was for at least 30% of eligible student participants to complete the survey, only 4% of eligible participants completed the student survey.

Faculty at ODU are of three types: administrative, teaching and research, and professional (Old Dominion University, 2021f). All faculty within these categories were identified by ODU. Staff shall be defined as salaried employees who are not identified as faculty. Staff, as identified by ODU, who support sophomore students in the commission of their assigned duties were specifically targeted for participation in the survey. Surveys were distributed via email from ODU SEES administrators on behalf of our research team to encourage participation. While our aim was to have at least 30% of identified and eligible faculty and staff complete the survey, only 16% of staff and faculty participants completed the faculty and staff survey.

## **Data Collection**

### **Setting**

Qualitative data were collected during virtual focus groups and interviews held via Zoom, while quantitative data was collected via anonymous, self-administered, web-based surveys using QuestionPro. QuestionPro is an online survey tool used to collect non-confidential quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers chose QuestionPro as a survey tool as it allows data collected to be analyzed for trends (QuestionPro, n.d.).

### **Focus Groups and Interviews**

ODU SEES identified 8,546 students who had completed at least 60 credits and their second year of study. The participants self-identified as any of the following: military-affiliated,

FGCS, transfer students, marginalized identities, or as a participant in a HIP. Of these individuals, 11 male (18%) and female (82%) students participated in either a focus group or interview session. Of the participants, 55% identified as White, 46% identified as Black/African-American, 18% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 9% identified as a race/ethnicity not listed on our biodemographic form. Participants were allowed to select more than one choice in relation to race/ethnicity. In addition, 46% of the participants lived off-campus independently, 36% lived on campus, and 18% lived off-campus with others. Finally, 73% of our participants identified as FGCS, 55% identified as transfer students, and 36% identified as military-affiliated students. Participants were allowed to select more than one choice in relation to student identity. We assigned the following pseudonyms for these participants: Elias, Sarah, Rochelle, Melissa, Jane, John, Kim, Tammy, Tara, Julie, and Jill.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all focus groups and interviews were held virtually. Two focus groups were conducted consisting of two students per group. Semi-structured interviews were conducted when only one participant attended the focus group. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the meetings. We collected general, non-identifying demographic information from the participants via Google Forms to determine any noteworthy patterns. We notified the participants that the sessions would be recorded and responses would be transcribed, but no identifying information would be shared or retained. As a result of these measures, Institutional Review Board approval was not required. We transcribed the responses via Zoom teleconferencing software. In our first round of focus group and interview participants held in December 2021, the participants were entered into a drawing for a \$25 Visa gift card. In an effort to boost participation in January 2022, a second round of focus groups and interviews were conducted due to low participation during the



previous sessions. New participants were each provided \$15 in Monarch Plus, a debit account on student ID cards that can be used at various on and off-campus locations. (See Appendix G for examples of emails sent to solicit participation in focus group sessions).

During this phase of our data collection we also interviewed individuals from benchmark institutions who have sophomore success and retention programs. These semi-structured interviews would gather data regarding current best practices for supporting sophomore students. These interviews were conducted via zoom and recorded. Participants were notified of recording but were not identified by name. Benchmark and aspirational peers were identified by ODU SEES. Institutions identified had successful programming that improved the retention rate for sophomore students.

### **Surveys**

The survey instruments contained questions across the following areas: institutional support, institutional accessibility including advising, financial aid, health and wellness resources, experiences with sophomore success initiatives, communication of sophomore experience opportunities, and impact of the sophomore experience with HIPs. ODU SEES assisted by furnishing the email addresses for 2,676 active sophomore students to participate in the *Sophomore Student Survey* distributed by our research team. An initial email invitation was sent out on February 1, 2022 and the survey remained open until February 21, 2022. Email reminders were sent to those students who had not yet completed the survey on February 7, February 15, and February 21. The anonymous survey consisted of approximately 30 closed, open-ended, and Likert scale questions. At the end of the survey, the participants had the opportunity to enter a random drawing for select winners to have \$20 added to their Monarch Plus account.

In total, 414 individuals viewed the survey, 250 began it, and 112 completed it. Our team only analyzed the results of those individuals who completed the survey. Of these 112 individuals, 63% identified as female, 27% identified as male, 4% identified as non-binary, 2% identified as other, 1% identified as transgender, and 4% chose not to disclose their gender. In addition, 42% of the participants identified as White, 25% identified as Black/African-American, 10% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 9% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 5% identified as a Multiracial or Biracial, 3% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, and 5% preferred not to disclose their race/ethnicity. Of the participants, 41% lived off-campus with family or friends, 36% lived on campus, 20% lived off-campus independently, and 3% preferred not to disclose this information. Additionally, 35% of our participants identified as FGCS, 33% identified as transfer students, and 26% identified as military-affiliated students.

Not only was our sample population demographically diverse, but it was also closely aligned with the most recent ODU demographic information of its student body. See Table 1.

**Table 1**

*ODU Demographic and Diversity Information*

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Biographic/Demographic Information	Total Student Population	Student Survey
Female	56.8%	63.1%
Male	43.2%	27%
White	46.7%	42.4%

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Black/African-American	28.9%	25%
Hispanic/Latinx	8.5%	9.1%
Multiracial or Biracial	5.8%	5.3%
Asian or Pacific Islander	4.9%	9.9%
American Indian/Alaska Native	<1%	3%

*Note.* Total student population data is based on total ODU enrollment for academic year 2020-2021 as per <https://www.univstats.com/>.

ODU SEES identified 477 eligible staff and faculty to participate in the survey. These participants received the survey on January 12, 2022 and it remained open until February 11, 2022. Email reminders were sent to eligible participants on January 27, 2022. The anonymous survey consisted of approximately 28 closed, open-ended, and Likert scale questions. The participants were entered into a drawing to receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card. In total, 399 individuals viewed the survey, 155 began it, and 74 completed it. Our team only analyzed the results of those individuals who completed the survey. Of these 74 individuals, 74% identified as staff and 27% identified as faculty. In addition faculty and staff self identified as the following: 49% of the participants identified as White, 37% identified as Black/African-American, 4% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, 4% identified as Multiracial or Biracial, 3% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% identified as a race/ethnicity not listed among our options (See Appendix D), and 3% preferred not to disclose their race/ethnicity. None of our participants identified as Hispanic/Latinx.

### **Data Analysis**

Table 2 illustrates how we employed the multiple qualitative and quantitative methods

associated with an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods research design to answer our research questions.

**Table 2**

*Mixed-Methods Data Analysis*

Research Question	Qualitative Data	Quantitative Data
1. What is the sophomore student experience at ODU?	Student focus groups and interviews	Student survey questionnaire
1a. What are the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience at ODU?	Coding and document analysis	Faculty/staff survey questionnaire  Coding and document analysis
2. What are the organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence at ODU?	Student focus groups and interviews  Coding and document analysis	Student survey questionnaire  Faculty/staff survey questionnaire

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 Coding and document analysis
 

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3. What strategies can ODU implement to increase second to third-year retention and help sophomores to thrive and persist?	Student focus groups and interviews  Interviews with benchmark institutions  Coding and document analysis	Student survey questionnaire  Faculty/staff survey questionnaire  Coding and document analysis
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*Note.* The table represents how we collected and utilized the qualitative and quantitative data to answer each of the study's research questions.

### ***Qualitative Data***

The qualitative data collected in the focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom teleconferencing software. Based on research conducted through our literature review, we developed an initial set of codes for prevalent themes associated with sophomore students. Our team reviewed, analyzed, and corrected the transcripts from each session for accuracy. We then coded the transcripts from our focus groups and interviews individually and collectively. Elliot (2018) described coding in qualitative research as a decision-making process where data is outlined to provide an overview of disparate data that researchers can use to make sense of the information in relation to their research questions. Deductive coding

creates codes derived from theoretical frameworks and relevant research, while inductive coding creates codes based on themes that emerge during the data collection process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Combining both approaches to data analysis enables researchers to maximize analytic acuity and create relevant thematic categorizations (Williams & Moser, 2019). A deductive approach was used to create a list of codes, such as sophomore programs, HIPs, and sophomore support, as determined by the themes that emerged from our theoretical framework, literature review, and discussions with the client. Additionally, inductive coding was used to create a list of codes based on the data gathered from the focus groups and interviews

### ***Quantitative Data***

The quantitative data provided demographic information on our sample; whether they lived on or off-campus; and additional student identities they may associate themselves with, such as transfer students, military-affiliated students, students of color, and FGCS. It also provided information on our participants' overall awareness of support services at ODU. Additionally, we surveyed respondents on their satisfaction levels with HIPs, academic advising, financial aid services, organizational culture, and available resources for sophomore students. For the qualitative data obtained in several open-ended questions of our survey, the team adopted a hybrid coding approach. We conducted a descriptive, statistical analysis from our collected data to detect potential patterns and trends.

### ***Results***

The results from our qualitative and quantitative data collection were analyzed using Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) and its stages of *random exploration*, *focused exploration*, *tentative choices*, and *commitment*. The data collected were additionally analyzed through Schreiner's (2018) thriving theory to ascertain sophomore students' academic

engagements, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being. Through an organizational culture lens, we analyzed the data using variables that Berger and Braxton (1998) identified as contributing to student persistence. The interpretation of this data through these frameworks enabled us to provide SEES with a model of sophomore student success and recommendations that can positively impact the sophomore student experience at ODU.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation was used to pull together all of our collected data to inform our recommended strategies to improve the sophomore student experience. Flick (2004) explained that “the triangulation of different approaches makes it possible to capture different aspects of the research issue – such as concrete examples of professional activity and knowledge of one’s own modes of action and routines” (p. 180). Capturing different aspects of the sophomore students’ experiences through our research design allowed our team to develop sustainable and specific strategies as opposed to surface-level recommendations. Through triangulation, Creswell (2014) noted how researchers who establish themes based on converging sources of data add to the validity of a research study.

Our team triangulated the data gathered from the focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Focus group and interview questions were centered on obtaining student perceptions and attitudes regarding their second year of study, and were used to create questions in our survey instrument. We also used information obtained from the focus groups and interviews to ensure that the language used in the student survey was appropriate for and relevant to the survey participants. This data provided us with a strong conceptual framework before we crafted the survey instrument. The survey questions focused on gathering data regarding the students’, faculty’s, and staff’s awareness of the current level of support for students in their second year at

ODU. After both phases of data collection were complete, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data to identify the major themes that emerged.

### **Trustworthiness and Limitations**

Our team concluded that trust was embedded in the research process. The constant need for simple, but highly effective measures to assess the content analysis research required the researchers to convey high trustworthiness in their research methods. Huberts (2018) suggested that ethics and integrity research must take an empirical turn to inform normative reasoning. By clicking the consent button on the first page of the survey, the participants acknowledged their understanding and confirmed their willingness to participate in the survey. Our team provided additional information on informed consent in the emails sent to the staff and faculty, and the students were provided detailed information on how to contact team members via email with any questions they had as it pertained to their participation in our study (See Appendices E and F). Participation was voluntary with an option to opt-out or quit at any time. The participants were informed that all of the data would be maintained safely, personal information would be kept private, and the findings would be masked to keep others from identifying the individual participants. In order to keep the data secure, we used a password-protected Google Drive folder, accessible only under student login and within university protection.

Despite the study's strengths, limitations were identified. COVID-19 continues to provoke a broad range of unexpected reactions and adjustments affecting university constituents. Since COVID-19 transformed the format of most courses, most current students enrolled in study activities are not as physically active on campus. As such, this situation may have posed a challenge to the recruitment of focus group members, and decreased participation in the programming being evaluated may be a by-product of the data analyzed from the institution.



COVID-19 also affected our ability to hold larger, in-person focus groups on the ODU campus during phase one of our data collection. We were also unable to visit the ODU campus to promote participation in our student surveys in person and only sent email reminders. Ideally, the number of student participants in our qualitative and quantitative phases of data collection would have been higher to yield a higher sample size. However, while the sample size is important for statistical analysis in quantitative data, it is less important in qualitative data because the depth of the findings is more important than the breadth of it (Crawford, 2016). Since statistical analysis was not the focus of our study, we relied more heavily on the narrative qualitative data to answer our research questions.

The study is also limited by the age of some of the data. The secondary data were at least three to five years old, and current assumptions were based on this past data. Further, our team was unable to access students who did not return to complete their sophomore year. These situations limited our understanding of those students who left for specific reasons that were unknown to the institution and researchers.

### **Chapter Summary**

A thorough study of ODU's potential problem of practice highlighted the necessity for examining sophomore students and the issues they experience that can lead to attrition. A review of the literature helped define sophomore students and their unique needs, showing that establishing meaningful relationships with peers, faculty members, and administrators is essential for sophomore success. We determined that a mixed-methods study approach was ideal for examining and considering the many different perspectives on sophomore student success at ODU. Our team analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data to assist ODU in better understanding their current organizational culture, sophomore student experience, and impact of

existing sophomore-centric initiatives, while also providing them with recommendations to improve sophomore student thriving, persistence, and retention. In our next chapter, we will discuss the findings of our study.

#### **Chapter Four: Findings**

Old Dominion University (ODU) offers several sophomore-centric initiatives, such as annual welcome back events, sophomore success coaching, and the *UNIV 111 Sophomore Seminar*. The Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services (SEES) submitted a Request for Assistance (RFA) to evaluate and identify recommendations to enhance the sophomore student experience at the institution. As we discussed in Chapter 1, while the freshman to sophomore retention rate at ODU is reported to be approximately 80%, a six-year graduation rate of 53% indicates a need to determine if unaddressed challenges exist among the sophomore student population. In response to ODU's RFA, our team developed and implemented an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods research design to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the sophomore student experience at ODU?
  - a) What are the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience at ODU?
2. What are the organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence at ODU?
3. What strategies can ODU implement to increase second to third-year retention and help sophomores to thrive and persist?

The research design for this study consisted of two phases of data collection, which allowed for the effective triangulation of the data. Triangulation utilizes a combination of different research methods to allow researchers to gain a greater understanding of the data than

when conducting separate analyses (O’Cathain et al., 2010). For the first phase of our data collection, we collected qualitative data through virtual focus groups and interviews with ODU juniors and seniors. Once coded and analyzed, we used this data to inform the questions created to survey current ODU sophomores during phase two of our data collection. The first phase of our data collection also consisted of interviewing individuals from benchmark institutions who have sophomore success and retention programs. This data complemented our overall findings to assist with developing strategies and recommendations on how to improve the sophomore student experience.

For the second phase of our data collection process, we distributed web-based surveys to ODU sophomores as well as current ODU staff and faculty who work with sophomore students to collect quantitative data to help answer our research questions. With input and assistance from SEES, we used an intentional selection of relevant participants for our focus groups, interviews, and surveys to allow for the collection and descriptive statistical analysis of data provided by individuals with a vested interest in our research topic.

### **Phase One Participants**

For the virtual focus groups on the sophomore student experience, 8,546 students who had completed their second year of college and earned at least 60 credits were invited to participate. From these invitees, 23 students signed up to attend, with 11 participants ultimately attending. We designed our focus groups to be informal conversations meant to capture the experiences, insights, and recommendations of ODU juniors and seniors regarding their sophomore student experience. Due to our low number of attendees, some of these focus groups became one-on-one interviews.

Additionally, we contacted 13 institutions of higher learning via email found through our research to have successful sophomore initiatives and programs. Six schools, a mix of large and mid-sized, private and public, research institutions, responded that they were able to be interviewed to discuss the success they have had with their sophomore programming. Research team members individually interviewed six individuals involved with these sophomore programs. The interviews were held via Zoom, with some of the responses submitted in writing via email.

### **Phase Two Participants**

ODU identified 2,676 students as potential sophomore students. These students were invited to participate in a web-based survey consisting of approximately 30 questions on the sophomore student experience at ODU. Although the response rate was only 4%, of the 414 individuals who viewed the survey, 250 began it and 112 completed it for a completion rate of 45%. In addition, 477 staff members and faculty were invited to participate in a web-based survey consisting of approximately 28 questions on the sophomore student experience at ODU. Of the 399 individuals who viewed the survey, 155 began it and 74 completed it for a completion rate of 48%.

### **Chapter Organization**

This chapter will be organized by three major themes (i.e., *sophomore student experience; organizational attributes; strategies for retention, thriving, and persistence*) as they relate to our research questions (see Table 3). We will divide the presentation of our findings into sections by each phase (qualitative and quantitative) of our data collection. In an effort to answer the research questions of our study, each section will present the findings that corroborate, contradict, or expand upon prior research on the sophomore student experience. Pseudonyms will

be used for all of the participants, and some responses have been edited for clarity and conciseness.

**Table 3**

*Theme and Research Question Alignment*

Theme	Research Question
Sophomore Student Experience	1. What is the sophomore student experience at ODU?  1a. What are the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience at ODU?
Organizational Attributes	2. What are the organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence at ODU?
Strategies for Retention, Thriving, and Persistence	3. What strategies can ODU implement to increase second to third-year retention and help sophomores to thrive and persist?

*Note.* The table represents the overall themes from our findings and how they align with our research questions.

**Phase One – Qualitative Research**

During phase one of our data collection, we conducted virtual focus groups and interviews with ODU juniors and seniors, asking them to reflect and provide feedback on their sophomore student experiences at the institution. Additionally, we conducted interviews with administrators at benchmark institutions who are actively involved with successful sophomore programming at their schools. Together, this qualitative data provided a comprehensive foundational groundwork to help answer our research questions.

## **ODU Students**

### *Sophomore Student Experience*

The qualitative data we collected from ODU juniors and seniors on their sophomore student experience focused primarily on the adjustment period to their second year, student-faculty interactions, academic advising, and COVID-19's impact on their sense of belonging and school culture. These findings were mostly aligned with our deductive coding approach that reflected the pre-existing themes from the literature on sophomore students and the combined theoretical framework of Schaller (2005), Schreiner (2018), and Berger and Braxton (1998) that we used for our study. Due to the newness of COVID-19, findings in this area were inductive and influenced our decision to include several specific COVID-related questions in our sophomore student survey during phase two of data collection. Focus group and interview participants during our qualitative phase of data collection offered valuable insights into the relevant practices that currently exist at ODU that influenced their experiences as sophomore students. They also recommended potential practices to be implemented at the institution to improve the sophomore student experience.

**Adjustment Period.** The majority of the ODU juniors and seniors who participated in our focus groups and interviews described their sophomore student experiences as challenging

periods of adjustment. In addition to challenging, some of the participants described their sophomore years as “complicated” and “lonely.” With 55% of the participants identifying as transfer students, the transition to ODU as a sophomore student was a recurrent theme. Elias transferred to ODU at the start of his sophomore year and explained his initial transition to the university:

I spent a lot of my first semester really just figuring things out—how should I orient myself here, where should I go or shouldn't I go, how I can balance my time, who I could talk to. My classes were really hard, but I felt the school helped me adjust pretty well.

Another focus group participant who transferred in from a smaller institution for her sophomore year also felt it was a challenging period of adjustment, noting that specific sophomore support services were not in place:

Coming in it was just like: Okay, I have to figure this out myself because I'm not a freshman. I don't get a freshman tour. Granted, I am a sophomore and I kind of know how the world works in college, but, still, it'd be nice to have a tour and just kind of get some special treatment. It was just a lot to adjust to, especially since it was a bigger campus than the first one I went to, so a tour would have been really nice.

Assistance with the transition period during their sophomore year was something that many of our focus groups and interview participants indicated would have been helpful during their second year. As we discussed in our review of the literature, communication and support services are aspects of the sophomore student experience that are of utmost importance to sophomores. Research on sophomore students points out that relevant practices that contribute to student success include aspects of Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) and Schreiner's (2018) theory of *thriving* that focus on sense of belonging, sense of community,

and campus involvement. None of our 11 focus group and interview participants could identify any specific sophomore-centric support services that ODU had to offer when they were sophomore students. Rather, many commented that they were aware of the large amount of resources ODU has, but were either overwhelmed or unsure of where to go when they needed a specific type of support. The participants did, however, provide some suggested best practices to assist with the sophomore year transition:

- A floor or a building that's designated for sophomores so they can just help each other out...you want somebody to go through the same things as you sometimes
- A survey [to] generate different offices for each of the different problems that the student mentioned
- Streamline [support services] because not many things are streamlined here
- Zoom [meetings] in the beginning going over how to operate the website, how to operate DegreeWorks, etc.
- A better way to communicate with [students] other than just posting things on obscure websites that students have to find or including [things] in bulk emails
- Make people more aware of things that they can get involved in on campus
- Bringing more information to the student

**Student-faculty Interactions.** For transfer students and non-transfer students alike, we found that positive student-faculty interactions were a recurrent theme during phase one of our data collection. While several of our participants mentioned how academic work during their sophomore year was challenging, nearly all of the participants had high praise for their interactions with faculty. One participant highlighted how the positive relationship she had with



ODU faculty during her sophomore year, even amidst COVID-19 and virtual learning, led to her overall success as a sophomore:

It's kind of difficult to form a relationship with professors, especially virtually, but I actually had some pretty great professors my sophomore year. I think the relationships that I had were pretty good. That made it really easy to go through my sophomore year.

Another student commented on a faculty member during her sophomore year whose ability to engage with students beyond the classroom created a strong student-faculty connection and also helped foster strong interpersonal relationships among fellow students:

My professor offered “Question Time,” where you could meet [with] questions about the class, so there [was] always a small group of students I would go [with]. Eventually the students got close and we [students] had relationships that way. The professor was really awesome, so I had a close relationship with her. She loved my crazy questions.

Praise from our participants about faculty during their sophomore year at ODU was a consistent trend throughout our focus groups and interviews:

- I feel that my professors were really there helping me at the time.
- They were always available and communicative.
- I've had some really amazing teachers. I mean, some of the best.
- They were nice and open to having discussions whenever. If I need to have a meeting or anything [with regard to] talking after class, they were open to it.
- I'm definitely not afraid to reach out to my professors. They've always been available to meet with me whenever I've had questions.
- Most of my academic experiences rely strongly on professors I've had.

Schreiner (2018) identified the inability to connect with faculty in meaningful ways as an external and institutional barrier to sophomore success. Overall, our focus group and interview participants did not cite faculty connections as a barrier to their success, but, rather, highlighted it as one of the predominantly positive experiences during their sophomore year at ODU. While a small percentage of our participants mentioned frustrations with specific faculty members in specific classes, most communicated a high satisfaction with their instructors during their sophomore year. One student mentioned the role that faculty plays in supporting the mental health of sophomore students, and how these relationships matter and play a role in thriving and persistence:

I feel like it would be very easy to get lost in the crowd if you didn't have a professor that cared about you because, honestly, everything stems from the professor. Students really look up to their professor. If they feel that they're being cared for, that they matter, I feel it's going to put more attention on them. If somebody had a professor that was just there to get paid [and] go home, then I would understand how they wouldn't feel like they were being cared about.

A few accounts occurred from the students we spoke to about frustrating individual experiences with faculty. One student in particular expressed dissatisfaction over mistakes in a syllabus, lack of communication about the rubric for assignments, and inflexibility on the part of an instructor to accommodate her when she needed to miss time for a family health-related issue. Aside from this participant, any criticism related to faculty pertained to communication issues, whether difficulty understanding a faculty member's accent or difficulty getting a response from a faculty member during COVID. These few instances of unsatisfactory experiences with faculty can prove to be a barrier to sophomore student success. While most students we spoke with

categorized their interactions with faculty as positive, academic advising was a topic that generated more mixed reactions from our participants.

**Academic Advising.** A common response we heard from ODU juniors and seniors about academic advising at ODU was that it could be confusing when changing advisors as well as difficult to get in touch with an advisor. The students also explained that, often, it was their proactive nature that helped them obtain the necessary information they needed when it came to choosing courses and declaring majors. Sarah, a first-generation college student (FGCS) who completed her freshman year at ODU and described herself as “quite the overachiever,” conveyed her frustration with her academic advising experience with staff before she was ultimately assigned a faculty advisor when she declared a major:

Being completely honest here, my advisors did not know much. It didn't seem like they were as aware of the specialties and things like that. Now that I'm an upperclassman, I have an actual faculty advisor who checks everything for me, so she knows what classes are offered when and things of that nature. Being who I am, I didn't really feel the need for an advisor. I felt like all they did was overcomplicate a lot of stuff that didn't have to be overcomplicated, and I ended up just doing everything myself.

Elias' major was cybersecurity and he expressed frustration related to when he first transferred in as a sophomore student as he was not informed of specific certification requirements needed to complete the major:

I didn't really know just how important those were until really this [senior] year. For my major specifically, you need to get your [certifications] and I was not as well-informed about that as I would have liked to be because I would have started getting prepped for those way earlier. I wish there would have been someone available to tell me how

important that was or where to start in the direction when I first got here.

Rochelle, a transfer student who, like Elias, came to ODU during her sophomore year, described her academic advising experience during her sophomore year as “really frustrating.” She explained that these frustrations started as soon as she came to ODU:

I’ve literally been thrown at different advisors with no information given to me that I was being switched advisors. We have professors being our advisors which is nice on one hand because they know what the classes are and what you can do with [them], but at the same time, I feel like we should have advisors that can focus on advising.

As we argued in our literature review, knowledge of program requirements and information about academic plans is essential for sophomore student success and persistence (Blekic et al., 2020; Lynch & Lungrin, 2018; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011, 2015; Spight, 2020; Sterling, 2018). Several of the students we spoke with commented about the challenges they had with DegreeWorks, the degree program evaluation system that ODU currently uses, describing it as confusing and challenging to work with. Melissa, a non-traditional student who lives off-campus and takes all of her courses online, commented on the lack of information she received about DegreeWorks and the frustration that still exists for her today with the system:

As a sophomore, I was really only told that I needed to make sure I got a C or better or it wouldn't be transferable to a master's degree program. I don't really remember anybody kind of explaining DegreeWorks to me until my next [junior] year, and I've only been explained it once. So, at this point [when] I go in there [to DegreeWorks] I'm like, “I don't know what this stuff looks like.”

Yet, we also heard from many students about the overall positive experiences they had with their academic advisors when they were sophomores. Jane, another student who transferred

into ODU during her sophomore year, addressed other students' complaints about their advisors, but offered the following on her individual experience:

I actually have a great academic advisor here because I came in and was originally going to be a biology major. Then when I talked to her, she knew my interests and everything [and] she pretty much told me my options, what kind of classes I *had* to take, and then the options of what I *could* take. So, I told her my career paths and everything and then that was kind of the starting point of it. If she found out anything new, then she would generally send it my way. Honestly, I know I am very fortunate because most people ...I've heard a lot of complaints with their academic advisors. I just happen to be a lucky one.

As we explained in our literature review, the research showed that effective academic advising is not only about providing students with technical information about course selection and graduation requirements, but is also about providing mentorship and encouragement for students to challenge themselves and pursue relevant goals and interests. Taking a holistic approach to advising that encourages sophomores to engage in deep self-reflection about educational goals and the selection of their majors has been found to be a relevant practice for sophomore student success, especially since declaring majors is a common stress points for sophomore students (Blekic et al., 2020; Demetriou et al., 2017; Pisarik et al., 2017; Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). Several of the ODU students who participated in our focus groups and interviews commented on this holistic approach to advising and how it assisted them during their sophomore year. One student who received most of her advising from a student success coach through the Center for Major Exploration stated how her success coach eased the stress of declaring a major through encouraging her to reflect on her long-term goals:

She was advising me and really helped me hone in on what I wanted to do and challenged me to find those things that I wanted. She had told me, “Well, what do you want to do?” because I changed my major four times. So, she'd say “Okay, what do you want from this? Don't look at the major, look at the job,” and that made a lot of sense to me because she was a mathematics major and she is a success coach now. So, she said that it's all about what you want to do and the degree is what helps get you there. So, I come to the conclusion that, as long as I'm helping people, and as long as I'm talking to people daily, I will be happy. As someone in college [who is] first gen, it's hard because your whole identity is around this major, and that's something huge. So, she really challenged me that way.

Not all of our participants, however, had similar experiences. Some of our transfer students indicated that their advisors during their sophomore year took a more conservative approach, guiding them to take classes that were manageable to assist with the transition process. Another student we spoke with who was interested in a challenging science major had an advisor who offered limited motivational guidance: “He was just kind of like ‘This is what you need to do. Do this,’ and then ‘I wish you the best.’” Some students explained that the onus to meeting with advisors on a regular basis was on the student. Suggested best practices we heard from students during focus groups and interviews included more regular check-ups and better communication. Overall, the level of satisfaction that was expressed about sophomore student academic advising was closely aligned with the national data in this area that we discussed in our literature review.

**COVID-19.** Most of the ODU juniors and seniors we spoke with highlighted their perseverance as sophomore students during COVID-19. Based on their responses, however, the

pandemic exacerbated their feelings of loneliness and hindered some of our participants' senses of belonging and their abilities to connect with others on campus. Some of the students categorized this situation as difficult in regard to adapting to the sudden shift to virtual learning and lack of human contact. As a transfer student who came to ODU during his sophomore year, Elias mentioned how COVID-19 prevented him from getting a true sense of the school culture:

I got [to be] a sophomore and then the pandemic started and a lot of things started to shut down. I didn't really go to a lot of events that were [being] planned before things got shut down. I wasn't able to really get the best impression of what the culture on campus was like.

John, a transfer student who also identified as a military-affiliated student and FGCS, noted a lack of opportunities for greater communication with classmates during classes held via Zoom:

Teachers were fine. Even when we were on Zoom most of the time, most of them would stay after and talk to me if I needed to talk to them. As far as classmates, as you can imagine, on Zoom there was little to no interaction with any of my classmates so most of the time I wasn't even aware how many people were in the class. Most people didn't have their cameras on or anything.

As classes began to transition back to face-to-face learning in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters, one participant noticed that students who missed a traditional first-year experience because of COVID-19 showed signs of struggling to interact with others on campus:

One of the things that's actually really hard at this point is, for a lot of people, it's their second year in school right now, [but] they don't have that freshman experience, so they

don't know how to be around other people and they don't know how to interact with another person, especially in a formal college setting.

Since most of our focus group and interview participants experienced at least some portion of their sophomore year during COVID-19, several students commented that communication with faculty and advisors was difficult, and the lack of human contact and connection was a hindrance to developing a sense of belonging and community involvement. Moreover, several participants noted that COVID-19 created a situation where students who were already unsure of which services were available for specific support felt that it became an even greater challenge to make personal connections with individuals. Jane summarized it quite clearly when she told us:

So, I kind of feel like a lot of things on campus [are] geared towards helping students and helping everybody be successful, but at the same time, it's not known about and so it just kind of flies under the radar. So COVID didn't stop me from being able to go somewhere—it stopped me from finding someone to help me.

Several of our students commented positively on the efforts made by ODU to support them as sophomore students during COVID-19, but it was clearly a stressor for the majority of the students we spoke with during this phase of our data collection. None of our 11 participants mentioned the pandemic as causing them to consider withdrawing from the university. On the contrary, all of our participants rated their current commitment level to their personal and professional goals very highly. The final stage of Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005), *commitment*, is described as the point where students feel a sense of ownership for their choices and are committed to their plans for the future. From phase one of our study, our findings suggest that most of the ODU juniors and seniors we spoke with have reached this



stage, even after going through the stress of COVID-19. Yet, based on their comments regarding communication practices, the main relevant practice to improve the sophomore student experience appears to be to create a way to get more students connected to the services that already exist at ODU. Participants offered:

- A problem for a lot of different things on campus is a lot of people don't know what's going on because we don't really have a space to see and know what's going on, at least nothing very centralized.
- I feel like the reason why I didn't feel as involved or I belonged was because I just didn't take advantage of the many opportunities. It was just SO many options, and when you have so many options, you just choose none sometimes [laughs]. That's what I did. I just chose nothing.
- I have no idea what's happening. I know what I know because my professors tell me. So, if my professors don't tell me or it's not on the career website, I don't know anything.
- I feel like they [ODU] just do a data dump. [It's] on the websites and it's everywhere, but you have to be the one to look for and dive for it [when] it's not like an announcement or flier around campus. You just have to search on your own.
- The 50 million different offices are a blessing and a curse. Getting emails from 45 different people about helping I feel in a sense can be very overwhelming for not only sophomores but also freshmen.

Sophomores feel strongly about the attitudes of staff and personnel, and that institutional integrity plays an important role in sophomore student success (Gahagan, 2018; Nelson, 2018; Reason et al., 2009). To this end, we included several questions during our focus groups and interviews related to Berger and Braxton's (1998) aspects of organizational attributes and how

they relate to student persistence. Student assessments of ODU's organizational attributes provided further information on the sophomore student experience as well as potential recommendations and strategies for future improvement.

### ***Organizational Attributes***

When examining the role of organizational attributes in student persistence, our research team used three variables as defined by Berger and Braxton (1998): initial institutional commitment (i.e., recruitment), organizational attributes (i.e., institutional communication, fairness in policy and rule enforcement, participation in decision-making), and subsequent institutional commitment (i.e., retention). When asked why they selected ODU, the focus group participants named the following reasons for initially committing to the institution:

- 64% mentioned location, including convenience and preference
- 36% mentioned the quality of academic programs and institutional reputation
- 27% mentioned diversity of student body
- 27% mentioned access and affordability, including easy application process, no standardized testing requirement, and quality financial aid package
- 27% mentioned a quality support system for special populations, including transfer and military-affiliated students

The students provided additional information about their initial commitment to ODU:

- I applied when I was still in the military and they didn't require me to take an SAT or anything like that, so the applying process [was easy] and [ODU] was the one I know of the most, so I ended up going to ODU.
- When I left community college...I was looking into Christopher Newport, ODU, and Hampton University. But out of those three, ODU was the most price-efficient and had

really good graduation rates, so I went with ODU because I figured why spend more for the same quality education? So, I chose ODU mainly for the price point and also for the fact that they have really good ratings.

- Part of it was out of convenience, but before I actually started [at] ODU I was actually in the military so I would drive by every day going towards base and wishing that I was in school rather than the military. So, I wanted to go to ODU for about four years...and it did look like a good school for me to be able to go to. It looked very military-friendly [which] was one thing that I was definitely looking for, and then also, just a very good segue into what I'm going to eventually try to go into 'cause I'm trying to get into medical school as well.

When examining institutional communication about graduation, academic standards, and course requirements during their sophomore year, three primary themes emerged from our student focus groups: (1) communicate the importance of persisting toward requirements, (2) provide training and orientation on tools to support degree completion and career development, and (3) foster peer and faculty/staff relationships to support persistence.

Of the focus group participants, 36% responded with an awareness of campus resources, although they felt that student support services were not needed to gain a good academic standing and/or they did not have issues requiring additional support. However, two of the participants discussed that the institution could improve communication by highlighting the importance of persistence and the value of resources to support student persistence.

Finally, the participants mentioned academic student organizations, academic advisors, and faculty as three support systems that would be helpful to improve communication about graduation, academic standards, and course requirements:

- When I go to events, it feels like it doesn't add value to my objective as to pass my classes and graduate.
- I think what would have been helpful [could have been] an introduction to how to use DegreeWorks because I'm still kind of trying to learn that stuff now as I'm technically a senior. Maybe not even just a course, maybe even just a couple of Zoom sessions for introductory students, either freshmen or transferring sophomores. That would be really helpful to show them how to use the programs and how to use MyODU portal would be really helpful.
- As a sophomore, I wish they went to the STEM groups or organizations that we have on campus and kind of partner up with them and help them, maybe, because it wasn't until sophomore year when I joined National Society of Black Engineers, where I felt like I could get help in my classes.
- I know there were on campus resources available to help [with] that and things of that nature. I never really interacted with them that much because I never really had too many issues in that regard. But I know they exist.

When examining the subsequent institutional commitment, two primary themes emerged from the focus groups and interviews: (1) quality relationships and sense of institutional loyalty and (2) personal drive and commitment to personal and professional goals. The participants mentioned student employment and student involvement as critical to feeling a sense of connection and belonging. Several pointed out that positive relationships with professional and faculty advisors were critical to career exploration and understanding academic progression and options:

- So, I continued to work on campus. I found that as a way to stay connected. I had

relationships with my boss and with my co-workers because if you sit somewhere with someone for like four hours straight, you're going to know them after a while. So, I had a few jobs on campus that I had relationships with coworkers and bosses.

- I honestly feel a sense of loyalty to the university that I didn't expect that I would feel, which is a good thing I guess because I have gotten involved in things because I knew that I wouldn't be living on campus.
- I think that at least ODU has a support system as far as when you're trying to figure out your path. They kind of talk to you about what your interests are and what your passions are and help you gear your degree program towards that. So, it's been very helpful.

The variables, as defined by Berger and Braxton (1998), aided our research team in better understanding the institutional recruitment, communication, and retention factors that play into student persistence. Although the majority of the respondents stated location as the primary reason for initially committing to ODU, quality relationships, institutional loyalty, and personal student commitment have helped keep the students there. The next section will apply these recruitment and retention factors for actionable strategies for thriving and persistence.

### ***Strategies for Retention, Thriving, and Persistence***

The qualitative data we collected from ODU juniors and seniors regarding strategies for retention, thriving, and persistence also focused primarily on the adjustment period to their second year, student-faculty interactions, academic advising, and COVID-19's impact on their senses of belonging and school culture. The participants offered valuable feedback and recommendations to improve retention, thriving, and persistence at ODU.

**Retention.** Several factors influence retention rates for sophomore students. According to Schaller (2010a), the key to student retention is faculty interaction. It is also important to have

positive social interactions with faculty members and adequate advising. Our interviews and focus groups with ODU juniors and seniors found that their sophomore year was a challenging adjustment time and that faculty interactions were necessary. Rochelle is a military-affiliated student who transferred to ODU and expressed her feelings toward faculty interaction:

I don't think it's fair to students and I don't know if I'm the only one. I feel like your advisor should be your advisor the entire time you're at ODU. It's frustrating for me as a student because in the short time that I've been at ODU, I've been thrown at different advisors with no information given to me that I was being switched.

Similarly, another participant who transferred to ODU from a smaller institution didn't like the process of changing advisors multiple times since it was a difficult period of adjustment:

I'm not gonna lie—that was kind of rough. I kept getting a new advisor, like, I don't know—every semester.

According to College Transitions (2021), the national freshman to sophomore retention rate stood at 78%. ODU's 53% six-year graduation rate indicates that sophomore retention may be an issue of concern. Several focus group and interview participants indicated that assistance with the transition period during their sophomore year would have been helpful. As a transfer student who came to ODU during her sophomore year, Sarah focused on finding multiple jobs on campus as a sophomore in order to gain the connections she needed:

I'm very aware of a lot of things, and I was aware of sophomore retention rates being really bad, so I wanted to prepare myself to not fall into that statistic. So, I continued to work on campus. I found that [to be] a way to stay connected.

Positive interactions with faculty are a vital building block in creating a foundation for supporting students.

**Thriving.** Institutions have opportunities to improve students' senses of belonging and fulfill other environmental conditions to meet the needs of sophomores. Schreiner (2018) pointed out that thriving sophomores have invested efforts in their academics and are in the process of selecting majors that interest them and make them proud. The second-year experience is, therefore, evaluated through the lens of thriving sophomores, and, thus, all programs and services that are designed to meet sophomores' needs are informed by this vision. Rochelle identified a lack of effective communication to students of opportunities available to help them succeed:

I feel there has to be a better way to communicate to the students about the opportunities that they have because I know the things that I know because I ask the right questions to the right people. I feel like a lot of students are missing out on opportunities because they don't know that opportunities exist.

Kim, a FGCS who completed her freshman year on campus and sophomore year online, decided to get involved in an organization on campus to branch out and meet more people:

I would make people more aware of things that they can get involved in on campus. You have to do some digging to find out about groups on campus, other than fraternity and sorority life. I definitely think that can enhance your experience overall.

**Persistence.** Sophomores, a particularly vulnerable group of students who historically have been overlooked in higher education, experience increasing levels of dissatisfaction, challenges, and attrition, while receiving less support than freshmen, juniors, and seniors (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Kranzow et al., 2015). Several of the ODU students who participated in our focus groups and interviews commented that universities need to focus more attention on sophomores and their academic transitions. Jane, a transfer student who also identified as a

FGCS, attended a community college her first year and transferred to ODU at the start of her sophomore year. She explained:

I feel like there needs to be a little more training for the students on DegreeWorks, the MyODU online portal, and all that to kind of really bring it full circle, so we totally understand it. I think that maybe [ODU] could improve that aspect of bringing more information to the students.

Tammy noted that she had a tough time her freshman year due to her mother's diagnosis of cancer, and that she struggled with mental health issues her sophomore year:

I feel like sophomore year was that weird transition, where freshman year everybody's telling you about financial aid and applying to FAFSA. Then junior and senior year, everybody's telling you [about] job/career fairs and stuff like that. But when you're a sophomore, me personally, I felt like it was that weird transition period where you just don't fit into any group because you're supposed to know the freshman stuff, but then you want to go for the career fair and stuff like that. But when the companies come out, they kind of look at you like (in meek, soft voice) "Well you're a sophomore..." and I felt like I wish maybe people or the companies that they brought will give the sophomores like an internship or volunteership per se, so they can still figure out what they want to do and not wait until the junior and senior year.

According to our review of the literature, sophomore year is a critical time for strengthening institutional messages about care and concern. Leadership must also consider how culture impacts institutions' abilities to focus on retention and success (Gahagan, 2018). For this reason, we included questions during our focus groups and interviews that focused on Berger and Braxton's (1998) aspects of organizational attributes and how they related to student persistence.



When asked about their expectations of ODU, focus group participants offered the following comments:

- I need something new, some place I can grow.
- I just expected a good college experience.
- I expected it to be a little more of a social experiment experience.
- I didn't really have many expectations for ODU, and I did not know what to expect at all.

The focus group and interview participants had little to no expectations of their experiences at ODU. According to Strayhorn (2012), universities have prime opportunities to foster senses of belonging by communicating to sophomores they are seen and valued.

### **Benchmark Institutions**

In our institutional benchmarking phase of data collection, we interviewed senior and mid-level administrators across different university and administrative units with successful sophomore programs that varied widely in size, scope, and design (see Appendix H). Interviews were conducted with staff and administrators at the Ohio State University, University of Rochester, Emory University, University of Texas at Dallas, and Virginia Commonwealth University. The Ohio State University's Second-Year Transformational Experience (STEP) Program was launched as a 2013 presidential directive intentionally designed as a partnership between academic affairs and student life to redefine the student experience. The program was founded on research resulting in the following essential components: (1) faculty mentoring, (2) student cohort-based model, (3) financial wellness and security, and (4) professional development co-curriculars. The participants develop a proposal to engage in a transformative experience that is similar to a capstone project with the support of a fellowship. As learned through our interview, STEP is jointly funded and staffed by Undergraduate Education and

Student Life, including \$9 million in program support for 2,850 student participants and 160 faculty mentors.

Similar to The Ohio State University, the Sophomore Year Experience (SYE) at Emory University is also a live-on campus experience. As part of the Residential Education mission at Emory University, sophomore students gain senses of belonging, practice individual and social responsibilities, develop greater senses of self and others, and engage intellectually outside the classroom (Emory University, 2017). As explained in our interview, resident assistants are equipped with sophomore student development theory as part of their training in supporting their peer students. Residential Education partners across the university sponsor programs, including academic advisor evening hall hours, Love Your Major Week, and junior year study abroad preparation and advising. A signature experience is the sophomore pinning ceremony. At Emory University, we learned that students are considered alumni after two semesters, honoring the university's greatest benefactor who left after two semesters to work at The Coca-Cola Factory (Emory University, 2019). As one of the university's major campus traditions, the Student Alumni Association pins sophomore students each year to continue the legacy and receive gold lapel pins as part of achieving to this point in their academic careers.

Like ODU, some institutions have a dedicated university committee to examine the sophomore student experience. The University of Rochester's (UR) Sophomore Committee "seeks to engage and empower sophomores through advocacy, education, programming, and the facilitation of meaningful connections within and beyond the University of Rochester" (University of Rochester, 2022). The administrator we spoke with discussed that a primary expectation of UR sophomores is declaring their academic majors. To accomplish academic expectations and fulfill the committee's mission, a primary partner is the Sophomore Class

Council, which plans and promotes events for the sophomore class. As a university-wide committee with student representation and student organization partnership, UR is able to set academic and social expectations for the second year. Additionally, UR furthers a sense of belonging by reminding sophomores that they are seen and matter to the institution, connecting them to resources and celebrating their accomplishments along their academic journeys. Like Emory University, UR seeks to build tradition and spirit as a means to build a shared student experience and sense of unity.

As with Emory University and UR, the University of Texas at Dallas' Student Transition Programs aim to foster a sense of belonging by reassuring sophomores that they are seen and their presence is valued. Eager to help students in their sophomore year, the administrator we spoke with at the University of Texas at Dallas heavily supports sophomores in their major exploratory courses, stating that sophomores need additional academic support and connections within their school as this support is the key to helping the university bridge the gap and retain students.

The first program developed specifically for sophomores at the University of Texas at Dallas is Sophomore Advance, which serves as an orientation program during the first two weeks of the fall semester. Sophomore Advance has taken a slightly different form over the years depending upon student needs; however, the data from assessments of the sophomore student population currently drives the program. Additionally, the administrators in Student Transition Programs shared that they collaborate with the Student Success Center on a program called Survive and Thrive the Sophomore Slump, which is a major academic tutoring service on campus for sophomores to explore time management, avoid burnout, and set realistic goals. Student Transition Programs connect sophomores to a variety of resources, with an emphasis on

the academic clarity and commitment to their major courses. The goal of these programs is to effectively support students even after graduation.

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) shares the same passion for supporting students as the above colleges and universities. In order to move forward with a collective vision, the VCU Office of First and Second Year Experiences and Transitions was recently created in 2021 to better focus on first year and second year transitions. The first item on the agenda was to meet with all of the campus partners involved with sophomore initiatives. In response, a program has been developed that connects students with faculty who have similar interests and perspectives. Additionally, they developed the Sophomore Transition Series, where they connect particular sophomore students to campus support services and peers who will help them to be successful. As described in our interview, the Office of First and Second Year Experiences and Transitions has developed other successful programs and undertakings that help sophomores recognize the importance of networking and deepen their social engagements.

### **Alignment with Research Questions**

Phase one of our data collection process allowed us to collect foundational qualitative data to not only inform the subsequent quantitative phase of our study, but also provide us with important information to help answer our research questions. From our focus group and interviews with ODU juniors and seniors, we found a perception that very little specific sophomore-centric support exists at ODU. This information confirms much of what we discussed in our literature review as it pertains to sophomore students' feelings of abandonment once they transition from their freshmen year.

The participants acknowledged that many resources exist at ODU to help support students, but communication about these resources is mixed. Overall, however, the junior and

senior students we spoke with felt very committed at the current stages of their collegiate careers. They also overwhelmingly noted a commitment and loyalty to ODU. Organizational attributes were identified as being in place to support student success at the sophomore level, but the findings from this phase of data collection illustrates that students felt a need for improvement existed in communication of available resources and activities, academic advising, and transitional support from the first to the second year.

The struggle with transitioning from the first to the second year of college was highlighted during our focus groups and interviews. The participants provided helpful strategies for addressing these issues and improving second- to third-year student retention at ODU. Additionally, our conversations with leaders from institutions with successful sophomore programming confirmed the findings from our literature review that sophomore-specific programs must be intentional and serve as a way to create meaning and purpose for sophomore students and make them feel connected to the university.

### **Phase Two – Quantitative Research**

Phase two of the data collection process consisted of document analysis and data collection through surveys. The qualitative data from phase one explored the views of the participants, and provided the participants a voice in the research process. By analyzing institutional data on enrollment, retention, major campus programming, and sophomore withdrawal, key issues can be identified as well as trends among special populations. Themes that emerged from the first phase of data collection informed the questions for the surveys used in phase two. For example, extended conversations about COVID-19 came up naturally in all of our discussions with focus groups and interview participants during phase one of our data collection. As a result, we included specific questions about COVID-19 in our phase two surveys

*(Likert scale student survey questions: “COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to access academic advising services,” “COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to develop strong relationships with faculty and staff members at ODU,” “COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to access ODU support services that I normally would be able to access if not for the pandemic,”; Yes or No faculty and staff survey question: “Are you aware of additional student support resources put in place due to COVID-19?”; Open-ended follow-up question: “Please describe the resources that have been created to support students in response to COVID-19.”).*

Additionally, there were two promising practices that were mentioned in phase one of our data collection that opened up opportunities for phase two of our data collection. With multiple focus group and interview participants noting campus employment and success coaches as positive contributors to their sophomore success, we expanded our survey with two additional questions for further exploration and study: *“Please select all the activities that you have previously participated in or are currently participating in at ODU from the below list”* (expanded to include campus employment as an option) and *“Do you feel that there are additional resources needed to support sophomores at ODU, including opportunities you may have participated in during your first year (i.e. Success Coach, First-Year Orientation, etc.)?”*.

Surveys were distributed electronically via QuestionPro to ODU students, faculty, and staff. Eligible faculty participants are noted as administrative, teaching, research, and professional. Eligible staff participants were identified as salaried employees that support sophomore students in the commission of their assigned duties. The student participants were identified by the institution as having completed their second year of study. The surveys also contained open-ended questions. The responses collected from the open-ended questions were coded as qualitative data.

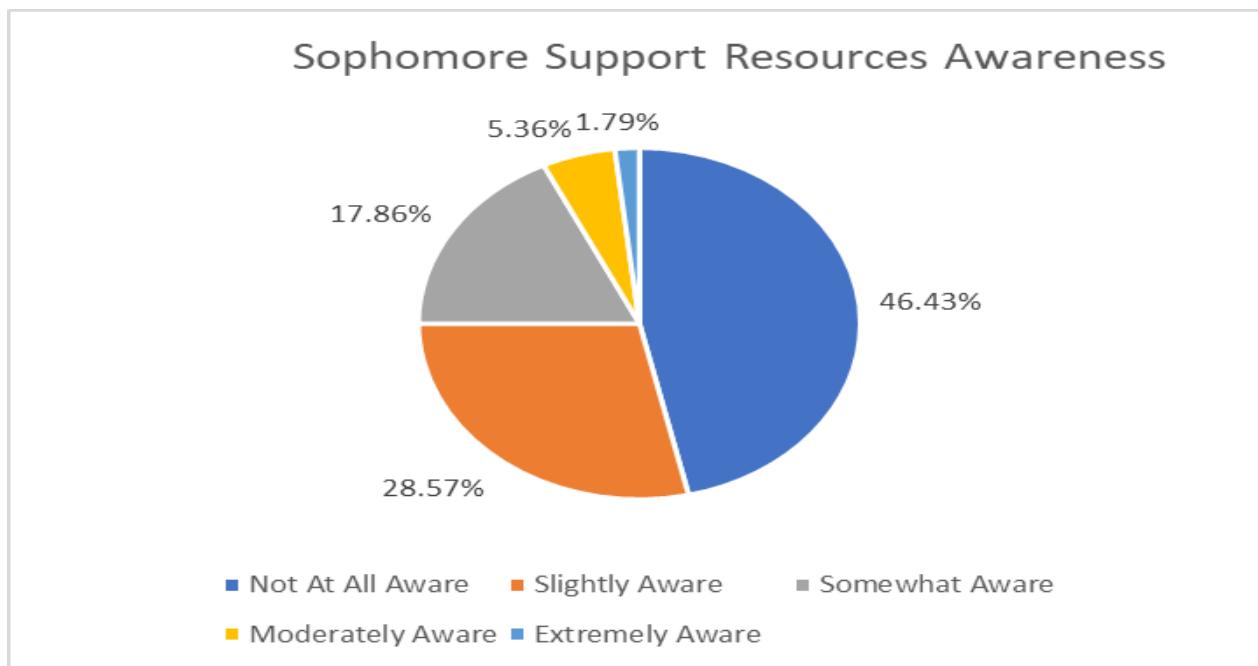
## ODU Student Data

### *Sophomore Student Experience*

The sophomore student survey (see Appendix C) was completed by 112 respondents. The first set of questions in the survey gauged the knowledge of the current students regarding their overall awareness of sophomore student initiatives. As illustrated in Figure 3, 46% of the respondents reported no awareness of such sophomore initiatives as the Sophomore Retention Subcommittee, Housing & Residence Life's Welcome to Sophomores event, and the *UNIV III Sophomore Seminar*.

### Figure 3

*Results of our survey question "How aware are you of initiatives, programs, and resources dedicated to supporting sophomore students?"*



The respondents noted participating in multiple sophomore programmatic activities including the first-year experience, living learning communities, study abroad, undergraduate research, service learning, internships, faculty mentorship, employment on campus, student

organizations, campus recreation, and athletic teams. The sophomore students reported the highest rates of participation in student organizations (25%), campus recreation (20%), and campus employment (18%). The students offered that campus employment helped with choosing majors; it was fun being a part of a team; and everyone should join at least one club, especially if friendships are hard to initiate or sustain. The lowest rates of participation in the sophomore students' activities were study abroad (3%), service learning (5%), and athletic team memberships (6%). While 93% of the respondents reported being unsure if they attended a sophomore-specific event, 8% of the students reported attending these events, including a sophomore plant give-away, casino night, basketball games, a post-COVID sophomore welcome at the football stadium, and a study abroad information session.

**Table 4**

*Responses to Awareness of Sophomore Student Support Resources, High-Impact Practices, and Campus Activities*

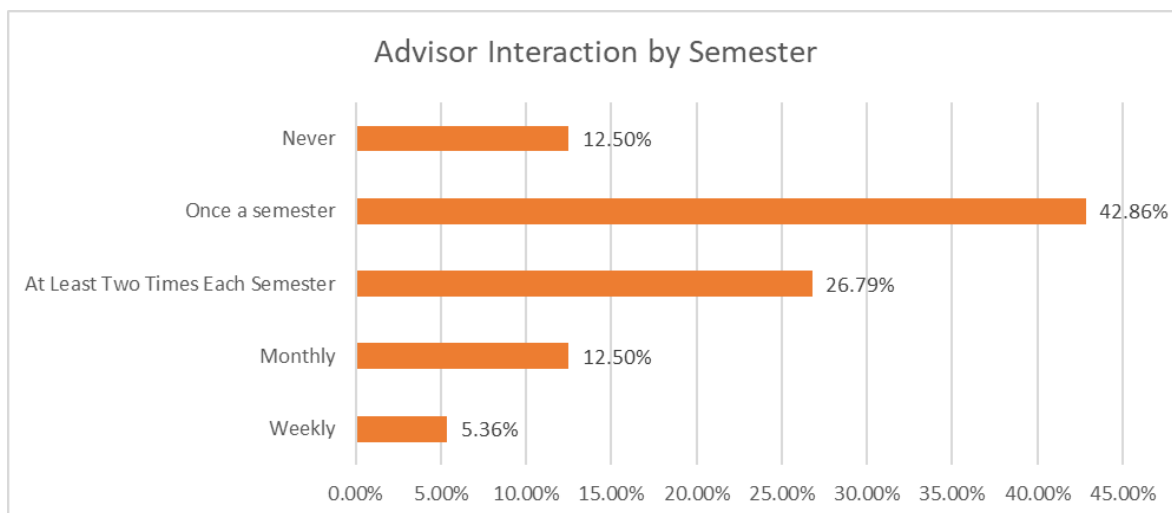
	Extremely Aware	Moderately aware	Somewhat aware	Slightly aware	Not at all aware
How aware are you of initiatives, programs, and resources dedicated to	1.79%	5.36%	17.86%	28.57%	46.43%



supporting sophomore students?					
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
How often do you hear about or receive information about sophomore- specific programs and resources?	0.90%	9.01%	19.82%	46.85%	23.42%

**Figure 4**

*Results of our survey question “How often do you interact with your academic advisor each semester?”*



Of the respondents, 67% agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of ODU's academic advising services. In addition, 70% of the respondents noted that they interacted with their advisor one to two times a semester. The students shared that their advisors were good overall and provided good advice, it was not hard contacting the advisor, and it was a smooth process to pick courses. Additionally, 67% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their academic advisors supported their career development and exploration. This finding was supported through qualitative data collected in focus groups with ODU juniors and seniors, who stated that their advisors often provided additional support for their career interests, educational goals, and life goals.

Of the respondents, 61% agreed or strongly agreed that they made decisions as to which courses to take and choices of majors and/or minors on their own without the assistance of an academic advisor, while 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 19% neither agreed nor disagreed. Additionally, 54% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed they learned about the course and program requirements needed to graduate on their own without the assistance of an academic advisor, while 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 22% neither agree nor disagree. Of the 54% of the students who agreed or strongly agreed they learned about course

requirements on their own noted that they did not generally find academic advisors to be very helpful as they are vague, often don't provide plans, and have ignored questions in emails.

Of the respondents, 47% agreed or strongly agreed that COVID-19 was a barrier in developing strong relationships with faculty and staff, while 21% reported that it was not a barrier and 31% neither agreed or disagreed. Furthermore, the respondents were split on the effect of COVID-19 in accessing academic services. Of the respondents, 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed that COVID-19 was a barrier, while 33% reported that it was a barrier and 32% neither agreed nor disagreed that it was a barrier. Table 5 illustrates the experiences of sophomores at ODU with academic support services.

**Table 5**

*Experiences with Academic Support Services*

	I am satisfied with the quality of academic advising services I have received at ODU.	My academic advisor is helpful to me as I make decisions about courses and my major.	My academic advisor supports my career development and exploration.	COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to access academic advising services.
Strongly Agreed	24.11%	26.79%	18.75%	15.18%
Agreed	42.86%	38.39%	48.21%	17.86%
Neither Agreed	13.39%	18.75%	22.32%	32.14%

nor Disagreed				
Disagreed	9.82%	8.04%	2.68%	17.86%
Strongly Disagreed	9.82%	8.04%	8.04%	16.96%

Our literature review noted that issues with financial aid were barriers to sophomore student success. Of the respondents, 42% noted that information regarding financial aid opportunities were accessible and easy to understand, while 29% disagreed or strongly disagreed. As illustrated in Table 6, we also found that personal development and belonging of sophomores was more noteworthy.

**Table 6**

*Personal Development and Belonging*

	I believe ODU cares about sophomore students at ODU.	I believe I belong and feel included at ODU.	I have strong relationships with faculty members at ODU.	I have strong relationships with staff members at ODU.	COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to develop strong relationships with faculty and staff members at ODU.
Strongly Agreed	13.39%	17.86%	6.25%	4.46%	19.09%

Agreed	40.18%	38.39%	16.96%	18.75%	28.18%
Neither Agreed nor Disagreed	34.82%	28.57%	41.96%	41.07%	31.82%
Disagreed	4.46%	7.14%	20.54%	21.43%	12.73%
Strongly Disagreed	7.14%	8.04%	14.29%	14.29%	8.18%

Research has shown that strong relationships increase thriving for students (Schaller, 2005; Schreiner et al., 2012; Webb & Cotton, 2018) and is necessary to support persistence to graduation. Only 23% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed they had strong relationships with faculty or staff, whereas 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed and the remaining participants (42%) neither agreed nor disagreed. The 23% of respondents that agreed or strongly agreed reported that faculty truly care about students retaining information, help students stay on track and keep up with activities, give students the time they deserve, and want students to succeed.

Transfer students and student-athletes provided some qualitative data related to their well-being. The transfer students in the study stated that the fall activities were very inviting, guided them academically, and improved their mental and physical fitness as well as provided comradery between peers and allowed them to meet like-minded people. While not many of our students were student-athletes, those students who were reported that their coaches supported

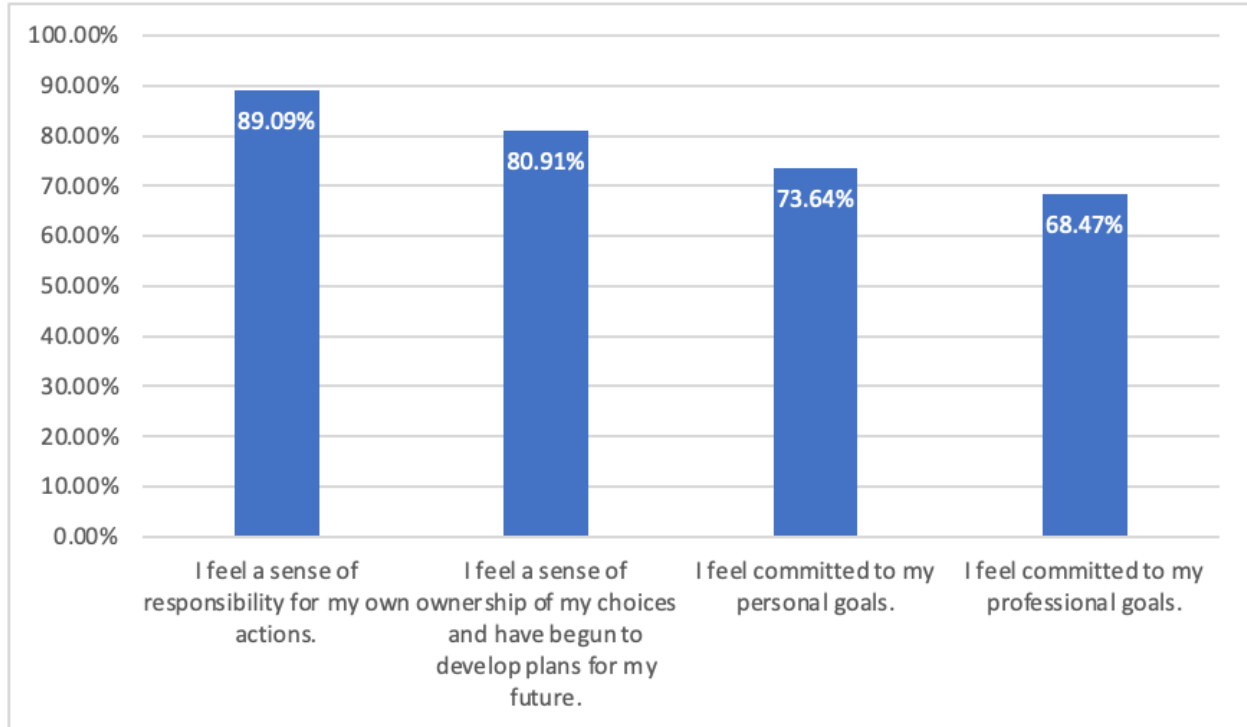
their academic success and made sure that there were opportunities to seek help with issues, such as mental health.

Over half the respondents (56%) reported feeling included and belonging at ODU. Overall, 53% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ODU cared about sophomore students. Only 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 35% neither agreed nor disagreed. The impact of relationships and belonging cannot be understated and is particularly important for sophomore students as they continue to explore their identities and create senses of community. Meaningful relationships, belonging, and senses of community support students' abilities to persist toward educational, career, and life goals (Gahagan, 2018; Schreiner, 2010a, 2010b, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013).

It is key that institutions acknowledge the needs of sophomores. Institutions of higher education must focus on the developmental and educational needs of sophomores to ensure that the necessary resources and supports are in place. Not only must these supports be in place, but the administration must communicate and partner with faculty, staff, and students to ensure that all voices are heard so that policies and procedures are equitable. Figure 5 displays the responses to our section of the survey that discussed personal development.

### **Figure 5**

*Responses to Personal Development Questions*



Note: The numbers above represent those responses that indicated strongly agreed and agreed.

### ***Organizational Attributes***

When examining organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence at ODU, the student survey inquired about the students' personal development (including frustrations and commitment) and organizational attributes, according to Berger and Braxton (1998). The four organizational attributes included communications about academic standards, policy and rule enforcement related to academic standards, policies about scholarships and financial aid, and students playing active roles in decision-making concerning academic and social rules. Overall, nearly three out of four respondents agreed or strongly agreed that ODU:

- believe that policies and rule enforcement on issues such as academic standards and grading are fair to a large or very large extent (94%),
- believe that policies on financial aid and scholarships are fair to a large or very large extent (81%),

- believe communication about academic standards is average, effective, or very effective (79%), and
- believe that students play an active role in academic and social rule decision-making to an average, large, or very large extent (74%).

Table 7 compares and contrasts the students' frustrations with their level of commitment and ownership to their education.

The table suggests that even though a fair portion of students showed levels of frustration with interpersonal relationships, academic experiences, and personal and professional decisions, a much greater amount displayed strong senses of responsibility, commitment, and decision-making. These results are striking because they suggest high student levels of commitment amid frustration. In this vein, the next section explores strategies for retention, thriving, and persistence that capitalize on our quantitative research findings.

### **Table 7**

#### *Student Frustrations and Commitment Levels*

Student Frustrations		Commitment	
Strongly agreed or agreed	As a sophomore student, I feel frustrated...	Strongly agreed or agreed	As a sophomore student at ODU, I...
37%	With interpersonal relationships	89%	feel a sense of responsibility for my own actions



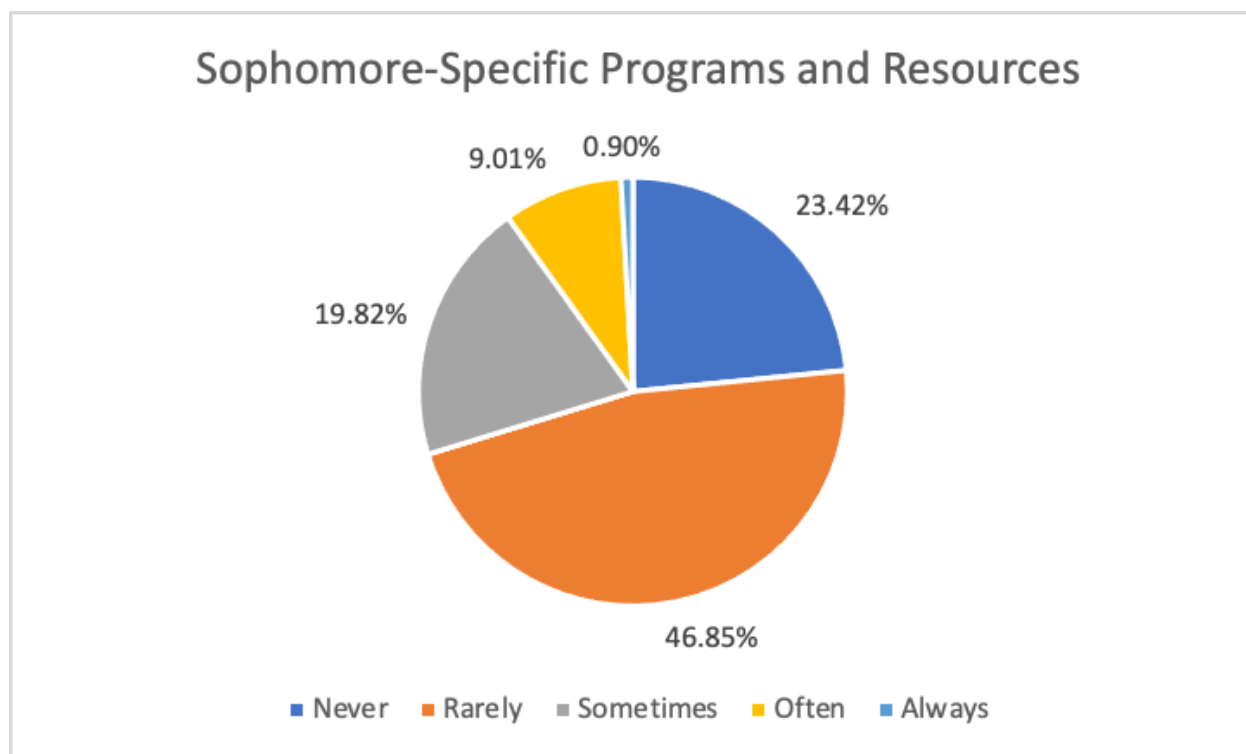
34%	With academic experience	85%	make decisions that align closely with my personal values
26%	With personal decisions	81%	feel a sense of ownership of my choices and have begun to develop plans for my future
26%	With professional decisions	79%	chosen major aligns with my future career goals
		74%	feel committed to my personal goals
		68%	feel committed to my professional goals

### *Strategies for Retention, Thriving, and Persistence*

In this section, we detail information from the survey that responded to the third research question of our study: “*What strategies can ODU implement to increase second to third-year retention and help sophomores to thrive and persist?*” As illustrated by Figure 6, almost half of the student participants rarely heard about or received information about sophomore-specific programs and resources.

### **Figure 6**

*Responses to question “How often do you hear about or receive information about sophomore-specific programs and resources?”*



While there were criticisms of academic advising systems at ODU during the quantitative phase of this study, nearly half of the student participants in the survey still agree that they felt senses of ownership of their choices and have begun to develop plans for their futures. This criticism may demonstrate that many sophomores at ODU seem to persist, to thrive, and be committed in spite of a lack of awareness of programs specific to their needs.

### **ODU Staff and Faculty Data**

The faculty and staff at ODU completed the survey via QuestionPro (Appendix D). Out of 74 respondents, 74% identified as staff, while the remaining 26% identified as faculty. In addition, 49% self-identified as White, 37% as African-American, 4% as American Indian/Alaska Native, 3% as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 5% having multiple racial identities or identities not listed. In addition, 3% preferred not to answer.

### *Sophomore Student Experience*

The questions in the survey addressed training, knowledge of current sophomore student programming efforts, student retention, and programmatic support for sophomore students.

Overwhelmingly, 94% of the respondents reported receiving no training in supporting sophomore students. The respondents who reported that they received training indicated that it was through conference presentations that provided information and research on the sophomore slump as well as through targeted interventions, including mentoring, peer engagement, connecting students to faculty, and connecting students to opportunities that supported their major choices and career paths.

Additionally, the respondents were split on whether they received the necessary resources to support sophomore students. Of the respondents, 53% strongly agreed or agreed that they had the necessary resources to support sophomore students, including healthcare support, providing access to advisors, financial funding to support returning sophomores, access to tutoring programs, and the student success portal. Further, the respondents indicated that the following resources are necessary for supporting students: career development services, strong mentorship programs, peer counseling, financial aid grants, proactive advising specifically for sophomore students, and internship preparation resources.

### *Organizational Attributes*

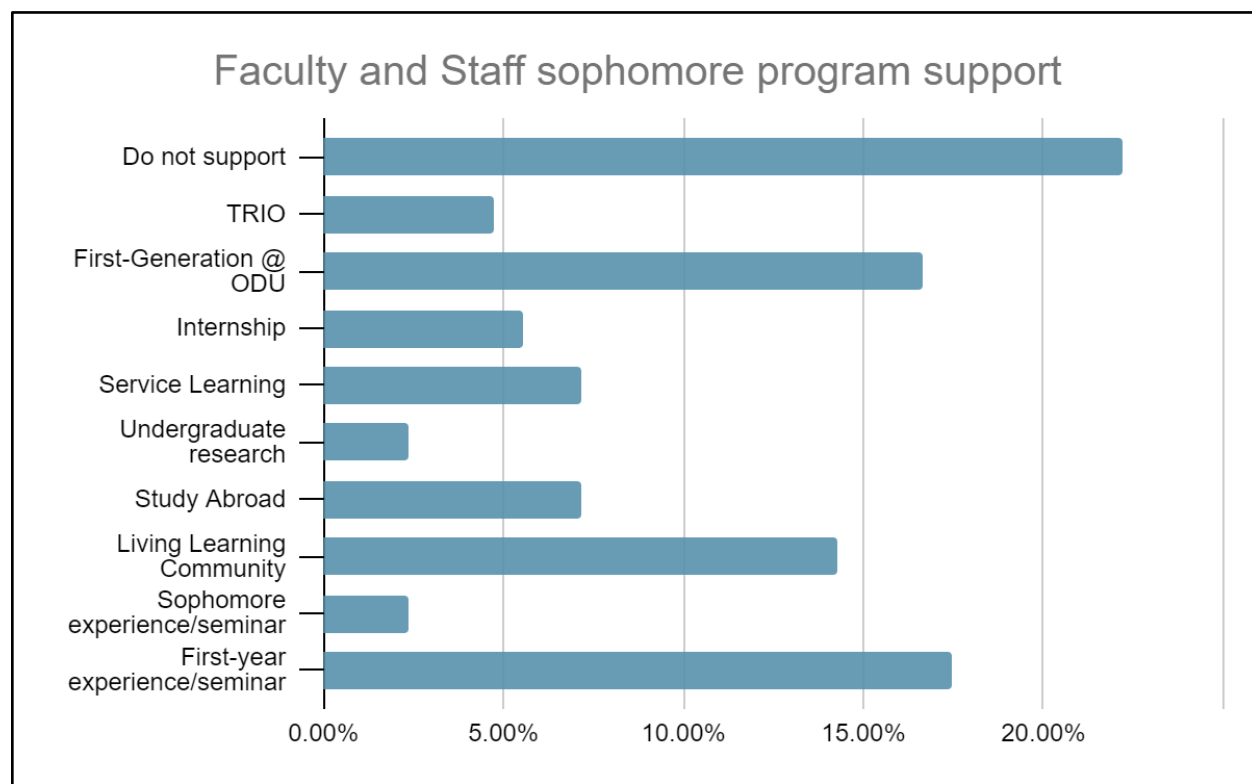
In response to COVID-19, the respondents were split regarding their awareness of resources that were specifically put in place during the pandemic. Of the respondents, 55% said additional resources were put in place, while 45% disagreed. The respondents who stated that additional resources were implemented noted that the following resources were offered: COVID

testing, quarantine housing, virtual registration options, reduced housing occupancy, free masks, vaccinations, and boosters. The students were also eligible for emergency CARES Act funding.

Overwhelmingly, 75% of the faculty and staff respondents were unaware of resources specifically for supporting sophomore students. One respondent who was aware of these resources referred to the sophomore retention subcommittee, but was unaware if the group still met. Although they may not necessarily be sophomore-specific resources, the respondents noted the sophomore success event calendar, TRIO Support Services, the Writing Center, INNOVATE Monarchs, and various tutoring and academic coaching to be resources for sophomore students. Figure 7 illustrates that most faculty and staff are not working with campus partners that are key to the sophomore student experience.

### Figure 7

*Responses to “Do you work with/support any of the following programs/opportunities at ODU?”*



The respondents offered that they supported these programs through one-on-one interactions with students, creating a welcoming, inclusive environment, answering questions, providing support for students facing situations that impact their decisions to continue their education, and connecting students to other resources. Additionally, the respondents stated that they removed roadblocks from student success by providing specialized care for specific populations and assisting students in finding communities and resources to succeed.

The faculty and staff respondents offered narrative responses to illustrate their understanding of the academic advising services and structures for sophomore students. They offered very little understanding of how advising worked at ODU:

- Very little knowledge
- Not clear on the structure. I am aware of efforts (care calling) and such that have been implemented in order to increase retention. Student success coaches are a huge source of the support.
- I do not have enough experiences to fully answer the question. However, I understand that Freshman and Seniors do get more advising due to graduation and being new, respectively.
- I know there are quite a few resources available for first-year students, but I don't hear much at all about resources or advising for sophomores.
- I don't have a good understanding.
- It's honestly not super easy to understand. A lot of sophomores have taken most Gen Eds and usually have an "intro" advisor, but don't have their office assigned major academic advisor until they complete a certain number of credit/certain classes, etc. Some sophomores do so they have their official who they will work with for their remaining

time at ODU, but some are still working with those “intro” advisors. And if they are undecided then they are working with the Center of Major Exploration.

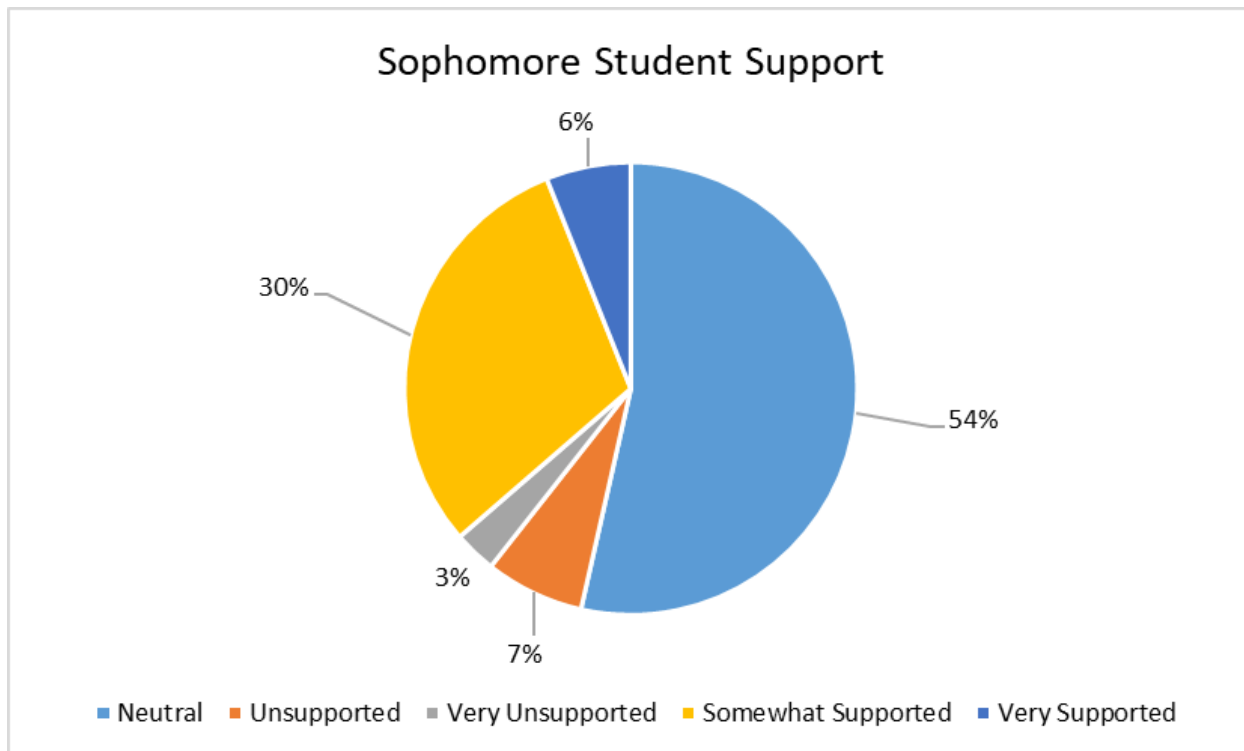
Further, the faculty and staff provided narrative responses to illustrate their understanding of the academic expectations of sophomores including:

- To be in the process of declaring their major and hopefully on target credit wise
- By the start of their sophomore year, students’ needs to have completed 30 credit hours and have maintained a 2.0 GPA. Many sophomores have completed general requirements and may have completed some major requirements.
- I do not have any academic expectations of sophomores unfortunately.
- A certain # of credits. I am not aware of the specific number.
- 30 or more credits, looking into internships, gain experience in their field, keep their grades the same or continue to improve.

Figure 8 shows that the faculty and staff were overwhelmingly neutral regarding whether sophomore students were academically supported.

### **Figure 8**

*Faculty and Staff responses to question “Based on your experience, how would you rate how well sophomore students are supported academically at ODU?”*



The faculty and staff respondents' perceptions of how well sophomore students were socially supported closely mirrored those perceptions of the academic support provided for sophomore students as 47% of the respondents believed they were somewhat or very supported socially while at ODU.

Finally, the respondents were asked to provide any further information that may be helpful in supporting students:

- Web link on the ODU main page with resources for those faculty and staff who had not had a direct training related to sophomore students.
- Any email reminders, optional meetings, and resources for questions and concerns should be offered to ALL level students.
- Mid semester reminders of Satisfactory Academic Progress policy, Payment/billing responsibilities and options to settle bills prior to the next semester, registration time slots, appeal opportunities.

- Clearer paths to experiential learning opportunities.
- Increased number academic advisors, centrally housed to ensure consistent training and information across all majors and student type

Input from faculty and staff are important as they provide the infrastructure for student success, contribute to student retention, and support thriving, persistence, and retention.

### ***Strategies for Retention, Thriving, and Persistence***

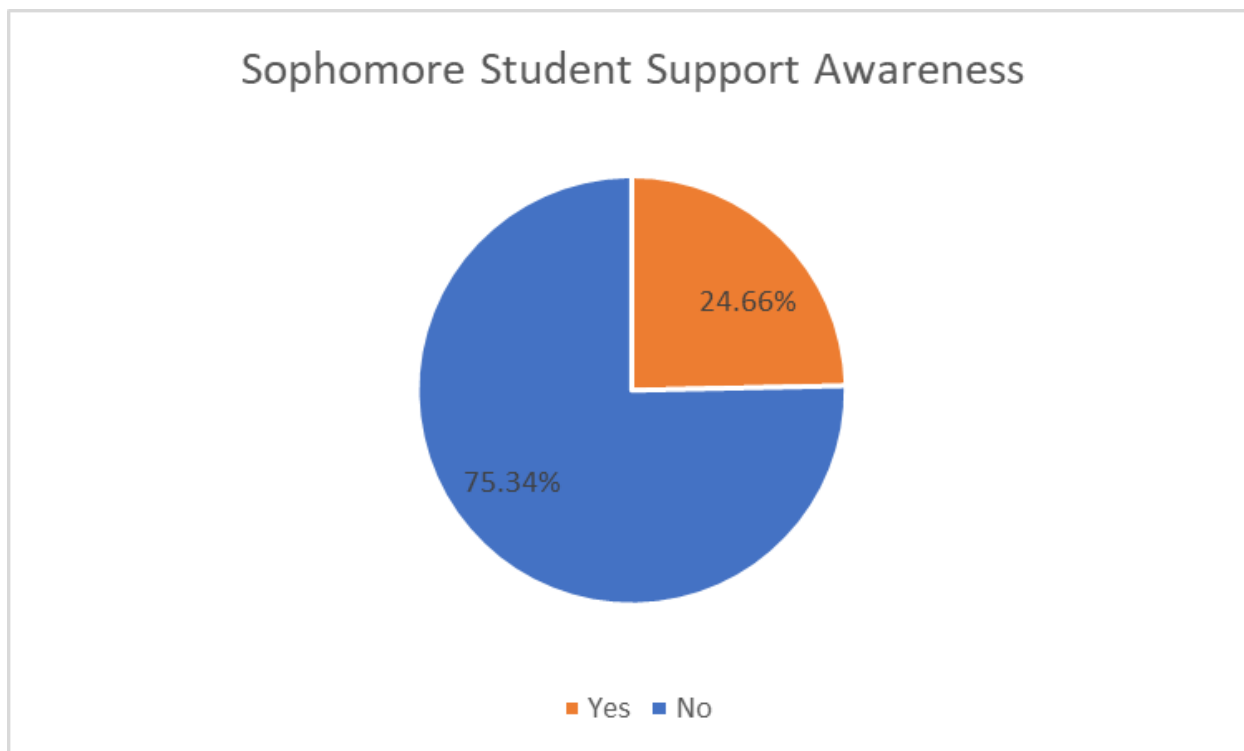
This section will provide detailed information from the survey about our third research question: “*What strategies can ODU implement to increase second to third-year retention and help sophomores to thrive and persist?*” Research states that support for sophomore students must be intentional (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Kranzow et al., 2015; Plominski & Burns, 2017; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011, 2015; Schaller, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). Several programs at ODU are believed to be positive influences on student retention per faculty and staff. The first-year experience and seminar, faculty mentor relationships, and living learning communities were reported by staff and faculty to have had the most influence on student retention, while undergraduate research, study abroad, and internships were reported to have the lowest positive influence. The high-impact practices that have had the lowest positive influence on student retention may have been impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 9 illustrates faculty and staff responses regarding their awareness of resources that are specifically for supporting sophomore students. The majority of the responses, 76% of the faculty and staff, reported that they were not aware of resources that were specifically for supporting sophomore students.

### **Figure 9**



*Responses to “Are you aware of resources that are specifically for supporting sophomore students?”*



### **Alignment with Research Questions**

During phase two of the data collection process, we were able to survey current ODU sophomore students and faculty and staff that support sophomore students at the institution. The information they provided corroborated much of what we discussed in our literature review on the sophomore student experience, but also what we discovered from interviews with ODU junior and seniors as well as benchmark institutions during phase one of our data collection process. Overall, the findings from phase two illustrates that ODU sophomore students as well as ODU faculty and staff acknowledge the difficult transition from the first to second year of college, but were often unable to identify any existing intentional sophomore-specific programming at the institution.

Approximately three in four of faculty and staff respondents were unaware of any resources at ODU specifically designed to assist sophomore students. The findings from the faculty and staff responses also revealed that very few (less than 6%) reported having ever received specific training on how to assist sophomore students. While most offered that the necessary resources exist at ODU to assist sophomore students to navigate common barriers, such as curricular and extracurricular support, mental wellness, and academic demands and expectations (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Oehme et al., 2018; Schaller 2010a; Sterling, 2018), they also reported a lack of intentional support and effective communication to enhance the sophomore experience at the institution. The majority of the sophomore students we surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that ODU cares about their sophomore students, but organizational attributes, such as internal communication, was found to be an area that they felt needs improvement.

Finally, as the literature pointed out (Demetriou et al., 2017; Schaller, 2005, 2010a; Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Spight, 2020; Sterling, 2018; Webb & Cotton, 2018), and as the ODU juniors and seniors we spoke with during phase one of the data collection process revealed, intentional academic advising and strong student-faculty relationships are two key areas found throughout our surveys that ODU students, faculty, and staff feel increase first to second year retention, thriving, and persistence. Qualitative feedback from both ODU sophomores as well as faculty and staff indicate that satisfaction and awareness of academic advising is mixed. While 67% of the students we surveyed stated that they strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of advising at ODU, the qualitative comments revealed some concerning trends, such as a lack of communication, a lack of availability to speak to someone when needed, and overall challenges with the decentralized system of advising that

exists at ODU. The findings also reveal that COVID has had an effect on the ability of students to make meaningful connections with faculty.

### **Chapter Summary**

An exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods research design allowed us to conduct two phases of data collection to provide the necessary information to answer our three research questions. During phase one, current ODU juniors and seniors, along with administrators at other institutions with sophomore programming, provided foundational, qualitative information to apply to the quantitative data we collected during phase two. Current ODU sophomores during phase two provided vitally important insights into the sophomore student experience and organizational attributes at the institution. They also provided recommendations and strategies that ODU could implement to improve the sophomore student experience at the institution. Additionally, ODU staff and faculty members who were surveyed had the opportunity to share their insights into the sophomore student experience, organizational attributes, and current relevant practices that assisted with second to third-year retention, thriving, and persistence. In our next chapter, we will go into greater detail about what we learned from the two phases of our data collection and how this information can be applied to specifically answer our research questions and provide ODU with a model for sophomore student success.

## Chapter Five: Recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of our study, present the major findings from our previous chapter, and offer recommendations based on our data. We will explain our findings in detail and present a sophomore student success model consisting of practical recommendations that Old Dominion University (ODU) can implement. We will also provide ideas for future research that ODU and other institutions can consider to ensure that efforts made to change and improve the sophomore student experience will be ongoing and sustainable.

In Spring 2021, the Division of Student Engagement & Enrollment Services (SEES) at ODU submitted a Request for Assistance (RFA) that expressed a desire to learn whether its sophomore students experience common barriers that may lead to attrition. SEES believed that strategic programming to assist sophomores might enhance engagement, career preparation, and student satisfaction (See Appendix A). In response, our team conducted an in-depth literature review to properly identify qualities about the typical sophomore student, address the ‘sophomore slump’ phenomenon, and illustrate the relevance of using Schaller’s Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) and Schreiner’s (2018) theory of student success, known as *thriving*, as the basis of the theoretical framework we used throughout our study.

We established three research questions to guide the study that were informed by the research included in our literature review:

1. What is the sophomore student experience at ODU?
  - a) What are the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience at ODU?
2. What are the organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence at ODU?

3. What strategies can ODU implement to increase second to third-year retention and help sophomores to thrive and persist?

We employed a sequential, exploratory, mixed-methods research design to collect and analyze the data to answer our research questions and determine whether a sophomore student problem of practice exists at ODU. The results yielded three major findings:

- **Finding 1:** A lack of transitional support exists for sophomore students at ODU.
- **Finding 2:** A lack of sophomore student development training for staff and faculty members exists at ODU.
- **Finding 3:** A lack of a defined sophomore student experience at ODU exists that fuses belonging, commitment, and celebration.

The three major findings from our study indicate that a sophomore student problem of practice does exist at ODU. Our recommendations will highlight the areas of improvement that need to be addressed.

### **Study Findings and Recommendations for Practice**

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (2021, para. 12) defined a problem of practice as “a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes.” Throughout our study, we used an improvement science approach to develop a sophomore student success model that we feel ODU can effectively implement to assess improvement in its problem of practice. Improvement science is concerned with finding the root cause of a problem through an extensive, robust literature review of the problem as well as observational methods, such as interviews and surveys (Perry et al., 2020). Perry et al. explained that one of the most important considerations when investigating a

problem of practice is the perceived needs of those individuals who are affected by the problem.

Our study found that the sophomore student experience at ODU is an issue that affects the needs of students, staff, and faculty alike. Sophomore students need to feel celebrated and have resources in place that can help with the challenges they face, and staff and faculty need to fully understand the sophomore student experience to create a program with the resources to properly assist sophomores. Without considering the root cause of the current problem of practice, it may be difficult to implement sustainable change. Our three major findings address the root cause of ODU's sophomore student problem: no definable sophomore programming exists at the institution to celebrate and support sophomore students. We begin with outlining the current challenges that exist for students entering their second-year of study at ODU.

***Finding 1: A Lack of Transitional Support Exists for Sophomore Students at ODU***

Students choose to attend ODU for many different reasons, but some of the most commonly expressed ones include access, affordability, and quality support for special populations (e.g., FGCS, military-affiliated students, transfer students). However, our findings show that a common barrier for sophomore students at ODU is the difficult adjustment period and lack of transitional support as they move from their first-year to their second-year. The students that we spoke with and surveyed expressed their knowledge of the extensive *overall* resources available at ODU, but were generally unaware of specific sophomore programming. Further, our conversations with SEES staff and campus partners from advising, housing and residence life, and student engagement along with the results of our staff/faculty survey confirmed that, presently, very few specific sophomore programming initiatives are in place at the institution. Hence, the aspects of the sophomore student experience that need the most attention tend to revolve around the challenges that come with the transition from the first to the

second year amid no tangible sophomore student support program in place.

Whereas the data we reviewed showed that freshmen have numerous welcome events, orientations, and targeted first-year experience activities, sophomores and rising sophomores tended to receive very few opportunities for specific transitional support in comparison. Our review of the literature stressed the importance of transitional support for sophomore students. Schaller (2005; 2010a) explained that the transition process must include opportunities for learning, self-reflection, and personal and professional growth in order for students to thrive. Based on the organizational data we reviewed and our findings, it seems that sophomore students at ODU are not receiving the necessary transitional support needed to fully thrive and persist, which could, then, in turn affect retention and attrition.

Our findings confirmed that some of the most common barriers that sophomore students face during their transition from the first year to the second year is a lack of curricular and extracurricular support to assist with thriving, persistence, and retention (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Schaller 2005, 2010a; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018; Tobolowsky, 2008). As reported in our previous chapter, very few of the 11 ODU juniors and seniors we spoke with during the focus groups and interviews remembered attending any specific sophomore-themed events when they were sophomores. In addition, 84% of the current ODU sophomores we surveyed reported that they had never attended any type of sophomore-specific event at ODU. While sophomore-specific events are one aspect of transitional support, we were more concerned with the students' awareness of and access to specific sophomore support services and programming that ODU currently has in place.

Relatedly, none of the ODU juniors and seniors we spoke with could recall any sophomore-specific communications that they received as sophomores. From our student survey,

we found that 75% of the current sophomores indicated that they were mostly unaware of the initiatives, programs, and resources that ODU dedicates to specifically supporting sophomores. Of those students who did indicate an awareness of sophomore-specific support, 5% reported that they rarely heard about or received information on these programs and initiatives, and 50% reported that they *never* heard or received information about them. These numbers, combined with the qualitative data we collected from students, indicate that a severe lack of sophomore-specific communication exists at ODU. For the smaller numbers of sophomores who were aware of sophomore-specific support, the appeared to be on the student to find out about them. This data showed that an opportunity exists for ODU to develop more sophomore-specific support programming and improve its communication about these opportunities.

Confirming the students' responses to a lack of specific resources to support sophomore students, a majority (75%) of the current ODU faculty and staff, who were identified by SEES as individuals who support sophomore students in the scope of their assigned duties, were also unaware of specific resources for sophomore students. We found that this lack of awareness illustrated three main issues: (1) a lack of sophomore-specific resources and services at ODU, (2) students, staff, and faculty are mostly unaware of the few sophomore-specific services that are currently in place at the institution, and (3) any current relevant practices and services in place specifically to support sophomore success are not effectively marketed and promoted.

ODU has extensive support services to assist all students, but without a concerted effort to create and market intentional and targeted support for sophomore students, the sophomore student experience at the institution will continue to remain undefined. Our data showed that an opportunity exists for ODU to improve not only the breadth of its sophomore student programming, but also the communication needed to market and promote this programming.



Although we found that sophomores are aware of resources at ODU to support student success, they appeared to have very little, if any, awareness of the resources that specifically addressed their needs as sophomores. Through our findings, we found that these needs included increased engagement in HIPs and intentional academic advising, both of which can serve as opportunities for creating a sense of belonging, increasing commitment to personal and professional goals, and establishing connections to other students on campus.

Our literature review highlighted how engagement in HIPs can increase student thriving, persistence, and retention. HIPs, such as participating in living learning communities, conducting undergraduate research, and completing internships, can also foster a sense of belonging, community, and connection to the school and others (Demetriou et al., 2017; Kuh, 2008; Kuh & Kinzie, 2018; Schaller, 2005; Schreiner, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). The results from our sophomore student survey showed modest increases in participation from the first to second year in HIPs, such as service-learning, undergraduate research, faculty mentorship, internships, campus employment, and engagement in student organizations, campus recreation, and ODU athletic activities. Yet, on average, 78% of sophomores reported having never participated in any of the HIPs that were listed in our survey (See Appendix C). This high number is concerning considering those students who did participate in HIPs reported that they positively influenced their overall sense of psychological well-being, relationships with others, belonging, commitment to personal and professional goals, and personal responsibility for their own decisions. The data implied that ODU has an opportunity to identify strategies to increase participation in HIPs that positively support sophomore students, as supported by research and student feedback.

One of the most noteworthy findings, that corroborated much of the literature about

sophomore students, was the discovery of the students' dissatisfaction with academic advising. On a positive note, 67% of the sophomore students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of academic advising services. Yet, 54% of students reported that they learned about the course and program requirements needed to graduate on their own without the assistance of an academic advisor. Additionally, 26% of the students in our survey shared negative feedback that highlighted the onus being placed on the student to determine what classes to take, a lack of timely responses and availability to meet with academic advisors, and the frequency of having to switch advisors throughout their freshmen and sophomore years. Considering the crucial role academic advising plays in sophomore students' personal and professional development (Demetriou et al., 2017; Schaller, 2010a; Schreiner, 2018; Spight, 2020; Sterling, 2018), it is important that these responses be addressed. While the majority of the comments on academic advising services were positive, our findings indicated that it is an area that may need to be evaluated, and one that other institutions with successful sophomore programming pay special attention to when implementing programming to assist with the transition to the students' second year.

From our interviews with leaders at benchmark institutions with sophomore programming, we found that an academic affairs-student affairs commitment to adjustment, transition, and orientation is a promising practice. The Ohio State University's Second-Year Transformational Experience Program (STEP) was designed as a partnership between academic affairs and student life to redefine the sophomore student experience. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) developed a second-year transition support office to address the first to second year transition, intentionally working with other campus partners to create an office that could focus on how to connect sophomores to appropriate services on campus. VCU also celebrates its

rising sophomore students with an achievement ceremony at the end of the students' first year of college to honor them as they transition to their second year. The University of Texas at Dallas created similar sophomore transition programming because they wanted to ensure that sophomores felt valued and supported, while also emphasizing strong academic support and clarity of academic expectations. ODU must join these institutions in creating intentional sophomore programming. To begin, the institution must develop a program committed to raising awareness of and improving the sophomore experience.

**Recommendation 1: Develop a Sophomore Student Orientation Program.** In light of our discovery of a lack of transitional support for sophomore students at ODU, we recommend the university develop a sophomore student orientation program. By creating a specific, overarching sophomore support program, leaders will make a commitment to elevate awareness of the sophomore experience at ODU. One of the foundations of this program would be a targeted communication plan to raise awareness of relevant resources, campus activities, and HIP opportunities to support the transition from first to second year and support persistence in future years. As we will discuss in Finding 2, a lack of training and awareness about the sophomore student experience can threaten thriving, persistence, and second to third year retention.

***Finding 2: Lack of Sophomore Student Development Training for ODU Staff and Faculty***

ODU's faculty and staff relationships with students have positive impacts on student persistence, but little training has been provided on how to support sophomore students during major transitions, resulting in frustration and a lack of their senses of belonging. This finding was evidenced through both phases of data collection presented in Chapter 4. The student focus groups and interview participants commented that ODU should devote more attention to sophomores and their academic transitions. The main concerns of sophomores are finding

meaning and purpose, while, at the same time, they feel abandoned by their university (Schreiner, 2018). Yet, 94% of ODU faculty and staff reported having no training in supporting sophomores. Students who have positive relationships with faculty are more likely to persist and thrive (Schaller, 2005; Schreiner et al., 2012; Webb & Cotton, 2018). The student survey results revealed that only half of the sophomores believed that ODU cares about them and that they belonged. Only 54% believed that ODU cared about sophomore students (13% strongly agree). Correspondingly, only 56% believed they belonged and felt included at ODU.

In addition, ODU faculty, staff, and students have mixed feelings about sophomore students' interpersonal and social relationships. ODU offers a non-credit course every fall semester that is described in the undergraduate course catalog as a seminar focusing on fostering relationships with other sophomores and faculty and exploring strengths, values, skills, and interests (Old Dominion University, 2021c). According to the results, 37% of the sophomore students we surveyed indicated they were frustrated with interpersonal relationships on campus; however, the results revealed that 47% of the faculty/staff believed that sophomores are somewhat supported or very supported socially. The students expressed their desire for more opportunities to interact with faculty/staff socially and learn how they would benefit from these relationships.

The students provided positive feedback on ODU efforts to support them; however, they also stated that they had a lack of human connection due to COVID-19, which affected their senses of belonging, connections to get the necessary support, and abilities to develop strong relationships with faculty and staff. The students commented that, while resources were in place, due to COVID-19 regulations, it was even harder to make the personal connections needed to ask for help. Many students expressed frustration with reaching out to faculty and staff regarding

resources available to them and being unable to connect to those resources due to misinformation. The majority of the faculty and staff (75%) were unaware of the resources specifically put in place to assist sophomore students during the pandemic. The lack of awareness of specific resources combined with a lack of sophomore student development training among faculty and staff may have hindered students from creating strong relationships with faculty and staff.

**Recommendation 2: Provide Training on Sophomore Needs and Development.**

Based on the study's findings, we recommend developing faculty and staff training that prepares them to better understand sophomore-specific needs, student development, and success factors related to this particular population. ODU has the opportunity to improve students' senses of belonging and other environmental conditions to meet the needs of sophomore students through a holistic approach of student support.

**Recommendation 3: Implement an Updated and Streamlined Sophomore Mentoring Program.** We recommend the restructuring of the current peer mentoring program to enhance student relationships with faculty and staff through enhanced interactions and connections. As noted by Schreiner (2018), meaningful connections with faculty support sophomore success. Faculty and staff can be connected by shared professional interests with students; work with students to connect them to campus offices, such as mental health services; or have similar backgrounds to the students, such as first-generation status.

As previously reported, the students noted mixed satisfaction with advising, including a lack of guidance, a lack of mentorship, and multiple advisor changes. Similarly, the majority of faculty and staff noted a lack of understanding when asked about the advising structure at ODU. They articulated that they have little to no understanding of advising, while noting that freshman,

juniors, and seniors were given more advising than sophomores. For those faculty and staff who offered some understanding of the advising structure, they noted that the structure was not easy to understand and no clear understanding exists of the academic expectations of sophomores.

**Recommendation 4: Evaluate Current Academic Advising Model.** In its current structure, students often have advisors during their freshman year and then change to other advisors once they declare their majors. Students who have not declared majors are administratively supported through the Center for Major Exploration. However, these students reported getting information regarding course and career planning, including internships, from faculty members and peer counselors. These various formal and informal advising sources can often lead to misinformation, frustration, poor interactions between students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, a perceived lack of training and the current advising structure results in faculty and staff being unaware of all relevant resources.

We recommend an evaluation of the current academic advising model and an examination of how academic advising connects with faculty and other campus partners. This evaluation should include a focus on strengthening campus partnerships and ensuring that faculty and staff are aware of available resources to partner with other departments, including advising, financial aid, housing, and counseling services. One byproduct of stronger partnerships is that resources are accurately shared with students. Evidence that campus resource awareness, positive relationships with faculty and staff, and strong campus partnerships are essential when seeking to holistically support students is found in a student participant's comment.

I think if I did not have as many relationships with faculty and staff as I do now, ODU would not feel as secure for me. If I am in need of anything, academically, socially, or

even emotionally, I can reach out to ODU staff I know and be confident that they will help me.

According to Jullierat (2000), sophomores noted that knowledgeable and caring faculty and advisors in conjunction with appropriate financial aid, a variety of course offerings, and an environment that supports intellectual growth are key in their college experiences (as cited in Sterling, 2018).

***Finding 3: A Lack of a Defined Sophomore Student Experience at ODU that Fuses Belonging, Commitment, and Celebration***

Our findings highlighted that seniors, juniors, and sophomores at ODU have a strong sense of commitment to their personal and professional goals. All of our focus group participants rated their current commitment level to personal and professional goals very highly. In our student survey, nearly 70% of the respondents felt committed to their personal and professional goals. This strong sense of commitment is promising for ODU as it suggests that sophomores are investing time and energy to pursue their personal and academic goals. *Commitment*, the fourth and final stage of Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005), is characterized by a sense of ownership of student choices and making plans for the future. This stage is significant for ODU as the findings contradict Schaller's belief that most sophomores are in the focused exploration stage, whereas our data suggests that sophomores at ODU are in the tentative choices and/or commitment stages.

This strong level of commitment is further corroborated by our findings specific to the sophomore personal development behaviors of responsibility and ownership. For instance, 89% of our sophomore survey respondents noted that they have a strong sense of responsibility for their actions and 80% take ownership of their choices. These data points suggest that

*commitment* goes beyond raw confidence and also includes a sense of resilience when challenges and frustrations may occur.

Academic advising is a critical component for second to third-year retention. Our findings highlighted that satisfaction with academic advisors was mixed. The impact of academic advisor satisfaction on sophomore student commitment is significant and has the potential to harm second-year retention and persistence if not adequately addressed. Our study showed that a majority of ODU's sophomores make course decisions and learn about graduation requirements without the assistance of an advisor. With the majority of our respondents not relying on professional guidance, our findings suggest that students may fall through the cracks without quality support. Our literature review described how sophomores experience significant decision points, such as declaring majors and aligning personal interests with career decisions. When the decision points with sophomores during this critical period are rare or inadequate, the impact on persistence and commitment may be consequential (Craig, 2005; Ott, 1995; Reason, 2009).

In addition to personal drive and commitment, our findings highlighted that institutional loyalty has a positive impact on student belonging and persistence. A sense of belonging and community is improved when students develop meaningful relationships with classmates, administrators, and faculty (Gahagan, 2018; Schreiner, 2010a, 2010b, 2018; Wang & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013). In both our focus groups and survey results, the participants noted that student employment was critical to their senses of belonging and loyalty to ODU. One focus group respondent shared that her on-campus job was a "way to stay connected and have relationships with coworkers and boss." Nearly one in five of our survey respondents shared that student employment had a positive impact on their student experiences. This finding was significant as it stood out from research identified in the literature review. Yet, emerging research suggests that



some student employment experiences may have the characteristics of a high-impact practice, resulting in an enhanced learning experience taking place beyond the classroom (Kuh, 2009; McClellan et al., 2018). Additionally, both the focus group and student survey instruments revealed student involvement, including membership in student organizations were positive factors in their sophomore student success. One focus group respondent shared that being involved on campus “honestly [made them] feel a sense of loyalty that [they] didn’t expect.” One in four of our survey respondents noted participation in student organizations or student involvement programs. As a result, we found that both student employment and student involvement played key factors in driving a sense of belonging and sophomore student persistence. When examining HIPs and co-curricular activities to promote student belonging and success, however, these opportunities do not tend to be available or intentionally designed for the needs of sophomores.

**Recommendation 5: Design a Sophomore Year Experience (SYE).** While sophomores at ODU have a strong sense of responsibility, ownership toward their personal and professional goals, and a sense of loyalty to the institution, they lack a shared experience that fuses together belonging, commitment, and celebration. The tenacity that sophomores at ODU demonstrate should be made visible through a culture of celebration and care. Amid challenges and frustrations, our findings highlighted that sophomores are able and willing to make important independent decisions without quality institutional support. However, the lack of interdependence between sophomores and institutional support structures can prove faulty if students do not fully understand the impact of their academic and career decisions, such as personal interests, values, and academic major expectations.

First, we recommend that, with a goal of strengthening loyalty, belonging, and

commitment to ODU, it designs a Sophomore Year Experience (SYE). The SYE could have a five-part framework: (1) meaningful faculty-student relationships, (2) peer connections, (3) promotes career exploration, (4) institutes new sophomore traditions, and (5) celebrates sophomore accomplishments. The meaningful relationships that sophomores have with faculty, staff, and peers prove to be a positive factor in student success (Schaller, 2005; Schreiner et al., 2012; Webb & Cotton, 2018). The intentional design of space, mentorship, and coaching for sophomores with these stakeholders can have a positive impact on persistence. One promising practice at The Ohio State University is the Second-Year Transformational Experience Program (STEP), which includes faculty mentorship and small cohorts to foster a sense of belonging and connection.

Second, the promotion of *focused exploration* is in line with Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) to help students continue on the path to *commitment*. If a sophomore experience lacks attention to focused career exploration, sophomore student commitment levels may be negatively impacted. HIPs, such as internships, undergraduate research, service-learning, and leadership development for sophomores at ODU, can aid in helping students explore, commit, and align personal interests to academic and career goals.

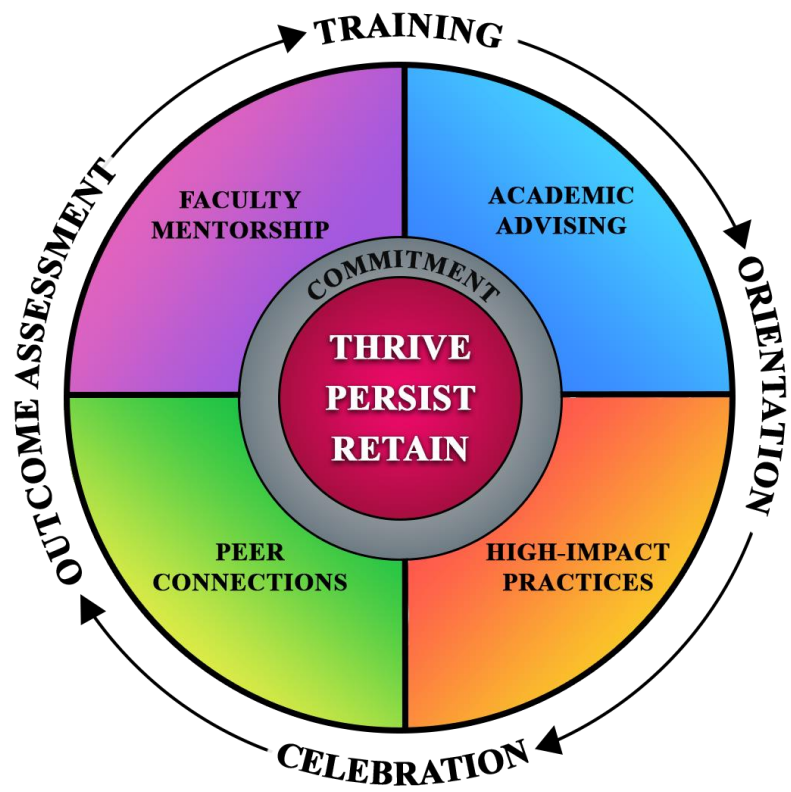
Third, a SYE that institutes new sophomore traditions and celebrates student accomplishments aids in institutional loyalty and a sense of belonging. At Emory University, the sophomore pinning ceremony, where students, after two semesters, are pinned as part of a significant university tradition sponsored by the Student Alumni Association that increases sense of belonging and encourages student persistence. Student traditions and celebrations aid sophomores in feeling seen and valued by the institution, renewing their personal purposes and commitments to continuing to persist, and giving them senses of connection with others in

celebrating significant milestones. Relatedly, collaboration with other campus units could provide a mutually beneficial opportunity for students and increase exposure of sophomore students throughout the campus.

Our three major findings from the data informed our recommendations and serve as the basis for our suggested model of sophomore student success displayed in Figure 10.

**Figure 10**

*ODU - Sophomores Reign On! Model of Sophomore Student Success*



The major outcome of this study is our proposed *Sophomores Reign On! Model of Sophomore Student Success*. Achieving sophomore student success requires both institutional action and student investment. The center of our model embodies a definition for sophomore student success: *thrive, persist, and retain*. Thriving refers to students who maintain optimal functioning in academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being.

Persistence refers to sustained progress toward earning a college degree on an annual basis. Retention refers to re-enrolling at the same institution (ODU) for their third year of post-secondary education. Thriving, persistence, and retention are predominant themes in the literature on sophomore students (Blekic et al., 2020; Gregg-Jolly et al., 2016; Miao & Li, 2021; Schaller, 2010b; Schreiner, 2010b, 2013, 2018; Virtue et al., 2017). ODU can design a comprehensive evaluation and assessment process to measure thriving (mixed-methods), persistence, and retention rates to identify trends over time.

The next layer, *commitment*, reflects the phase of Schaller's Sophomore Student Development Theory (2005) that aims to have students become dedicated to their personal and professional goals and possess strong senses of ownership over their decisions. We feel that, if sophomores are able to reach the *commitment* stage of Schaller's theory, their chances to thrive, persist, and continue on to their third year at ODU will increase. To achieve commitment, sophomores must attend an institution that invests in the major areas that have been found to lead to thriving, persistence, and retention. Commitment can be defined and/or measured, at this stage, through evaluation of student participation in sophomore-specific programming (i.e., SYE).

We found four major elements to helping students and institutions achieve commitment and success: *faculty mentorships*, *academic advising*, *peer connections*, and *HIPs*. These four elements are critical needs for sophomore student success and explored in our literature review (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010; Kranzow et al., 2015; Plominski & Burns, 2017; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011, 2015; Schaller, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Schreiner, 2018; Sterling, 2018). These elements also emphasize that it is incumbent upon the institution to equip faculty, advisors, and peer leaders with the knowledge and skills to develop meaningful relationships and relevant

experiences with sophomore students. Our findings and recommendations specifically address strategies and opportunities to illuminate the importance of these four elements to support student success and embed them into institutional practices.

Finally, the outer circle displays the operational needs to hold the model together. First, *training* for faculty and staff on sophomore student development and success factors is paramount to shared language and understanding. Next, *orientation* programming for sophomore students will aid with transitional support and create a strong foundation of success throughout their second year, as recommended by Wang and Kennedy-Phillips (2013). Third, *celebration* allows for a shared sophomore student experience that increases satisfaction and fosters a sense of belonging and commitment by achieving common milestones (Miao & Li, 2021; Schreiner et al., 2012; Virtue et al., 2017). Fourth, *outcome assessment* is key to assessing the core goals of thriving, persistence, retention, and sophomore commitment. We encourage ODU to define specific outcomes for sophomore student success and benchmark the integral components for continuous assessment. *Assessment* cycles back to training to ensure that organizational conditions continue to meet the needs of sophomores at ODU. The cyclical nature of the model illustrates the connectivity between all of the parts and how they are interrelated. Ultimately, the model encompasses the several recommendations we include in this chapter from the three major findings of our study.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This capstone study explored the sophomore student experience at ODU and organizational attributes that contribute to student persistence, thriving, and retention. With constraints on time and resources to complete a project as significant as the one requested, we suggest a few areas for future research to help shape a comprehensive student success strategy.

First, a more thorough study into academic advising satisfaction is necessary. Based on the results of our capstone, the academic advising structure at ODU requires further exploration to understand the weight of the impact of current structures on sophomore student retention. Our study yielded mixed results on advising in general, but also on the quality of academic advisors (i.e., faculty advisors vs. staff advisors).

Second, further exploration of the impact of HIPs at ODU on sophomore student success would be significant. Our study was only able to capture participation in certain HIPs. With the broad array of HIPs across academic and student affairs at ODU, understanding the impact of specific programs will be helpful when considering scaling or expanding existing initiatives to support sophomores. The work on HIPs will also support the newly-designed Office of Leadership and Learning, as well as the ODU LeADERS (Leadership, ePortfolio, Academic Internship, Diversity, Entrepreneurship, Research, Service Learning) career pathways program offered to students.

Third, our research team believes that future research is needed on the specific social identities that sophomores at ODU hold. Although we were able to gain significant insights on specific populations, including military-affiliated and transfer students, we recognize that the institution, as a minority-serving institution, will benefit from better understanding the sophomore experience through the lens of specific identities, cultures, and backgrounds. Considering the small sample size overall, our research team did not pursue looking at a statistical analysis of the data. To this end, future research from a statistical significance perspective may be beneficial.

Our capstone project consisted of mostly descriptive research to examine the sophomore student experience at ODU in an effort to provide practical recommendations. Future research on

sophomore students, and an approach that could be an effective method of outcome assessment, would be to implement a cross-sectional or longitudinal research design on sophomore students. A cross-sectional design involves collecting data from similar samples of individuals from different groups that are studied at the same point in time (Ravid, 2015). A cross-sectional approach toward this research issue could involve collecting data over the next several academic years of different classes of ODU sophomores at the end of their second year at the institution.

A more ambitious approach may be to conduct a longitudinal study to measure changes over time among the same or similar groups of students. Ravid (2015) explained that a panel study is a type of longitudinal study where the same group is studied at different points in time. This approach would allow for an assessment of how ODU's newly implemented model of sophomore student success has impacted the same group of sophomores over time throughout their second year at the institution and beyond. In addition to these other types of descriptive research, future research could place a heavier emphasis on statistical analysis to dig deeper into interpreting the collected data on sophomore students.

### **Conclusion**

Our research highlights the sophomore student experience from a wide variety of perspectives, including current sophomores, upperclassmen, and faculty and staff who impact their experience. Although sophomores earn their standing through credit hours, very little exists to bring sophomores together to resemble a student experience similar to freshmen, juniors, or seniors. The lack of attention that sophomores receive has been a topic of interest to researchers over the past few decades and resulted in institutional action to improve the student experience for sophomores. This study helps bring the literature review and national trends into perspective for ODU to take intentional action in the areas of student-faculty relationships, academic

advising, and broadening the understanding of sophomore student development to improve university-wide partnerships and respond to the expectations of the contemporary college student. With a demographic cliff expected within the next decade, an examination of second to third-year retention is key for colleges and universities nationwide. ODU, however, has a solid foundation of meaningfully-formed relationships for students to interact with faculty and staff. With a sense of belonging and connection at the core of the work of SEES, the implementation of a sophomore student success model builds off of the university's current successes, while identifying opportunities for organizational improvement to support retention, persistence, and graduation at ODU.



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## Appendix A

### Client Request for Assistance



Attention: Dr. Kim Bridges & Dr. Tomika Ferguson  
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3/11/2021

Old Dominion University – Student Engagement & Enrollment Services

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#### **Problem of Practice**

While there is tremendous focus on first-year students' transition to the university, institutional leadership has noted that second-year students have unique needs and face challenges of their own. Nationwide, Sophomore students in higher education have been compared to the often-overlooked middle child in a family. The primary focus of this capstone research is **Sophomore Success Models for Old Dominion University**, a diverse metropolitan institution.

There is a need for an examination of students during their Sophomore year and the challenges they face that can lead to stopping out. Sophomore students may be experiencing challenges in an array of areas including academic deficiencies (warning or probation status), academic disengagement, dissatisfaction with the collegiate experience, selecting an academic major, career uncertainty, and identity development. Common Sophomore success initiatives include housing and residence life programs, career planning, leadership development, academic advising, peer mentoring by Sophomores, community service, faculty staff mentors, etc.

While Freshman to Sophomore retention at ODU is around 80%, current 6-year graduation rate drops to around 53%. ODU administrators are interested in learning more about this pattern. Specifically, we want to learn whether there are common barriers during the Sophomore year that lead to attrition. We believe that by strategically designing Sophomore success programs and practices, ODU can enhance student further enhance engagement, career preparation, and student satisfaction, which all contribute to Sophomore retention.



## Old Dominion University & Sophomore Student Research

We are interested in a Capstone Group to research:

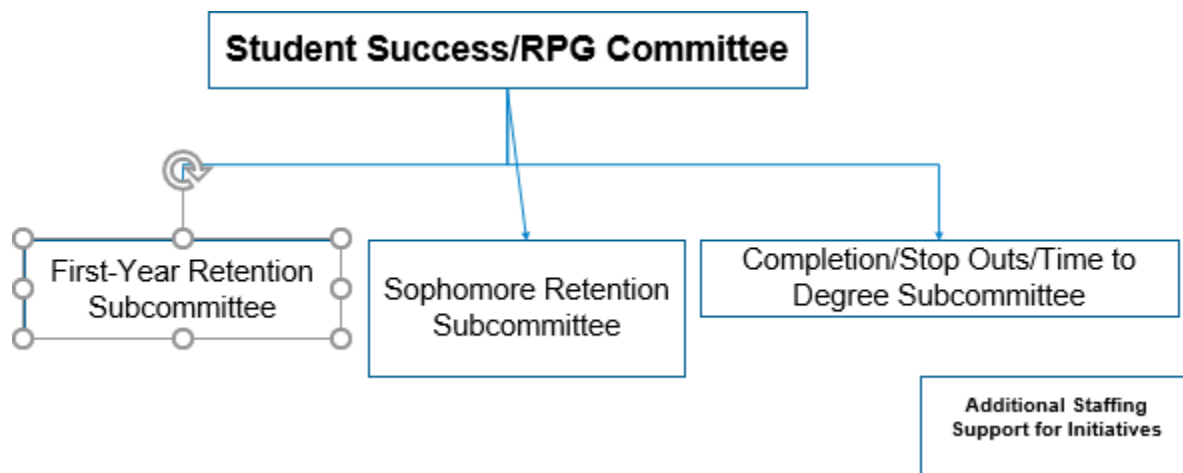
- The needs and challenges (academic, developmental, and institutional) of Sophomore students at Old Dominion University.
  - Identification of supports needed for Sophomore students to persist.
  - Frameworks that higher education administrators at ODU could utilize to support Sophomore success and address the second-year struggles.
- Sophomore issues and barriers faced (academic engagement, social integration, motivation, faculty contact, etc.) that may lead to attrition.
  - Action steps that can be taken to address these issues and barriers at ODU.
  - Strategies (resources and support) that would most effectively serve the ODU student population.
- Identification of ways we can help our ODU staff become the “best practitioners” to support Sophomore success. Moving beyond “best practices,” we would like to further connect this research to the practitioner.

### Background on ODU

A point of pride for Old Dominion University is its diverse population of students including transfers, military-affiliated, distance learners, and traditionally underserved student populations (African American and Latinx). Our student body includes over 8,200 students who receive Pell Grants, accounting for 43% of our undergraduate student body, among the largest percent of 4-year publics in Virginia. At ODU, we have made it a priority to serve low-income, first-generation students, and we are proud of our work. Of note, 50% of the first-year class at ODU are first-generation college students.

Providing support for first-generation students has been a priority at ODU. We have been named a First Forward Institution by NASPA for the institutional efforts to help first-generation students succeed. In 2020, ODU ranked 18<sup>th</sup> in the nation for graduating African American students by *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*.

While we are excelling in the areas described above, Sophomore success remains an area for improvement. At ODU, we would like to enhance our Sophomore success program. The diagram below describes our current student success structure.



Old Dominion is committed to educating students from all backgrounds, and we believe enhancing our Sophomore Success support, from academics to engagement, can positively impact student outcomes.

Sophomore success will propel our efforts to improve outcomes for learners of color, specifically our African American and Latinx learners. In addition, it is critical to address the needs of first-generation students and the resources and support needed during their Sophomore year. Our goal is to make sure no one falls through the cracks on the path to graduation and this project is focused specifically on the Sophomore experience.

**Resources and Support Available:** ODU Student Engagement & Enrollment Services is available to provide needed support and serve as a partner during the process. We can provide support through our department of Institutional Research, organizationally housed in Student Engagement & Enrollment Services. In addition, the Capstone Group will have access to our assessment expert from the Assessment and Planning Office for Student Engagement & Enrollment Services. The Capstone Group will have full support of needed data sets, institutional documents, staff members, email lists, and additional research items. Dr. Carin Barber will serve as the point of contact and help connect the team to resources and staff contacts.

Expected Products and Timeline:

- The suggested timeline of a March/April 2022 end date is feasible for this project.
- A suggested model of Sophomore success including institutional and personnel practices and strategies.
- Recommendations for a Sophomore success strategy/program including institutional support needed for Sophomore student success.
  - Identification of partnerships or programs that could be utilized to reduce barriers that block students' progress.
- Review of current Sophomore success events and outreach activities and recommendations of additions or modifications to assist second-year students with overcoming hurdles and obstacles.

Division of Student Engagement &  
Enrollment Services Office of the Vice  
President

1002 Koch Hall, Norfolk, VA 23529 □ Phone: 757/683-6702 □ Fax: 757/683-6885 □ <http://odu.edu/sees>

**Appendix B**  
**Study Protocol**

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Sophomore Success Models for Old Dominion University</b>
<b>Institution/Affiliation:</b>	Virginia Commonwealth University, School of Education Educational Leadership  Old Dominion University, Student Engagement & Enrollment Services
<b>Faculty Supervisor:</b>	Tomika L. Ferguson, Ph.D Asst. Dean, Student Affairs & Inclusive Excellence; Asst. Professor, Educational Leadership
<b>Investigator(s) Name/Email:</b>	Kevin T. Caffrey, M.A. caffreyk@vcu.edu  Ricardo Clauden-Cross, M.Ed. raclauden@vcu.edu  Tiyacca Simms-Jones, M.Ed. tsimmsjones@vcu.edu  Fredelito Yvan M. Tugas, M.Ed. fymtugas@vcu.edu
<b>Study Contact Person Name/Email:</b>	Tomika L. Ferguson, Ph.D Asst. Dean, Student Affairs & Inclusive Excellence; Asst. Professor, Educational Leadership
<b>Trial Location(s):</b>	Old Dominion University 5115 Hampton Blvd Norfolk, VA 23529
<b>Background/Rationale:</b>	In March 2021, ODU submitted a Request for Assistance (RFA). The University is interested in seeing a proposal for sophomore success, including organizational practices and student success plans, identifying college-wide strategies for putting sophomores in a position to participate in current events and outreach activities, and identifying ways to remove barriers to sophomore success.  ODU Student Engagement & Enrollment Services (SEES) determined a need to examine challenges sophomores face that may contribute to attrition and will provide the necessary support.
<b>Primary Objective/Purpose:</b>	Gain an understanding of the organizational culture and practices that influence the sophomore student experience at Old Dominion University and develop potential strategies to assist with sophomore student persistence.

<p><b>Study Design:</b></p>	<p>An exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods design was implemented. Phase One consisted of qualitative data collection, and Phase Two consisted of quantitative data collection.</p> <p>During Phase One, ODU junior and senior students were identified and invited to participate in virtual focus groups and interviews to collect qualitative data on the sophomore student experience at ODU. Focus groups and interviews lasted no more than 60 minutes. Sessions were recorded and responses were transcribed via Zoom. No identifying information will be retained. Additionally, interviews were held with several benchmark institutions that offer successful sophomore programming to gain further qualitative data on the research issue.</p> <p>During Phase Two, current ODU sophomore students as well as ODU faculty and staff were identified and invited to complete a web-based survey to obtain quantitative data on the sophomore student experience at ODU.</p> <p>The surveys covered the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Institutional support</li> <li>● Institutional accessibility including advising, financial aid, health and wellness resources,</li> <li>● Experiences with sophomore success initiatives,</li> <li>● Communication of sophomore experience opportunities</li> <li>● Impact of the sophomore experience with HIPs</li> </ul> <p>Survey responses were collected via QuestionPro and all data was housed on a secure drive only accessible to the researchers via secure login.</p> <p>Survey data was analyzed to determine organizational culture and the relevant practices that influence the sophomore student experience.</p>
<p><b>Inclusion Criteria:</b></p>	<p>Focus group and interview participants were identified by ODU and include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Junior and Senior students</li> <li>● Military affiliated students</li> <li>● First Generation College student</li> <li>● Transfer students</li> <li>● Students with marginalized identities including students of color</li> <li>● Participant in a HIP as previously identified</li> </ul>

	<p>Survey participants were identified by ODU and include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students that had earned 30-59 credit hours after Fall 2021</li> <li>• Students enrolled in the Spring 2022 semester</li> <li>• Students inclusive of freshman admits, transfer admits, and fully online students</li> <li>• Administrative, teaching and research, and professional faculty that support sophomore students</li> <li>• Salaried employees not identified as faculty that support sophomore students</li> <li>• Faculty that support sophomore students and initiatives</li> </ul>
<b>Exclusion Criteria:</b>	Freshmen and sophomore students were excluded from participation in focus groups and interviews. Juniors, senior and graduate students were excluded from participation in the web-based student survey. Faculty and staff that do not directly support sophomore students and initiatives were excluded from participation in the web-based faculty/staff survey.
<b>Number of Participants:</b>	Number of participants will be determined by ODU.
<b>Duration:</b>	October 2021-March 2022
<b>Risks:</b>	No risks were noted to participants.
<b>Risk Mitigation:</b>	Subjects were allowed to skip any question(s) they did not wish to answer and were allowed to withdraw consent from the study at any time without repercussion.

## Appendix C

### Student Survey



## Sophomore Student Survey

You are invited to take part in a survey. The purpose of this study is to gather information about the environment, reasons that sophomore students drop out of the university, and sophomore programs at Old Dominion University. By understanding these things the researchers can help ODU start programs that help improve the experience of sophomore students so they will get their degrees.

Things you should know:

The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the culture and practices that affect the sophomore student experience at Old Dominion University.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a 10-15 minute web-based survey.

There are no known risks in participating in this study.

There are no direct benefits in participating in this study.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact:

Tiyacca Simms-Jones

[tsimmsjones@vcu.edu](mailto:tsimmsjones@vcu.edu)

I Agree

This survey will go through a series of questions asking about your experiences as a sophomore student at ODU. This survey should take no more than 10-15 minutes to complete. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Thank you very much for your time.

---

ODU categorizes sophomore students as undergraduate students who have earned at least 30 but no more than 59 credits. For the purposes of our study, we will define sophomore students as students entering their second-year of college regardless of earned credit hours. Do you fit into this category?

- Yes
  - No
  - Unsure
- 

**Part I: Awareness of Sophomore Student Support Resources, High-Impact Practices, and Campus Activities**

*The following questions will allow you to provide information on your awareness of sophomore-specific programs and resources at ODU as well as High-Impact Practices such as study abroad opportunities and internships. It will also afford you the opportunity to inform us of other campus activities you participate in.*

How aware are you of initiatives, programs, and resources dedicated to supporting sophomore students, such as the *Sophomore Retention Subcommittee*, *Housing & Residence Life's Welcome to Sophomores* event, and the *UNIV 111 Sophomore Seminar*?

- Not At All Aware
  - Slightly Aware
  - Somewhat Aware
  - Moderately Aware
  - Extremely Aware
-



---

How often do you hear about or receive information about sophomore-specific programs and resources?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

---

How do you learn about these opportunities? Please select all that apply.

- Email
- Posters On Campus
- Faculty or Staff Members
- Other Students
- Campus Newsletter
- Social Media
- Never Heard About These Opportunities
- Other

---

Have you attended any sophomore-specific events (social, academic, or otherwise) at ODU?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

Please describe the event(s) and your experience participating in the event(s)?

Please select all the activities that you have previously participated in or are currently participating in at ODU previously from the below list.

	First Year	Second Year	Not At All
First Year Experience/Seminar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Second Year Experience/Seminar	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Living Learning Community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Study Abroad	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Undergraduate Research	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Service Learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have a Faculty Mentor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Campus Employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student Organizations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	First Year	Second Year	Not At All
Campus Recreation (group fitness, intramurals, club sports, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ODU Athletic Team	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have engaged with any of the above activities, please indicate how you would agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Does Not Apply
positively influenced my academic well-being.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my relationships with faculty or staff members on campus.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my relationships with other students on campus.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my psychological well-being.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced how I chose my major.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my spirituality and/or religious beliefs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my sense of belonging and connection to the ODU community.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my overall sense of commitment to my personal goals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my overall sense of commitment to my professional goals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
positively influenced my overall sense of responsibility for my own decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please briefly describe your experiences participating in the activities you selected above. If you did not participate in any of the activities listed above, please briefly tell us why.

**Part II: Experience with University Support Services**

*The following questions will allow you to provide your experiences with student support services at ODU.*

How often do you interact with your academic advisor each semester?

- Weekly
- Monthly
- At Least Two Times Each Semester
- Once a semester
- Never

---

Please share your experience(s) with academic advising services related to selecting courses and career development?

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am satisfied with the quality of academic advising services I have received at ODU.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My academic advisor is helpful to me as I make decisions about courses and my major.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I make decisions as to which courses to take and my choice of a major and/or minor on my own without the assistance of an academic advisor.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I learn about course and program requirements needed to graduate on my own without the assistance of an academic advisor.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My academic advisor supports my career development and exploration.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to access academic advising services.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The financial aid package I have received adequately helps me and my family cover my educational costs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about financial aid opportunities is accessible and easy to understand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am satisfied with the financial aid opportunities ODU offers for sophomore students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have strong relationships with faculty members at ODU.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
			Neither Agree or Disagree		
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have strong relationships with staff members at ODU.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to develop strong relationships with faculty and staff members at ODU.

COVID-19 has been a barrier for me to access ODU support services that I normally would be able to access if not for the pandemic.

I believe ODU cares about sophomore students at ODU.

I believe I belong and feel included at ODU.

---

Please tell us how your relationship(s) with faculty and /or staff members influences your overall experience at ODU:

---

Do you feel that there are additional resources needed to support sophomore students at ODU, including opportunities you may have participated in during your first year (i.e. Success Coach, First-Year Orientation, etc.)?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

---

Please share what you feel these resources should be:

### Part III: Personal Development

*The following questions will allow you to reflect on your personal development at ODU and provide feedback on your relationship with faculty and staff members.*

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
As a sophomore student at ODU, I make academic choices (course selection, major/minor declaration, faculty interactions, etc.) with little or no amount of self-reflection.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I make personal choices with little or no amount of self-reflection.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I question the choices I made during my first year of college.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel frustrated with my academic experience.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel frustrated with my interpersonal relationships with others (faculty, friends, family, peers, etc.).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel frustrated with my personal decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel frustrated with my professional decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel committed to my personal goals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel committed to my professional goals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel a sense of responsibility for my own actions.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neither Agree or Disagree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel that my chosen major aligns with my future career goals.

As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel that I make decisions that align closely with my personal values.

As a sophomore student at ODU, I feel a sense of ownership of my choices and have begun to develop plans for my future.

**Part IV: School Culture** *The following questions will allow you to provide feedback on your perception of certain organization attributes of ODU.*

In your opinion, how effective is ODU's communication to sophomore students regarding academic standards, course requirements, and graduation requirements?

- Very Ineffective
- Ineffective
- Average
- Effective
- Very Effective



To what extent do you think ODU's policies and rule enforcement on issues such as academic standards and grading are fair to sophomore students?

- Not At All
  - To a Small Extent
  - To Average Extent
  - To a Large Extent
  - To a Very Large Extent
- 

To what extent do you think ODU's policies on scholarship and financial aid issues are fair to sophomore students?

- Not At All
  - To a Small Extent
  - To Average Extent
  - To a Large Extent
  - To a Very Large Extent
- 

To what extent do you think sophomore students at ODU play an active role in decision-making concerning making academic rules and making social rules?

- Not At All
  - To a Small Extent
  - To Average Extent
  - To a Large Extent
  - To a Very Large Extent
-

**Part V: Participant Demographic Information**

What is your gender?

- Male
  - Female
  - Transgender
  - Non-binary
  - Other
  - Prefer Not to Disclose
- 

Select the racial/ethnic group(s) with which you identify (you may check all that apply):

- Asian or Pacific Islander
  - American Indian/Alaska Native
  - Black/African American
  - Hispanic/ Latinx
  - Multiracial or Biracial
  - White
  - A Race/Ethnicity Not Listed Here
  - Prefer Not To Answer
-

Where do you currently live?

- Off-campus (with family or friends)
  - Off-campus (independently)
  - On-campus
  - Prefer not to answer
- 

Do you take all of your classes online?

- Yes
  - No
- 

Are you a military-affiliated student? A military-affiliated student is an individual that has some type of connection to military service such as students that identify as active duty service members or veterans of the armed forces and/or dependents of active duty service members or veterans of the armed forces.

- Yes
  - No
  - Prefer Not to Disclose
- 

Do you consider yourself to be a first-generation college student? For the purposes of this study, we are defining a first-generation college student as an individual for whom neither parent or guardian has earned a bachelor's degree.

- Yes
  - No
-

Did you come to ODU as a transfer student? For the purpose of this study, we are defining a transfer student as someone who attended a different college or university before attending ODU.

- Yes
- No
- 

Which did you attend prior to ODU?

- Community or Junior College
- Four-year College or University
- Other
- 

*For your participation in this survey, you can be entered into a random drawing where select winners will have \$20.00 added to their Monarch Plus account! If you would like to be entered into this drawing, please provide your email address. Your email address entry is separate and not be associated with your survey responses.*

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## Appendix D

### Faculty and Staff Survey

#### ODU Sophomore Student Success Survey for Faculty & Staff

Hello! **The survey will go through a series of questions asking about your experiences regarding sophomore students and resources, services, and programs related to their undergraduate experiences.** This survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please answer questions pertaining to your role at ODU. Thank you very much for your time.

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What is your primary role at Old Dominion University?

- Faculty
- Staff

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Select the racial/ethnic group(s) with which you identify (check all that apply):

- Asian or Pacific Islander
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Black/African American
- Hispanic/ Latinx
- Multiracial or Biracial
- White
- A race/ethnicity not listed here
- Prefer not to answer

Have you received any training on how to support sophomore students specifically?

Yes

No

Please describe the training you received and what you learned.

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Are you aware of resources that are specifically for supporting sophomore students?

Yes

No

Please describe those programs.

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Do you work/with support any of the following programs/opportunities at ODU? (check all that apply):

- First-year experience/seminar
- Sophomore experience/seminar
- Living Learning Community
- Study Abroad
- Undergraduate research
- Service Learning
- Internship
- First-Generation @ ODU
- TRIO
- I do not work with/support any of these programs

---

If so, in what ways?

Which of these programs do you believe positively influence student retention?

- First-year experience/seminar
- Sophomore experience/seminar
- Living Learning Community
- Study Abroad
- Undergraduate research
- Service Learning
- Faculty mentor relationship
- Internship
- First-Generation @ ODU
- TRIO
- None of these programs

Please select the areas you work with or support from the following choices (check all that apply):

- Military Services
- Academic Advising
- Financial Aid
- Intercultural Relations
- Transfer Center
- Center for Major Exploration
- TRIO Support Services



In what ways do you feel that any of these offices/services above increase student retention.

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What is your understanding of academic advising services/structure for sophomore students?

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What are the academic expectations of sophomore students by their sophomore year?

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Based on your experience, how would you rate how well sophomore students are supported academically at ODU?

- Very Supported
  - Somewhat Supported
  - Neutral
  - Unsupported
  - Very Unsupported
-

Based on your experience, how would you rate how well sophomore students are supported socially at ODU?

- Very Supported
- Somewhat Supported
- Neutral
- Unsupported
- Very Unsupported

Do you have access to the necessary resources to support sophomore students?

- Yes
- No

Please provide information about what resources you currently have access to to support sophomore students.

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Please provide information on what resources you consider necessary for sophomore students at ODU.

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Are you aware of additional student support resources put in place due to COVID-19?

Yes

No

---

Please describe the resources that have been created to support students in response to COVID-19.

---

Please provide any additional information that may be beneficial to support sophomore students.

---

If you would like to be entered in a raffle to receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card please enter your email address below.

## Appendix E

### Faculty/Staff Email to Participate in Survey and Consent Form

Hello,

Do sophomore students get less institutional attention than freshmen, juniors, and seniors? Studies over the past 20 years indicate that this may be the case. As Ed.D. Higher Education Leadership doctoral students at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), we are writing to invite you to participate in a faculty and staff survey to learn more about the sophomore experience at Old Dominion University (ODU). This survey is part of a larger study requested by the ODU Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services to gather information about the sophomore student experience at ODU, aspects of the institution's organizational culture, and possible reasons as to why sophomores may not return to ODU for their junior year. Your feedback on these issues is essential to develop strategies for ODU to examine and improve the sophomore student experience in the future.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and all of your responses are anonymous. Please see our [Informed Consent Information Sheet](#) for further information. We encourage you to ask any questions you may have if you are concerned about any aspects of this study.

**To participate, please click on the following**

**link:** <https://vcuportal.questionpro.com/t/AUmXDZqlzv>. The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Participants may choose to be entered into a raffle where five participants will be randomly selected to receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card.

If you have any questions about this survey or difficulty accessing the site or completing the survey, please contact Tomika L. Ferguson, [tlferguson@vcu.edu](mailto:tlferguson@vcu.edu), or Tiyacca Simms-Jones at [tsimmsjones@vcu.edu](mailto:tsimmsjones@vcu.edu).

Thank you in advance for providing this important feedback.

Sincerely,  
Kevin Caffrey, M.A.  
Ricardo Clauden-Cross, M.Ed.  
Tiyacca Simms-Jones, M.Ed.  
Fred Tugas, M.Ed.

## **CONSENT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY**

*(This form contains information that will help you decide whether to join the study.)*

### **1. KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS AND THIS STUDY**

**Study title: Sophomore Student Success Models for Old Dominion University**

**VCU Investigator:**

Tomika L. Ferguson, Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University  
Asst. Dean, Student Affairs & Inclusive Excellence; Asst. Professor, Educational Leadership  
[tlferguson@vcu.edu](mailto:tlferguson@vcu.edu)

You are invited to take part in a survey. The purpose of this study is to gather information about the environment, reasons that sophomore students drop out of the college and sophomore programs at Old Dominion University. By understanding these things the researchers can help ODU start programs that help improve the experience of sophomore students so they will get their degrees.

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the culture and practices that affect the sophomore student experience at Old Dominion University.
- If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a 15-20 minute web-based survey.
- There are no known risks in participating in this study.
- There are no direct benefits in participating in this study. Participants may choose to be entered into a raffle where five participants will be randomly selected to receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

### **2. WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY**

Survey participants will be identified by ODU as administrative, teaching and research, and professional faculty that support sophomore students as well as salaried employees not identified as faculty that support sophomore students.

### **3. INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY PARTICIPATION**

Participants will be asked to take one web-based survey expected to take no more than ten to fifteen minutes.

### **4. INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY RISKS AND BENEFITS**

**4.1 What risks will I face by taking part in the study? What will the researchers do to protect me against these risks?**

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study as this survey does not collect identifying data and seeks to understand your experience only. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer as this survey is voluntary.

**4.2 How could I benefit if I take part in this study? How could others benefit?**

The benefit of participating in this study is the opportunity to have your voice as an ODU faculty or staff member expressed in the study. As an ODU faculty/staff member, your experiences, opinions, and feedback are extremely valuable data to be considered by the researchers in order to understand the sophomore student experience at ODU and develop recommendations and strategies to improve programs for sophomore students.

## **5. PROTECTING AND SHARING RESEARCH INFORMATION**

### **5.1 How will the researchers protect my information?**

The researchers will use a Google Drive folder that is password-protected, accessible only under student login, and within Virginia Commonwealth University protection.

### **5.2 Who will have access to my research records?**

The only individuals who will have access to your survey responses will be the research team for this study.

### **5.3 What will happen to the information collected in this study?**

We will not keep your name or other information that can identify you directly. The results of this study will be used for program improvement for sophomore students at Old Dominion University.

### **5.4 Will my information be used for future research or shared with others?**

No, the results of this survey will only be used for internal program improvement for the programs and support services provided to sophomore students to promote persistence and retention towards graduation.

## **6. CONTACT INFORMATION**

### **Who can I contact about this study?**

#### **Faculty Advisor**

Tomika L. Ferguson, Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University  
Asst. Dean, Student Affairs & Inclusive Excellence; Asst. Professor, Educational Leadership  
[tlferguson@vcu.edu](mailto:tlferguson@vcu.edu)

Tiyacca Simms-Jones  
[tsimmsjones@vcu.edu](mailto:tsimmsjones@vcu.edu)

## **7. YOUR CONSENT**

### **Consent/Assent to Participate in the Research Study**

By completing this survey, you are agreeing to participate in this study. Please be sure you understand what the study is about before participating. We encourage you to ask any questions you may have if you are concerned about any aspects of this study. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact the investigator using the information provided above.

**Appendix F**  
**Student Email to Participate in Survey**

Hello,

You are invited to participate in an ODU Sophomore Experience survey! The survey will provide insight into the culture of ODU, how the institution supports sophomore students, and identify strategies to enhance the sophomore experience. Essentially, your participation in this survey is important to the success of our research study. This survey is part of a larger study about the sophomore experience at ODU that we, as doctoral students in the Doctor of Education Leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), are conducting to develop strategies for ODU to examine and improve the sophomore student experience in the future.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary and all of your responses are anonymous. **To complete this survey and learn more about your participation in the study, please visit: [Start Survey](#)**

The survey will take no more than 10-15 minutes to complete. Additionally, students who complete the survey will be randomly selected to receive \$20 Monarch Plus.

If you have any questions about this survey or difficulty accessing the site or completing the survey, please contact Tomika L. Ferguson, [tlferguson@vcu.edu](mailto:tlferguson@vcu.edu), or Tiyacca Simms-Jones at [timmsjones@vcu.edu](mailto:timmsjones@vcu.edu).

Thank you in advance for providing this important feedback.

Sincerely,  
Kevin Caffrey, M.A.  
Ricardo Clauden-Cross, M.Ed.  
Tiyacca Simms-Jones, M.Ed.  
Fred Tugas, M.Ed.

## Appendix G

### Student Emails to Participate in Focus Groups



Hello,

We are writing to invite you to participate in a student focus group to learn more about the sophomore experience at Old Dominion University (ODU). This focus group relates to a larger study about the sophomore experience at ODU and is being conducted by doctoral students in the Doctor of Education program at Virginia Commonwealth University. The study has been requested by the ODU Division of Student Engagement and Enrollment Services.

All students who have finished their second year of enrollment at ODU are invited to participate.

We are seeking a diverse group of sophomore students to share their experiences about ODU, the culture at this institution, and to learn more about your personal experiences engaging with programs and professionals at the institution. If you identify with any of the following populations, we are specifically excited to learn more about your experiences at ODU:

- transfer students,
- military-affiliated students (military and veteran students and their dependents),
- students of color,
- first-generation students (an individual for whom neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree.), and
- students who participated in a living-learning community

There will be various virtual focus groups held in December, all via Zoom. **Interested participants can sign up for a focus group at the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/ODUSophomores>.** The focus group will last approximately an hour and will be recorded for transcription purposes. All participants will be entered into a raffle where one participant will be randomly selected to receive a \$25 Visa gift card.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to provide your perspective, feedback, and experiences about the sophomore student experience initiatives at ODU. If you have any questions about this study or any difficulty accessing the sign-up link, please contact Tomika L. Ferguson, [tlferguson@vcu.edu](mailto:tlferguson@vcu.edu), or Tiyacca Simms-Jones at [tsimmsjones@vcu.edu](mailto:tsimmsjones@vcu.edu). If you prefer to speak to



someone from ODU, please contact Dr. Carin Barber at [cbarber@odu.edu](mailto:cbarber@odu.edu).

Regards,

Dr. Tomika Ferguson

Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, VCU School of Education  
[tlferguson2@vcu.edu](mailto:tlferguson2@vcu.edu)

Tiyacca Simms-Jones

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Educational Leadership, VCU School of Education  
[tsimmsjones@vcu.edu](mailto:tsimmsjones@vcu.edu)

Hello!

You are receiving this email because a staff member at ODU nominated you to join a focus group related to a study on ODU sophomore students. Are you able to still join our focus group? We will be on till 1pm.

<https://vcu.zoom.us/j/94554089171>

If you are no longer available, but still interested, please let me know if you are available any time before 3pm today.

We value your input on this study and are able to provide you with \$15 Monarch Plus.

Please let me know if you have any questions!

Sincerely,

Fred Tugas

VCU EdD Candidate

## **Appendix H**

### **Institutional Benchmarking Questions**

1. What strategies have been successful for sophomore student retention at your institution?
2. Could you provide an overview and describe the key outcomes and elements of your sophomore retention program? Anything created in response to COVID-19?
3. What are the academic expectations of sophomores at your institution?
4. What social support programs are available specifically for sophomores?
5. Whom are your key campus partners (including academic advising) to deliver your programs and opportunities?
6. What training or support do you provide to faculty and staff to improve the sophomore student experience?
7. What promising practices would you recommend for institutions seeking to implement a sophomore retention program or any best practices that you have not already shared?