Organizational Learning for Student Success: Exploring the roles of institutional actors

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my village for their unyielding love and support, and to my past self for persevering.

Abstract

Calls for institutional onus in efforts to increase student success, and the increasingly data-centered culture in higher education institutions, make it especially important to understand the roles that administrators, staff, and faculty play. This study explores institutional actors' roles in supporting student success, particularly in their consumption and application of research knowledge, institutional data, and best-practice to inform institutional efforts. This multi-site case study conducted at three public, research universities; included semi-structured interviews and document analysis to generate emergent themes, and critical discourse analysis to further interrogate those themes. Findings suggest that institutional structure, culture, and politics present explicit and implicit barriers to enhancing student success. Student success efforts are largely predicated on institutional data, with little discussion of research knowledge to guide practice. Additionally, discourses that emerged from interview narratives reveal how institutional actors' own dispositions and paradigms sometimes impede their student success work. Continuing to understand how institutional actors and factors inform student success efforts helps expand institutions' capacity to improve student success efforts and subsequent educational outcomes for students.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

   Changing environment and increased demands on higher education. With the changing nature of national and global economies, American higher education has experienced increasing pressure to sustain and enhance national standing and competitiveness in global markets (Ewell & Wellman, 2007). This pressure has resulted in a "… renewed sense of urgency for improving higher education's accountability, transparency, and performance…" caused by "…a perfect storm of state budget challenges, the ongoing transition from a manufacturing to a knowledge economy, and the inability of the value of higher education to be appropriately articulated" (Baer & Campbell, 2012, p. 53). Baer and Campbell (2012) observe the environmental demands outpacing institutional outputs in the context of higher education, "There are large and growing gaps between what the nation needs from postsecondary education and the current – and, likely future – production capacity of the system to meet these needs" (p. 4).

   Higher education has a longstanding history of serving as vehicle for individual growth, development, and mobility both socially and economically. The impact of such is enhanced quality of life for those who successfully navigate higher education. From this perspective, there is increased pressure from the public for higher education to live up to its promise of providing economic and social gains to individuals and society. This is

evidenced by increased calls for accountability toward consistent and equitable student

retention and completion (AACU, 2013; Baer & Campbell, 2012; Haworth & Conrad,

1997). The demands of higher education mentioned above are also reinforced by federal

agenda and policy, as Baer and Campbell (2012) highlight in their numerous references

to initiatives from the Obama administration leveraging higher education to bolster

American workforce competitiveness. More specifically, the Obama administration calls

for an increase in college graduates through coordinated state action toward specific and

quantifiable graduation targets (Baer & Campbell, 2012).

In response to demands for accountability, entities within the landscape of higher

education have moved toward enhancing understandings and approaches to student

success and strategies to support success (Ewell & Wellman, 2007; Haworth & Conrad,

1997; McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013). There have been a multitude of these

initiatives including *Assessing Underserved Students' Engagement in High-Impact*

Practices by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2013) and a number

of special interest publications from the Lumina Foundation. Among the most notable is

the National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative (NPEC), which is a partnership of

institutions, associations, organizations, state and federal government offices,

representing all sectors in higher education and funded by the National Center for

Education Statistics. The NPEC focuses on the quality, comparability, and utility of data;

in identifying gaps within student success data, and subsequent development of research

agendas; and connecting researchers, practitioners, and policy makers (Ewell &

Wellman, 2007). In their 2007 report "Enhancing Student Success in Education: Summary Report of the NPEC Initiative and National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success" Ewell and Wellman offer a pointed and digestible summary of the NPEC's special summit on the student success dilemma in American higher education.

       Student success dilemma. NPEC's summary report suggests that the initial and particularly salient challenge in supporting student success is the absence of a consistent and tangible definition of the concept. They declare "Parsing the different aspects of student success is an important first step toward connecting information derived from research with practices and policies to effect change, because the solution needs to fit the problem" (Ewell & Wellman, 2007, p. 2). Most broadly, student success is interpreted as getting a student into and through a degree program. To this end, the quality and content of students' learning and the educational experiences through which they cultivate and acquire that learning are important (Ewell & Wellman, 2007). While scholars take a variety of positions on how and where in the process, education should be measured, what is consistent is the need to improve student success efforts. In a bleak observation, Ewell and Wellman (2007) assert that "…despite positive signs in some areas, the overall diagnosis of where student success is headed in U.S. postsecondary education is not good" (p. 4). This speaks specifically to the fact that degree attainment is not keeping up with population growth, and that graduates are not completing academic programs that align with the current national needs (Ewell & Wellman, 2007).

A number of themes emerge from the Ewell and Wellman (2007) report that seek to make inroads for enhanced student success efforts, and are representative of more recent scholarly perspectives. There is a pressing concern that current research and best practices are not being used by student engagement practitioners. Ewell and Wellman (2007) first, call for practitioners in higher education to act on what we know. They reference common findings across student engagement literature specifically regarding, "the use of active and engaging pedagogies, including learning communities and collaborative approaches" and setting "high and clear expectations for students" (p. 8). The Association of American Colleges and Universities also reference this point in their 2013 study of student engagement for underserved populations. The authors also highlight the conditional effects of student engagement and other approaches offering direction for increased focus and precision of interventions, which is in line with more recent perspectives from Harper and Quaye (2009) and McCormick et al. (2013). Ewell and Wellman (2007) simply state, "What colleges do matter a lot," which is a timeless sentiment in student engagement literature and invites more institutional ownership in crafting the educational experience (p. 5). The faculty involvement trope emerges as well, "The role of faculty is the most important in determining student success" (Ewell & Wellman, 2007, p. 5). With this, however, there is a need for more concerted efforts to shape the behaviors of faculty. Incentive systems and professional development opportunities are two specific possibilities to help faculty adopt more engaging pedagogies and strategies in support of student learning (Ewell & Wellman, 2007; Harper

& Quaye, 2009). In addition to the instructional enhancements, scholars suggest the need

for more encompassing measurement of success, leveraging technology it improve

accessibility as well (AACU, 2013; Ewell & Wellman, 2007).

Ewell and Wellman (2007) also bring attention to opportunities for increased

consistency in their call for intentionality and alignment within higher education, "…up

to now, both research and practice have been episodic and piecemeal" (p. 10). They

attribute the disjointed nature of research and practice to common structural and cultural

features of higher education institutions, namely "…the dominance of silos defined by

arbitrary bureaucratic boundaries and long-established organizational turf" (p. 10).

Conversely, "… institutions that have demonstrated substantial success in improving

student progress are characterized by leadership approaches that attempt to round up

separately administered and funded initiatives under a more unified and clearly

articulated program" (p. 11). Ewell and Wellman (2007), similar to Tinto (2012),

specifically reference a persisting disconnect between academic and student affairs units,

an incongruence between faculty development and student success efforts, and a lack of

institutional funding for student success efforts. This commentary points toward a

debilitating rigidity within and across higher education institutions inhibiting their ability

to accommodate the needs of changing students and changing environments (AACU,

2013).

A third and compelling theme identified by Ewell and Wellman (2007), and

reinforced by McCormick et al. (2013), is the need for increased granularity in research

and practice. The authors note, "Scholarly research on student success traditionally has sought to establish the validity of generalized models, usually through empirical methods. But… such generalizable models are frequently not helpful in aiding academic progress for particular kinds of students in different educational environments" (p. 12). Similarly, AACU (2013) encourages future inquiry focused on exploring the engagement experiences of special populations and their resulting perceptions of their educational experience. They find that students' positive perceptions of their educational experience result from participation in high-impact engagement practices. This view embraces the notion of developing multiple perspectives on how to define student success, rather searching for one unifying definition. It also encourages an examination of distinctive and underrepresented populations within higher education from a value, rather than deficit, perspective. Employing value perspective invites discussion on the strengths and assets of these populations in hopes to leverage them for their success in higher education. These authors advocate using a value perspective to inform more contextualized models of student success interventions (AACU, 2013; Ewell & Wellman, 2007).

Ewell and Wellman (2007) draw attention to the overarching challenge of translating what we know into what we do, "…there is little knowledge about how institutions of higher education do or do not adopt new approaches to teaching and learning that research suggests" (p. 7). Similar to the alignment and granularity sentiments, higher education stakeholders are called to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches,

"At the student level, different populations may require different kinds of interventions. At the institutional level, differences in mission, circumstances and student clientele will necessarily yield differences in student outcomes" (Ewell & Wellman, p. 7). Contributing these challenges is the constantly changing environment in which institutions exist, "the landscape of higher education is increasingly moving away from the settings in which most of the research on student success has been conducted" (p. 7). Overall, Ewell and Wellman (2007) make evident the need for a mechanism that "…converts established research results into actions and practices that people in the field can utilize… for improving student success (p. 18). Their perspectives are corroborated and expanded by the continued work of prominent students engagement scholars like Harper and Quaye (2009), Tinto (2012), and McCormick et al. (2013).

Statement of Problem

Scholars over the last decade have done well to illustrate the evolution, composition, and intended outcomes related to student success. Unfortunately, similar to the challenges offered by Ewell and Wellman (2007), this has not translated to equally successful application of the knowledge generated. While there is extensive knowledge on how knowledge is created by institutions, what is understudied is the extent to which this knowledge is being used to inform practice. Ewell and Wellman (2007) state, "A lot is known through research about these topics, but practice in action upon this knowledge remains uneven" (p. 18). Tinto (2012) poignantly asserts, "Clearly there is still much to

do… to move beyond our theories of student retention to a model of institutional action that provides institutions reasonable guidelines for the development of policies, programs, and practices to enhance student retention and completion, in particular among those from low-income backgrounds" (p. 53). Harper and Quaye (2009) call out institutions that "…blatantly refuse or unintentionally neglect to enact the practices known [through research] to produce rich outcomes for students" (p. 6). McCormick, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2013) articulate the capacity of student engagement to "…bridge the worlds of researcher and practitioner in the interest of research-informed improvement" (p. 85). Evidence from these scholars explicitly identifies the persisting research to practice gap in this domain, and the appeal of student engagement to this end (Ewell & Wellman, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2009; McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013; Tinto, 2012). Overall, the research-to-practice gap remains a persistent problem in the area of student success in higher education. Student engagement scholars have extensively articulated the promise of student engagement in promoting student success, with limited application of that knowledge. More investigation is needed to understand how scholars and practitioners might maximize the value and utility of student engagement literature to impact student success in a more systematic and meaningful way.

Purpose of Study and Research Question

This study aims to generate new understandings about the research to practice gap in the field of student engagement in higher education. Specifically, the purpose of this

study is to explore how colleges and universities committed to improving student

engagement measures, explore, adopt, apply, and evaluate student engagement

knowledge and best practices to enhance student success. This study aims to meet the

following objectives: (1) to better the understand the processes higher education

institutions undergo to improve their student success efforts, (2) to explore what

facilitates or inhibits translation of research knowledge into practice, and (3) to identify

best practices for the application of research knowledge and best practice. The following

research question guides this study:

> How are institutions that are dedicated to improving student success exploring,
>
> adopting, applying, and evaluating research knowledge and best practice in
>
> support of student success?

This research question will be investigated through the lens of organizational

learning theory. The field of organizational learning focuses on addressing organizational

issues or improving organizational performance, by people within the organizations,

through the application of enhanced knowledge and skills (Argyris & Schon, 1988; Levitt

& March, 1988; Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

There are several rationales for investigating the research-to-practice gap in

student success through the lens of organizational learning theory. First, scholars assert

the usefulness of organizational learning to understand research-to-practice gaps in the

context of higher education. Bauman (2005) and Tagg (2007) identify organizational

learning as advantageous to enhancing the translation of research knowledge into action,

closing the research to practice gap and improving student outcomes. Bensimon (2005)

articulates this view, "I propose that the theory and processes of organizational learning

can help researchers and practitioners understand and address the structural and cultural

obstacles that prevent colleges and universities from producing equitable educational

outcomes" (p. 99). These scholars also identify faculty, staff, and administrators as

central to these efforts, similar to Harper and Quaye (2009) and Tinto (2012).

Second, organizational learning serves a vehicle for improvement of student

success efforts by mapping out conditions and strategies for increased institutional

learning around the concept and application of student success approaches. With learning

as the focus, institutions can respond to new research in a fluid and systematic way.

Organizational learning is well positioned as a framework to support investigations to this

end, as Bensimon (2005) asserts in the opening of her own study on the higher education

achievement gap, "…the theory and process of organizational learning can help

researchers and practitioners understand and address the structural and cultural obstacles

that prevent colleges and universities from producing equitable educational outcomes" (p.

99).

Finally, organizational learning is concerned with roles of individuals and

organizations, how individuals interpret and act on information, and how organizations

change as a result (Argyris and Schon, 1996; Bensimon, 2005). These considerations help

to address the challenges discussed by student engagement scholars, particularly around

measurement, onus, and application of student engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2009;

McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013; Tinto, 2012). A study of this kind could also

advance our understandings of organizational learning, subsequently enhancing its utility

in the context of higher education institutions; "Although the organizational learning

literature is rich in concepts about how learning happens and what serves as evidence of

an organization's having learned, there is a dearth of empirical studies of how

organizational learning happens" (Bauman, 2005, p. 25). For these reasons, this study

employs organizational learning as an organizing concept in understanding the research-

to-practice gap in the realm of student success in higher education.

Definitions of Key Terms

  Organizational Learning. Organizational learning has accumulated a number of

nuanced definitions in its evolution. For the purpose of this study organizational learning

is defined as actors within an organization inquiring on behalf of that organization to

improve performance or outcomes (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005).

Organizational learning considers both the dispositions and practices of institutions and

their members, offering a number of theories and concepts to aid organizations in

facilitating improvement efforts (Bensimon, 2005). Specifically within higher education,

organizational learning has been identified as a promising lens to leverage in facilitating

change, but is also underutilized to this end (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

      Student Engagement. Student engagement has evolved over time and is largely defined by participation in activities that have been empirically linked to increased academic success. Both institutions and students are viewed as playing important roles in promoting success (Harper and Quaye, 2009; McCormick et. al., 2013). Student engagement from this perspective is tied to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and often alludes to the NSSE Benchmarks and High-Impact Practices (HIPs). These practices themselves are pieced together from decades of research on various pedagogies and practices for teaching, learning, and student success (McCormick et. al., 2013).

      Chapter two delineates the evolution of student engagement concept as a tool for student success, explains the configuration and trajectory of student engagement literature, and offers comprehensive overview of each body of student engagement literature. Organizational learning is introduced and positioned within a higher education context. Chapter two also highlights the congruence between student engagement literature and organizational learning theory, with the goal of examining organizational learning as a lens to interpret and advance the application of student engagement literature.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Student engagement has emerged as a popular and well-researched strategy to support student success in higher education. Some higher education institutions have found great success in leveraging student engagement best practices to support their student success efforts. Unfortunately, these successes have been episodic and piecemeal. Stagnant national trends in student success present challenges for student engagement supporters, evidenced by scholars increasing interest in studying the application of student engagement research and best practices. This study seeks to contribute to an understanding of these challenges and opportunities.

In this chapter, student engagement literature will be interpreted through the lens of organizational learning. I will first review what is known about student engagement. This includes perspectives on student engagement as a vehicle for student success, student engagement for special populations within institutions, and how what is known about student engagement gets put into practice. Presented next is a review of organizational learning literature, with attention given to examples in higher education contexts. Finally, I will highlight congruence between student engagement findings and recommendations, and the goals and uses of organizational learning. The concepts and ideas presented here will be used to inform the design of strategies for data collection and analysis related to the proposed research question.

The Student Engagement Movement

Student engagement has been identified through research and practice as a useful strategy to increase desired student success outcomes for students and institutions (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kuh, 2009; McCormick et al., 2011; McCormick et al., 2013). Student engagement in practice is characterized by students' participation in activities empirically linked to academic success. Institutions and students are viewed as responsible for offering and engaging in these practices, although more recent literature encourages a shift toward increased institutional responsibility (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Student engagement is largely seen as a tool to enhance participation in purposeful and effective educational practices, but also has started to redirect the public perception and understanding of higher education quality (McCormick et al., 2013).

Student engagement foundations. There has been expansive research on student engagement from a number of perspectives, centering on its contributions to student success and institutional quality. Student engagement, with regard to student success, has evolved from the contributions of a various higher education scholars. Among the earliest scholars contributing to the student engagement premise is Ralph Tyler, who began investigating the relationship between secondary school curriculum and its impact on college success (McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013). Tyler's most notable contribution to the student engagement concept comes with his 1930's work identifying time spent on a particular task as a factor impacting student learning (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kuh, 2009).

In the late 1960's C. R. Pace asserted the importance of quality student effort, expanding beyond "time on task" (Kuh, 2009). Building on Tyler's work, Pace turns to students' creation and interaction with the total college environment as factors influencing student success (McCormick et al., 2013). His rationale for this perspective comes from viewing education as both experience and outcome, and belief that the quality of the experience and interactions has significant influence on attaining desired student outcomes (McCormick et al., 2013). Pace's work culminated with the creation of the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ), which examines the quantity of students' participation in meaningful learning experiences and the impact on student learning (Hu & Kuh, 2002; Kuh, 2009; McCormick et al., 2013). The content of, and findings from, this survey contributed to the creation of more encompassing surveys of student engagement, specifically the National Survey of Student Engagement (Hu & Kuh, 2002; McCormick et al., 2013).

These efforts surfaced as a result of the higher education challenges of the time. Reaching back to the 1930's, Ralph Tyler's time-on-task research came at the request of The Ohio State University to be used in the improvement of teaching quality and retention (McCormick et al., 2013). The work of Tyler, Pace, as well as other scholars of their time were influenced by the Social Science Research Council via their work to explore student development within the college environment (McCormick et al., 2013). Here, we see research priorities emerging from administrative institutional agendas and think tanks.

Later, in the 1970's, Vincent Tinto sought to incorporate environmental factors into the discussion of student retention (Tinto, 2006). With regard to current student engagement understandings, Tinto's work advances the exploration of the contextual nuances impacting student engagement within and across higher education institutions. In the 1980's, Pascarella and Terenzini began to associate previous student engagement concepts with their subsequent impact on specific student outcomes. By taking external and environmental factors into account, and focusing on more specific outcomes than matriculation, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) uncover a fuller picture of student engagement.

Building on the work of Pace, Astin (1984) proposed student involvement as effective strategy to support student success, seeking to direct students' investment of time and energy into specific educational experiences. He suggests that effectiveness of educational programs and policies are proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement resulting from those programs or policies (Astin, 1984; McCormick et al., 2013). Astin's work highlights the importance of institutions' roles in promoting student success, and begins a shift away from students as solely responsible for their success. These approaches related student success to the quantity of student participation in specific activities and experiences available at higher education institutions.

Student engagement has gained the most significant foundation from the Seven Principles of Successful Educational Practice posited by Chickering and Gamson (1987): (a) student and faculty interaction; (b) peer collaboration; (c) active learning; (d) prompt

feedback on performance; (e) time on task; (f) communicated high expectations; and (g)

embracing diverse talents and ways of knowing. These principles emerged from a

culmination of teaching and learning research literature (Chickering & Gamson, 1987;

McCormick et al., 2013). The seven principles proposed by Chickering and Gamson

(1987) invited more reflexive perspectives on student-institution interaction, valuing

cyclical communication, feedback, and interaction between students and higher education

institutions.

Accountability, rankings, and the National Survey of Student Engagement

(NSSE). Higher education assessment and accountability emerged as a national priority

in the 1990's, as the United States of America began to establish national educational

goals (McCormick et al., 2013). Influenced by the National Education Goals established

in 1989 by President George H. W. Bush and State Governors, and the Educate America

Act in 1994 set forth by President Bill Clinton, college preparedness became a part of the

national education discourse (McCormick et al., 2013). Assessment and accountability

discourse propagated in government and institutional settings, as policymakers,

administrators, and the public sought concrete and consistent measures for higher

education (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). The U.S. Government and special interest groups

have had a pervasive influence on the conceptualization and application of student

engagement, particularly because of its impact on desired student outcomes.

As these policy agendas were shifting their focus toward higher education

accountability, *US News & World Report (USNWR)* capitalized on the public's desire to

easily rank and stratify higher education institutions by introducing their annual

"America's Best Colleges" rankings (McCormick, et al., 2013). These rankings have

been scrutinized and criticized since their incipiency in the 1980's, but maintain

pervasive influence over the public perception of higher education quality. This level of

influence is attributed to the rising cost of higher education, decreases in state funding

and resulting increases in student fiscal responsibility, as well as low completion rates

(Wangenge-Ouma & Langa, 2010). Because public opinion has been so heavily

influenced by these rankings, a number of institutions willfully participated in this

system, and administrators at these institutions would consider how administrative

decisions would impact these rankings (McCormick, et al., 2013).

Out of frustration and contention with ranking systems like that of the *US News &*

World Report, which use institutional metrics to assess quality, the Pew Charitable Trusts

funded the creation of a survey tool to empirically assess quality focused on the

behavioral and environmental factors associated with student learning (McCormick, et

al., 2013). George Kuh, recognizing student engagement as a vital factor to student

success, worked with Pew Charitable Trusts to establish the National Survey on Student

Engagement (NSSE). Adopting the seven principles of successful educational practice as

a guide, the NSSE was created and first administered in the early 2000's (Kuh, 2001).

NSSE is built upon previous work on various aspects of student success, adopting a

considerable amount of the CESQ prompts for use in this survey (Kuh, 2009). According

to the NSSE: "Student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in

educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective

educational practices (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008, p. 542). "NSSE also

assesses the organization of learning opportunities and services to promote learning and

success. Because NSSE focuses on actionable information, results can inform efforts to

improve undergraduate education," particularly student success outcomes (McCormick et

al., 2011, p. 2).

From its conceptual evolution, student engagement is a phenomenon driven by

students' participation in activities that have been empirically linked to increased

academic success. Both institutions and students are viewed as playing important roles in

promoting success. The practices themselves are pieced together from decades of

research on various pedagogies and practices for teaching, learning, and student success,

using varying methods and methodologies. While student engagement literature tends to

focus heavily on the conceptual aspects, there is also value in acknowledging the socio-

political context influencing student engagement lineage.

Socio-political influences helped to build the momentum around student

engagement, resulting in the creation of the NSSE (Kuh, 2009). Public perception,

national political agendas, and institutional interests offer context for the NSSE creation.

Its creation is also indicative of the national shift toward higher education assessment of

student experience, particularly for quality and accountability measures toward student

success. The expressed purpose and desired impact of the National Survey of Student

engagement is institutional improvement, documentation of good practices, and public

advocacy, helping to "…cement student engagement in higher education lexicon" (Kuh, 2009, p. 6). From here student engagement is seen as a tool to assess and enhance student success through participation in purposeful and effective educational practices, as well as strategy to redirect the public perception and understanding of higher education quality and accountability (McCormick et al., 2013).

The evolution of student engagement movement offers a conceptual and contextual perspective on student engagement and its role in the educational experiences and outcomes of undergraduate students. The discussion of historical influences on the evolution of student engagement in higher education highlight the contextual factors that helped shape the trajectory of student engagement support, development, and application. Understanding these trends lends perspective to student engagement literature, particularly the challenges of consumption and application of student engagement scholarship and best practice discussed in the forthcoming sections of this paper.

Current Scholarly Perspectives on Student Engagement

Drawing heavily on its conceptual basis, student engagement was initially leveraged for its effectiveness and reliability in enhancing desired student outcomes in undergraduate education. Student engagement became a popular measure for higher education, in support of student success within the larger accountability movement. Literature focusing on student engagement as a vehicle for student success illuminates general trends in the relative effectiveness of student engagement, and for whom. Recent

critiques of student engagement instruments emerge as scholars challenge the validity of

the National Survey of Student Engagement as well as other assertions of student

engagement scholars. These critiques are focused on the methodological approaches of

NSSE studies seeking to establish the promise of student engagement's impact on student

success, and how NSSE claims are articulated through discourse (Martínez-Alemán,

Pusser, & Bensimon, 2015; Campbell & Cabrera, 2011; Porter, 2011).

As student engagement experienced broader usage, scholars turned to increased

granularity in their study of the concept. Student Engagement for special populations

identifies specific populations in undergraduate education, for whom student engagement

is particularly important, or particularly lacking, or both. Literature on special

populations offers a more nuanced understanding of the student engagement trends for

these specific populations. In discussing the application of student engagement

knowledge, scholars with work previously focused on the first two bodies of literature

have begun to call into question the application of traditional student engagement

literature to current contexts. These perspectives are more focused on the usage of current

student engagement knowledge and best practice, rather than creation of new knowledge

of student's engagement experiences.

Student engagement as a vehicle for student success. The broadest area of

discourse frames student engagement measures as a strategy for increased student

success. In this context student engagement efforts support and promote commonly held

student success outcomes, particularly student learning, retention and persistence, and for

overall institutional quality (Haworth & Conrad, 1997, McCormick et al., 2013). There have been a number of studies testing and validating the impact of student engagement efforts, as measured by NSSE, on student success outcomes. These studies are largely oriented around benchmarking institutional performance using the NSSE benchmarks and subsequent measures of student engagement (Dowd & Tong, 2012).

Kuh comes to the forefront of the student engagement literature, as he has worked extensively and collaboratively in solidifying, validating, exploring, and extending the student engagement concept through administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, 2009). For this reason we see Kuh's authorship at varying levels in an abundance of studies using NSSE survey data. Kuh's work is characterized by its exploration of the relationships between student engagement and commonly held measures of student success and desired student outcomes.

With a specific focus on time spent studying, time spent in co-curricular activities, and engagement in effective educational practices, Kuh et al. (2008) found a number of general, conditional, and compensatory effects of student engagement on grades and persistence. They examined NSSE scores for 18 baccalaureate-granting institutions who administered the NSSE at least once from 2000 to 2003; of which, eleven were Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), four were Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and three were Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) (Kuh et al., 2008). Generally, engagement in educationally purposeful activities had a small but significant, positive impact on first-year student grades as well as a significant positive

impact on persistence to the second year (Kuh et al., 2008). Students with lower ACT scores, African American, and Hispanic students experienced more GPA gains from engagement in educational purposeful activities than their higher ACT and white counterparts, respectively (Kuh et al., 2008). This study also affirms the applicability of the NSSE at a variety of institutional types.

Kuh and Umbach (2004) explored how the college experience, via student engagement, impact character development of students. Academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, and student-faculty interaction were the three scales used to measure student engagement; prompts related to knowledge of self, ethnical development and problem solving, civic responsibility, and general knowledge are used to assess character development (Kuh & Umbach, 2004). Drawing on self-reported gain data from senior students representing 568 four-year colleges administering the NSSE in 2002 or 2003, Kuh and Umbach (2004) found that students at smaller institutions, liberal arts institutions, private institutions, and religiously affiliated institutions experienced higher levels of character development compared to their larger, research, public, and non-religiously affiliated counterparts (Kuh & Umbach, 2004). In addition, character development was experienced at higher levels depending on identity and major, with students of color and social sciences majors experiencing greater benefit (Kuh & Umbach, 2004). The NSSE measure most attributed to character development was supportive campus environment (Kuh & Umbach, 2004). Overall, Kuh's work continues to inform and expand the potential for NSSE usefulness as he explores student

engagement linkages to a variety of student outcomes. These two studies are a snapshot of Kuh's prolific contributions to our student engagement understandings, but are particularly useful in their exploration of conditional effects of student engagement.

Focusing on student learning, Robert Carini and associates explored the impact of student engagement on standardized performance measures; RAND, GRE, and GPA scores. Students from 14 four-year colleges and universities, roughly approximating the U.S. landscape of higher education, completed the RAND cognitive performance test and the NSSE in the fall and spring of 2002 (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) found that student engagement had a stronger impact on first-year students than seniors, and a stronger impact on students with lower levels of pre-college achievement, than their higher achieving counterparts. These findings, in addition to the modest but significant, positive correlation between student engagement and GPA, are consistent with previous studies (Carini et al., 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Carini et al. (2006) also discovered that first-year students, seniors and low achieving students benefited from different measures of student engagement. The discoveries presented by Carini et al. (2006) are particularly valuable, as they not only affirm previous findings, but they highlight specific areas of practice and the extent to which they impact specific groups of students.

Gary Pike has offered an enhanced understanding of student engagement through a number of his research efforts, particularly those centered on learning communities (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011). A number of successful student engagement practices

emerge from student engagement literature, most notably identified as "high impact" practices (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, 2009). Learning communities are one of the 'high impact' practices found to have indirect effects on student engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pike has been exploring learning communities and student engagement over the past decade, with his most recent contribution focusing on contingent relationships (Pike et al., 2011). Pike, Kuh, and McCormick (2011) explored the contingent effect of class standing and institutional demographics on the relationship between student engagement and learning community membership. They sampled 277 four-year institutions that administered the NSSE in spring of 2004, and represented the make-up of U.S. Colleges and Universities at the time with the exception of an overrepresentation of Master's granting institutions (Pike et al., 2011). They found that learning community participation was significantly and positively related to engagement measures, consistent with previous findings (Pike et al., 2011). However, contrary to previous findings, student engagement had a larger positive impact on seniors than first-year students (Pike et al., 2011). The results of this study beg the question of longitudinal impact; specifically how benefits of student engagement persist throughout the entire undergraduate experience. Since Pike et al. (2011) were not able to determine when senior respondents participated in a learning community; they could not explore this in more detail. What they did find is that institutional characteristics had significant but differing impact on the relationship between learning community participation and

engagement measures; contributing to knowledge of how institutions impact student engagement practices, and to what extent.

Pascarella continues his contributions to student engagement as he helps to establish its validity related to additional measures of student learning. Recognizing the predicative limitations of student engagement, Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich (2010) extended the validity of the student engagement as they explored the impact of the NSSE benchmarks on the seven standardized measures of learning from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNSLAE). Examining first-year student responses to both the NSSE and WNSLAE in 2006 and again in 2007, institutional scores were created and used as the unit of comparison (Pascarella et al., 2010). Pascarella et al. (2010) implemented a longitudinal, pretest-posttest approach. They uncovered a strong, statistically significant partial correlation, suggesting NSSE benchmarks had a positive impact on the standardized measures of learning assessed in the WNSLAE (Pascarella et al., 2010). The most noteworthy finding from Pascarella et al. (2010) identified Enriching Educational Experiences, Level of Academic Challenge, and Supportive Campus Environment as having a significant association with most of the seven WNSLAE measures, with Student-Faculty Interaction as the only benchmark with no significant correlation.

Pascarella et al. (2006) used student engagement measures to challenge the appropriateness of institutional selectivity, which had been widely used as an indicator of institutional quality. Because student engagement emerged, in part, to enhance the

national public conception of higher education quality, it is fitting that it be compared

against long-standing measures like institutional selectivity. Pascarella et al. (2006)

examined the relationship between Barron's Selectivity score, and ACT and SAT scores,

measures of student learning reported from the National Survey of Student Learning, and

NSSE student engagement measures. NSSE data used in this study came from

respondents from 271 baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities completing the

NSSE in spring of 2002, and closely representing the national profile of U.S. four-year

institutions (Pascarella et al., 2006). Although a dominant public understanding of quality

is associated with college selectivity, Pascarella et al. (2006) found that selectivity

explains a significant but very small amount of desired student outcomes (GPA,

retention, graduation rates). This means that comparable institutions with very different

levels of selectivity could offer the same level of quality, particularly related to

engagement in educationally effective practices. This gives empirical backing to the

philosophical and conceptual critiques of institutional selectivity, and similar rankings, as

measures of higher education quality (Pascarella et al., 2006). The work of Pascarella

supports student engagement as a measure of student learning, and positions student

engagement as tool to support or challenge other measures of institutional quality.

   Recent critiques of student engagement instruments. Other recent literature in

the student engagement area has focused on methodological concerns about NSSE

instrumentation. For example, Porter (2011) expanded on the subtle sentiments presented

in his 2006 study as he offers a critique of student engagement surveys, with a focus on

the NSSE, "…if the NSSE cannot withstand scrutiny, it is likely that many, if not most

of, other college student surveys… cannot either" (p. 46).

Porter (2011) challenged the validity statements asserted by NSSE researchers,

focusing his contention on the accuracy of self-reported experiences; and the conception,

construction, an administration of the survey. Porter (2011) called attention to the broad

and seemingly ambiguous content domain of the NSSE, as well as seemingly arbitrary

organization of the five Benchmarks for Effective Educational Practice. This perspective

is shared and supported by many organizational learning scholars (Bauman, 2005). The

most compelling argument presented in this piece challenged the response process for the

NSSE, making reference to ambiguous and unreliable questions, allowance of bias in

exchange for improved response rates, students' inability to recall activities that occurred

throughout the year, and a social desirability bias (Porter, 2011). In closing his argument,

Porter (2011) suggested the following as contributing to the challenge of student

engagement surveys, "To my mind, three trends are responsible: a lack of training, the

demands placed on higher education faculty for publications, and the demand for quick

fixes to the problem of how we assess student learning" (p. 71). His overall sentiment

encourages more scrutiny in the assertion of validity of surveys and resulting data.

Campbell and Cabrera (2011) also explore NSSE validity in their study of the

NSSE Benchmarks and their psychometric properties. The authors assert, "If the NSSE

benchmarks are a valid measure of student engagement, they should be predicative of

student learning across a variety of institutional types and student populations (i.e. have

predicative validity)" (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011, p. 80). In framing the scope of their study, Campbell and Cabrera (2011) highlight the mixed results of Pascarella et al. (2010) and Carini et al. (2006). After evaluating the construct validity of the five NSSE benchmarks Campbell and Cabrera (2011) find considerable overlap between constructs and limited predicative ability of constructs, related to GPA. These findings suggest a need for refinement of the benchmarks using construct validity as a guide (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011). The study is not without limitations; this study is based on data from a single institution and only investigates GPA as a measure of student success (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011, p. 87). This study supports and empirically advances the Porter (2011) critiques.

McCormick and McClenney (2012) responded to the Porter (2011) critique and asserted the need for constructive discourse. They have responded to the critiques presented and acknowledged the areas for improvement with the NSSE. McCormick and McClenney (2012) explained the various types of validity within social science research, with specific reference criterion and consequential validity. Asserting the NSSE is built around consequential validity, which preferences theoretical alignment based on the application of the tool, McCormick and McClenney (2012) refuted Porter's (2011) challenge to the NSSE criterion validity. The choice to espouse a more purpose driven argument for validity was motivated by the practical purpose of student engagement:

What matters is not the precise number of papers written but the fact that certain

groups of students write more than others: students at a given college or

university versus those at a peer institution; athletes versus non-athletes; students

in some majors versus those in others; and so on. (McCormick & McClenney,

2012, p. 314)

The authors supported the soundness of NSSE prompts by citing several studies

using focus groups to evaluate students' understanding of prompts, leading to

redevelopment and retesting of new prompts; and exploration of the consistency of

understandings across different student identities (McCormick & McClenney, 2012).

This is indicative of the reflexivity of the NSSE and the continuous process of improving

student engagement. McCormick and McClenney (2012) acknowledged potential bias

based on the structure of survey administration and honored time-use diaries, suggested

by Porter (2011), as worthy of investigation.

Martínez-Alemán, Pusser, and Bensimon (2015) offer critique through an

interrogation of NSSE promotional material, the NSSE survey tool, and other products.

Analysis of these texts surface tone, connotation, and presupposition that advance

normative assumptions of what students need to do to be successful:

My critical view of these NSSE documents is that the construction of the

discourse of student success normalizes certain uncontested and undisturbed

experiences, privileges some identities over others, and restricts the range of

valued student interactions. The actual lived experiences of students are not

captured by the discourse repented in NSSE products, and its products and

production of normative claims therefore reinforce hegemonic beliefs about what

is and is not valuable experience in college what is or is not contributing to

students' definition of 'success'" (Martínez-Alemán, Pusser, & Bensimon, p. 34,

2015)

The suggested implication of these findings is that the NSSE does more harm than good,

particularly in maintaining the hegemonies that continue push students to the margins,

whose experiences do not fit within the NSSE construct.

The authors also assert that the promotion of NSSE as a ubiquitous tool for

student engagement manipulates the audience toward exclusive use of the tool for student

success efforts and measurement. "…institutions will reconfigure and reinforce structures

to discipline students experiences to fit the standards set by NSSE" (Martínez-Alemán et

al., 2015, p. 34). This suggests NSSE could be seen as a "magic bullet" for student

success issues which a number of scholars warn against (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Tinto,

2012).

Martínez-Alemán et al. (2015) address students' awareness of their development

during their college experience, "The NSSE survey… pays little attention to

developmental markers in students' subjectivity" (p. 34-35). This adds an additional to

dimension to critiques on the administration of the survey and reliability of student recall

from Porter (2011). While Porter (2011) and McCormick and McClenney (2012) agree on the utility of time-use diaries to address issues of student recall, critique from Martínez-Alemán et al. (2015) suggest that even time-use diaries may not capture the nuance in students' development capacities, "As measured by NSSE does 'engagement' account for the inability of some/many students to recognized the impact of college activities and behaviors?" (p. 35).

In these early stages of student engagement scholarship we find scholars who are focused on establishing momentum and gravitas for the concept and its impact on student success. Scholars test, assert, and debate validity, benchmarks, and general trends in engagement. Studies within this body of literature focus on vetting the validity and potential utility of the concept in a general higher education context. Student engagement is leveraged as a blunt instrument for observing engagement trends across the higher education landscape. Despite these limitations outlined by scholars, student engagement remains a highly utilized strategy for promoting student success outcomes.

Student engagement for special populations. Another prolific body of research focuses on the engagement experiences of various student populations within higher education. These populations reflect various demographic characteristics, academic interests, student statuses, extracurricular involvement, as well as some emerging population characteristics that have been far less studied (Harper & Quaye, 2009). The previous body of student engagement discourse focused broadly on student success, and the discourse on special populations intersect as diversity is viewed as an aspect of

institutional quality. Special population literature seems to explore in more depth the student engagement trends for these specific groups of students. In addition, student engagement strategies are used to maintain and increase the representation of traditionally underrepresented students and opportunities for diverse experiences and perspectives. Literature within this body seems to be more critical than outcome literature, employing a more imperative tone.

Contributing both theoretically and empirically, Harper highlights nuance and disparity in student engagement, particularly around race (Harper, 2009) and gender (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). In a robust discussion of Enriching Educational Experiences, one of the NSSE benchmarks, Harper (2009) investigated comparative participation in these and other high-impact practices by race, and the compensatory effects of these experiences. Harper (2009) highlighted the fact that lower achieving, Latino first-year students who had high levels of engagement earned higher grade point averages than their white counterparts; and the likelihood of persistence was higher for highly engaged African American students compared to their white counterparts. These findings illustrate the salutary effects of student engagement on students of color and low-achieving students compared to similar white and high-achieving students respectively (Harper, 2009). Notwithstanding these promising findings, Harper (2009) also highlighted findings that students of color were less likely to experience these benefits, as they were significantly less apt to participate in Enriching Educational Experiences according to the NSSE national trends.

Harper et al. (2004) explored engagement and gender for African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This study, using 2000 and 2001 NSSE data from nine public and three private HBCUs found that previous engagement and outcome gaps favoring men closed in all except two areas: academic challenge and student-faculty interaction (Harper et al., 2004). While women still fell behind men in the amount of student–faculty interaction they experience, women reported more academic challenging (Harper et al., 2004). In addition to these findings, the study itself offers a fresh approach to studying engagement at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Harper et al. (2004) asserted that most related research, "…has neglected to consider exclusively the impact and effectiveness of HBCUs in serving African American students" (p. 271). This approach is particularly salient within this body of student engagement literature, as it seeks to position the experience of students of color and other special populations as the focal point of research. This encourages increased depth in the exploration of these students' engagement experiences (Harper et al., 2004).

Harper and Quaye (2009) were particularly prolific in exploring the experiences of special populations in higher education, evidenced in the 2009 book, *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*. This book compiled theoretical and practical considerations for continued research and practices on a broad spectrum of student identity; international

students, students with disabilities, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, gender, race, and various intersections of these identities (Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Chun-Mei Zhao has contributed to our understandings of international student engagement (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), as well as the engagement experiences of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs (Zhao, Carini, & Kuh, 2005). Spring 2001 NSSE data from 317 four-year institutions was used in the study of international students' engagement experiences (Zhao, Kuh et al., 2005). Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) found that international first-year students experienced significant, higher levels of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, personal and social development, technology use, and general education, than their American counterparts. However, according to Zhao, Kuh et al. (2005), most differences between international and American students dissolve by their senior year. Also, both American and international students reported higher levels of diversity experiences and lower scores on the Supportive Campus Environment measure as the proportion of international student increased (Zhao, Kuh et al., 2005). This finding highlights the impact of population density and engagement, contributing to our understandings of the experiences of special populations within higher education in ways that other studies have overlooked.

Zhao, Carini et al. (2005), in exploring the impact of gender on engagement for students in STEM programs, uncovered compelling and somewhat confounding findings for women in STEM programs. Their study used NSSE data from the 2000 and 2001

administrations of the survey at 518 four-year institutions, with a slight

overrepresentation of women compared to national demographics (Zhao, Carini et al.,

2005). The authors found, women were just as engaged in effective educational practices

as their male counterparts, and equally, if not more, satisfied with their college

experience and campus environment than the men in STEM (Zhao, Carini et al., 2009).

These findings came as a contradiction to the assumed inhospitable culture for women in

STEM fields (Zhao, Carini et al., 2005). Women reported more academic challenge,

increased academic effort and lower gains in quantitative and analytical skills than men,

which raised questions about whether or not women were underestimating their own

accomplishments (Zhao, Carini et al., 2009). In addition, women in STEM seemed to

have a more solitary experience, reporting less collaboration with peers and student-

faculty interaction than male peers (Zhao, Carini et al., 2009). This study advances the

cause for women in STEM as it offers a more intimate understanding of women's

engagement experiences. It is also a promising example of a study embracing the

intersection of student identity, as we see an interesting juxtaposition of performance and

perception not widely seen in other studies of student engagement. Focusing on gender

and academic major allows a more nuanced exploration of these students' experiences,

compared to more general studies of student engagement as presented in the

accountability literature.

Paul Umbach has covered a breadth of topics in his research on student

engagement, including students' experiences with diverse populations (Umbach & Kuh,

2006) and student athletes' engagement (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh & Hannah, 2006). The

college experience of student athletes has been studied from a number of perspectives,

mostly related to development and achievement compared to non-athletes (Umbach et al.,

2006). Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, and Hannah (2006) used data from the spring 2003 NSSE

to explore the educational experiences of student athletes representing 107 NCAA

Division I, 93 Division II, and 145 NCAA Division III institutions. The impact of

institution and level of competition on student engagement was the focus (Umbach et al.,

2006). Results from this study showed that, in general, both male and female student

athletes were just as engaged, reported higher measures of supportive campus

environment, and higher educational gains since starting college, as their non-athlete

peers (Umbach et al., 2006). The only area where institution type significantly impacted

student outcomes was men's grades, with male athletes reporting lower grade point

averages than their peers in general, and NCAA Division II male athletes earning higher

grades than their Division I and Division III counterparts (Umbach et al., 2006). With

findings consistent with previous research, Umbach et al. (2006) assert the need for more

nuanced study of student athletes, as NSSE was limited in its ability to identify the sport

and level of competition of student respondents. This need is congruent with the

sentiments expressed by Harper and Quaye (2009), as they identified a number of

unexplored aspects of the student athlete experience that offer challenges and are areas

ripe for empirical study. Even in the absence of unique or groundbreaking findings,

Umbach et al. (2006) offered ways to enhance future studies toward more nuanced

understandings.

In an indirect study of special populations, Umbach and Kuh (2006) explored the

diversity component of student engagement. As a part of the student engagement

construct, students' experiences with varied populations enhance the overall student

experience (Kuh, 2003; Umbach & Kuh, 2006). This study does well to illustrate

students' engagement *with* special populations, different from other studies in this body

that focus of the student engagement experiences *of* special populations. As Umbach and

Kuh (2006) studied diversity experiences of students at liberal arts institutions as reported

via NSSE responses, they found density of diverse populations was significantly and

positively related to NSSE reported diversity experiences, more so than other types of

higher education institutions. Students at liberal arts institutions who participated in

diversity-related experiences reported higher academic challenge, higher participation in

active and collaborative learning, greater educational and personal gains, higher

satisfaction with their college experience, and more supportive campus environments

(Umbach & Kuh, 2006). Umbach & Kuh (2006) intentionally focused on population

density, similar to Zhao, Kuh et al. (2005). Because of the inability to control for self-

selection, one unique limitation was that students' predisposition toward diversity related

experiences may have influenced their choice of institutional type in ways that may

elevate the results for liberal arts institutions (Umbach & Kuh, 2006). Umbach & Kuh

(2006) highlighted how the presence of special populations has a distinct impact on the

engagement experiences of the entire student population. This finding offers a new

perspective on the relationship between special populations and engagement, potentially

contributing to institutions' capacity to serve and engage students.

The experiences of African-American and Latino(a) students is a predominant

focus of studies related to students of color, as these groups have been historically

underrepresented in higher education, and experience the largest disparities related to

student engagement and student outcomes (Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2009). There

are a number of studies that explore how specific genders experience student

engagement, but these are usually associated with an additional identity characteristic,

like race or academic interest (Harper, 2009; Zhao, Carini et al., 2009). Studies exploring

the engagement experiences of women in male dominated academic areas, and men of

color seem to be the most popular. Herein lies opportunity, similar to the intent of Harper

(2009), for studies focused specially on special populations without using a comparative

sample. Working to study specific populations in this way allows promotion of student

engagement that is not predicated on their counterparts' engagement experiences. These

new approaches will likely yield new and more nuanced understandings of these

populations of students and how institutions can work best to support their engagement.

The dominant perspective from scholars within this body is the need for more

nuanced study of the engagement experience for students in higher education, taking into

account their various identities. Scholars seemingly uphold the validity of the student

engagement construct, but challenge the blunt administration of the NSSE. Findings that

comprise special population literature affirm the promise of student engagement for

underrepresented student populations, but bring attention to disparities in the actual levels

of student engagement experiences by these students. Here, the theory-to-practice gap

begins to emerge.

   Application of student engagement knowledge. Finally, a third and growing

body of literature is focused on translation and application of student engagement

knowledge. Scholars are increasingly focused on how student engagement knowledge

can be used by higher education institutions to inform educational practices, toward

student success. This shift is rooted in the call for institutional onus from higher

education scholars from the previous two bodies of literature (Harper & Quaye, 2009;

Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2006). The discourse surrounding the application of student

engagement scholarship embraces and advances the perspectives and suggestions offered

in the previous two bodies, while attempting to address their respective shortcomings.

The initial student engagement discourse focused on student success is prolific, but is

blunt in its approach and offers few recommendations for action. Studies offer

observations of disparities and challenges with preliminary suggestions for future

research that could lead to better understandings and subsequent change. The discourse

on special populations is diffuse, in that it covers a breadth of specific perspectives. In

recent years it has become more assertive in its recommendations, evidenced by calls for

institutional action along with pointed suggestions for future research (Harper, 2009;

Harper & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 2012). While the disparities or conditional salutary effects

experienced by students affiliated with these special populations are well documented through empirical study, the subsequent recommendations for action lack documented empirical support. Student engagement knowledge application literature offers a mixture of theoretical, conceptual, and empirical perspectives and recommendations for enhanced consumption of student engagement knowledge and thus more informed efforts.

Tinto (2012) concisely asserted the need to "…move beyond our theories of student retention to a model of institutional action that provides institutions reasonable guidelines for the development of policies, programs, and practices to enhance student retention and completion, in particular among those from low-income backgrounds" (p. 53). Tinto (2012) made inroads in distilling existing scholarship on retention and persistence, conceptual antecedents of student engagement and two of the desired outcomes that student engagement strives to support. This distillation seeks to motivate and inform institutional action, or minimally conversation, on how to move forward most effectively. As a part of his call to action, Tinto (2012) offered a commonly held critique, "…work does not yet tell us how institutions can enhance integration of what is now commonly referred to as engagement" (p. 54). Contributing to the lack of action is the confusion that exists based on competing definitions, perspectives, and interpretations on student engagement (Tinto, 2012).

In addition to highlighting the persisting gap between scholarship and practice, Tinto (2012) asserted the need for timely action, encouraging a focus on the most immediately actionable items for institutions. Tinto (2012) leveraged his extensive and

comprehensive experience in a clear and unapologetic call to action on the part of

researchers, to provide useful information for institutional decision-makers. In addition to

providing information, Tinto (2012) references the limitations brought on by the inability

to apply said information, "…most faculty have not been trained to use pedagogy

effectively" (p. 75). This specific example is to illustrate that even once institutions have

succeeded in offering sound recommendations; application of those recommendations

can be a challenge. Tinto's (2012) work promotes a more reflexive approach to impacting

student outcomes.

What is particularly relevant to this discourse is the intent of scholarly critiques

such as Martínez-Alemán et al. (2015), Porter (2011), and Campbell and Cabrera (2011).

Even popularly held tools such as student engagement surveys are scrutinized in efforts

to continuously challenge understandings and enhance effectiveness of research and

practice at imparting change in higher education. There is tension from both sides,

evidenced by the assertive, argumentative, and condescending tones present in both

Porter (2011) and McCormick and McClenney (2012). Similar tones have been taken by

other scholars within this body, particularly Tinto (2012) and McCormick et al., (2013),

in what seems to be frustration around both process and progress improving student

engagement in colleges and universities.

McCormick, Kinzie, and Korkmaz (2011) contributed to the limited qualitative

exploration of the student engagement in higher education, as they sought to identify

trends of effectiveness, describe patters of improvement, and explore the factors

contributing to improvement at higher education institutions. McCormick et al. (2011)

used NSSE data and subsequent institutional questionnaires in effort to gain "…an in-

depth contextual understanding of a contemporary phenomenon, of organizational

processes, and of the meaning of these experience for those involved" (p. 10). After

identifying student engagement trends for 534 institutions using NSSE responses, they

administered questionnaires to a subset of 142 institutions with positive student

engagement trends, of which 61 responded completely (McCormick et al., 2011). The

authors employed treatments of organizational learning and intentional change as a

conceptual framework, "Organizational learning provides a framework for understanding

how organizations acquire and interpret information, interpret their experience, and make

choices while the literature on change provides a sharper focus on goal-directed change"

(McCormick et al., 2011, p. 3). They particularly focus on the interpretive function of

organizational learning, as they explore how NSSE data is used to inform institutional

practices (McCormick et al., 2011, p. 4). Furthermore, McCormick et al. (2011) identify

NSSE data as a source for disconfirmation and subsequent action to close the gaps

between institutional intentions and actual student experience.

They found that, while institutions generally endorse broad change to

undergraduate learning, spanning many class levels, experience of first-year students was

the most amendable (McCormick et al., 2011). Also, the change process was most

influenced by institutional and faculty commitment to improvement of undergraduate

education, data revealing concerns about undergraduate education, strategic planning, and

college and university administrators (McCormick et al., 2011). This study uncovered

roots leading to the persistent concerns of higher education scholars, and additionally,

"…contributes to the national conversation about how institutions can improve

performance to address widespread concerns about quality and success in undergraduate

education" (McCormick et al., 2011, p. 25).

 In a recent, particularly comprehensive, review of student engagement,

McCormick et al. (2013) outlined the conceptual and contextual evolution, highlighted

recent developments and contributions, explained approaches to measurement and

associated challenges, shared general findings and applications, and explored institutional

strategies around use of research findings and recommendations. Most significant for

this body of literature are sections on institutional strategies and use. The authors argued

that student engagement data can be the catalyst for discussions on improvement, help to

identify strengths and weakness across a number of practices, and ultimately help

institutions, "…hold themselves accountable for a quality undergraduate experience"

(McCormick et al., 2013, p. 73).

According to McCormick et al. (2013) NSSE researchers are particularly steadfast

in the movement to improve undergraduate education, as they work actively to make

student engagement knowledge digestible and applicable to institutions. This is evident in

the 2009 introduction of a series of publications entitled, *Lessons from the Field*; seeking

to "…capture the growing body of collective wisdom and emerging lessons about the use

of student engagement results to advance educational quality" (McCormick et al., 2013,

p. 74). Creating this hub for student engagement best practice is not only vital to support

the student experience, but it is important to creating systemic improvement in higher

education institutions (McCormick et al., 2013). McCormick et al. (2013) proposed

creating teams to oversee the collection and interpretation of data as well as the

subsequent development strategies around development, communication, and

implementation of resulting interventions. Another strategy offered by McCormick et al.

(2013) is to validate student engagement findings against other institutional data sources,

increasing confidence in research driven decision-making.

 Striving to accomplish the ongoing task of documenting effective practice, NSSE

researchers have collaborated with a number of organizations, producing initiatives that

contribute to enhanced practice. The Documenting Effective Education Practice (DEEP)

project is collaboration with the American Association for Higher Education examining

the daily activities of colleges and universities with unusually high levels of student

engagement and graduation rates (McCormick et al., 2013). Most notable across DEEP

institutions, researchers found intentionally crafted "…policies and practices that channel

students' energies to activities that matter to student learning" (p. 78). These findings

suggest that DEEP institutions are having success in leveraging engagement scholarship

for enhanced practice. This and other findings from the DEEP project were synthesized to

create a framework for institutional self-study and other colleges and universities

(McCormick et al., 2013). These findings demonstrate increased onus on the part of

researchers and institutions, and a synthesis and translation of student engagement knowledge into more digestible formats.

This body of literature represents the most recent research efforts and perspectives in the field of student engagement. Authors within this body agree on three areas of focus for continued advancement of student engagement. First, directly and indirectly, Tinto (2012), Porter (2011), Martínez-Alemán et al., 2015, McCormick and McClenney (2011), and McCormick et al. (2013) identified the need for more clear and shared understandings about definitions, intentions, and applications of student engagement, both within and across stakeholder groups. Second, there is a clear and vital need for professional development among scholars and practitioners to enhance their respective ability to thoughtfully produce, critically consume, and effectively apply student engagement scholarship (Martinez-Aleman et al., 2015; McCormick et al., 2013; Porter, 2011; Tinto, 2012). Third, there are conflicting perspectives on validity and the standards of research are in flux, illustrating "…how the standards and objectives of pure research may be at odds with the needs of practice" (McCormick et al., 2013, p. 62).

In addition to these shared perspectives, there is a need for systematic and reflexive processes to implement and improve student engagement efforts and initiatives at higher education institutions, "…the higher education research community has an unprecedented opportunity to undertake systematic investigation into how data are used – or not – to advance both theory and practice. Theories of organizational learning, leadership, and organizational culture are readily applicable" (McCormick et al., 2013, p. 77).

Organizational Learning in Higher Education

As the most recent student engagement literature calls for action, scholars have begun to investigate the usefulness of organizational theories (McCormick et al., 2013). This section introduces the organizational learning literature and its utility in understanding organizational change and adoption of student success practices in higher education. The section that follows brings together student engagement and organizational learning literature, and articulates the bridge in leveraging both concepts to examine student success.

There are a myriad of definitions for organizational learning, each with conceptual nuance. Argyris and Schon (1996) assert that, "Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on the organization's behalf," and that individuals, "…experience a surprising mismatch between expected and actual results of action and respond to that mismatch… to restructure their understandings of organizational phenomena and to restructure their activities so as to bring outcomes and expectations into line" (p. 16). Levitt and March (1988) focus intently on the routines, histories, and targets. Organizational learning from this perspective focuses on exploring and challenging routines and the histories that contribute to their development, with the goal of moving toward future goals or targets (Levitt & March, 1988). Fiol and Lyles (1985) define organizational learning as, "the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding" (p. 803).

The nuance in perspectives comes as scholars seek to define who is responsible for learning, the context in which it occurs, what actions contribute to learning, how it is measured. Bauman (2005) identifies ideal conditions for promoting learning in higher education institutions as she seeks to advance the utility of organizational learning in the context of higher education. Overall, organizational learning seems to involve the acknowledgement of a problem or goal, individual and collective efforts to explore and address the problem or goal, and systematic encoding of individual learning into new organizational practices (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Levitt & March, 1988).

Organizational learning can enhance our understanding of the adoption or creation of practices. In examining how institutions translate student engagement findings into practice, organizational learning may be uniquely observed in this context. Organizational learning is a phenomenon that has existed for more than fifty years, used to develop better understandings of how organizations change, particularly oriented toward growth and expansion of organizational capacity. Organizational learning aligns with teleological and social-cognition perspectives on organizational change, which view change as planned and adaptive, and tied to individual and collective sense-making (Kezar, 2005). Organizational learning is seen as neutral, as the actual learning can be positive or negative depending on how the resulting change is defined (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005).

In higher education there has been an absence of organizational learning perspectives in examining change (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005; McCormick, Kinzie, & Korkmaz, 2011). Bensimon (2005) points to the advantage of organizational learning in addressing structural and cultural challenges in higher education. Many scholars find congruence with the promise of organizational learning in accounting for the complexity of change within higher education institutions (Kezar, 2001; McCormick et al., 2011).

In discussing individuals' roles in organizational learning, Bensimon (2005) discusses the presence of cognitive frames and the impact these perspectives have on how organizations learn. She explains, "I use the concept of cognitive frame to describe the interpretive frameworks through which individuals make sense of phenomena" (p. 101). Because organizational learning is inextricably linked with individual cognition (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005) considering the cognitive frames of individuals within an organization is essential (Bensimon, 2005). Cognitive frames influence how individuals understand problems, the questions they ask, how data is interpreted, and what actions result (Bensimon, 2005). This idea is also represented by Levitt and March (1988) in reference to interpretations of past experience, "Organizations devote considerable energy to developing collective understandings of history. These interpretations of experience depend on the frames within which these events are comprehended" (p. 324). This explicit reference to the values, thoughts, and beliefs that

guide individual interpretation and action helps to enhance perspectives from literature that focus heavily on the practices that constitute organizational learning.

Scholars have made clear the struggles that higher education institutions have with facilitating organizational learning (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005; McCormick et al., 2011). This comes as no surprise considering the lack of empirical studies in higher education. Bauman declares, "Although the organizational learning literature is rich in concepts of how learning happens and what serves as evidence of an organization having learned, there is a dearth of empirical studies of how organizational learning happens" (p. 25). Bauman (2005) also speaks to a "…tendency to discuss organizational learning at an abstract level rather than in relation to a particular problem" (p. 25). The lack of concrete and consistent conceptions of organizational learning in higher education may undermine its appeal, but also create a great opportunity for consistent and concerted effort toward empirical study.

While scholars tend to employ nuanced language to discuss their perspectives on organizational learning, Bauman (2005) does well to articulate the tenets of the concept: the presence of new ideas, cultivation of doubt in existing knowledge and practices, and the development and transfer of knowledge among institutional actors. The perspectives and findings of Argyris and Schon (1996), Bauman (2005), Bensimon (2005), Kezar (2005), Levitt and March (1988), and McCormick et al. (2011) contribute to a concrete and encompassing framework. The framework is guided by the following assumptions derived from the aforementioned organizational learning theories:

1. Organizations manifest and are experienced as a confluence of people, structures, symbols, and cultures that are constantly changing in intelligible and unintelligible ways.

2. Organizational learning involves individuals within and outside of organizations.

    a. People take action that effects the organization, intentionally and unintentionally, subsequently resulting in a range of desirable or undesirable effects.

    b. People serve an interpretive function, intentionally and unintentionally by:

        i. Consuming and interpreting an array of information to guide perspectives, positions, and decisions (action and inaction);

        ii. Constantly making sense of their position, roles, and actions and those of others;

        iii. Constantly making sense of, interacting with, and challenging their own interpretations and those of others.

    c. People are dynamic.

        i. People's roles (within) and position (in relation to) the organization change, and;

       ii. People's interpretations, capacity to interpret, actions, and

capacity to act are constantly changing.

3. Organizational learning involves temporal considerations, namely:

    a. The histories of organizations and happenings within an organization,

particularly, how those histories are captured, redistributed, and

interpreted;

    b. Contemporary happenings within an organization, particularly the

patterns and routines that exist, emerge, or dissolve;

    c. Future happenings within an organization, particularly the aspirations,

targets, or goals espoused.

Organizational Learning for Institutional Change

       The work of Bauman (2005) offers a structured approach to apply organizational

learning, particularly regarding institutional change efforts in higher education.

       Presence of new ideas. Argyris and Schon (1996) and Bauman (2005) identify

the presence of new ideas and more nuanced perspectives of existing knowledge and

data, as valuable for organizational learning. Institutional culture, and individuals'

interpretive processes must be open to, valuing of, and desirous for new ideas and

perspectives (Bauman, 2005). This disposition is most popular in organizations for whom

learning is central to or explicit in their mission (Kezar, 2005). Levitt and March (1988)

assert institutional structure is also important to consider, as learning in complex

organizations like higher education is ecological. Considering the institution, the various configurations of subunits within the institution, and the individuals within the subunits, learning processes are asynchronous, simultaneous, and dissimilar (Levitt & March, 1988). From this perspective, learning can come from individuals, subunits, and the organization itself, as well as those outside of the organization (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). The presence of new ideas and perspectives require a comprehensive understanding of where and whom these ideas and perspectives can come from.

There are a number of specific strategies and perspectives, emergent from the literature that promote the presence of new ideas and perspectives. Experimentation contributes to the presence of new ideas, by operating outside of institutional routines and historical perspectives (Levitt & March, 1988). The process of organizational inquiry is important to reaching new and deeper perspectives. Of the more widely known strategies for inquiry, is double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). Double-loop learning is the process of organizations or individuals identifying symptoms of a problem, and continuing to explore the underlying causes inducing the presenting symptoms. This is different from single-loop learning, which relies on addressing symptoms with no regard for their cause. This type of inquiry is valuable, in that it often contributes to the change in the guiding values and perspectives of an organization (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Employing double-loop learning not only demonstrates openness to new ideas and perspectives, but it can also contribute in a shift toward more openness to new ideas and perspectives (Bensimon, 2005). Bensimon

(2005) promotes collective inquiry, defined as individuals within and organization

working collectively to investigate an issue on behalf of the organization. Collective

inquiry is different from double-loop learning in that it focuses on the organization of

people within the process of learning, and not the process itself. She and other scholars

assert that as individuals with and organization interact with new information, not only

does that information get dispersed among various institutional actors, but also the

cognitive capacity of the group expands beyond the sheer sum of individuals (Bauman,

2005; Bensimon, 2005; Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). Similarly, Bauman (2005) found

that collective inquiry led to the emergence of new ideas among higher education

professionals in her empirical study, "Promoting Organizational Learning in Higher

Education to Achieve Equity in Educational Outcomes." As institutional actors'

participation in collaborative and reflective review of institutional data, new

understandings of specific populations emerged. Participants in the study valued the new

perspectives gained and pledged to incorporate collaboration and reflection practices into

other areas of their work and decision-making (Bauman, 2005). Regardless of the actual

strategies employed to collect or cultivate new ideas and perspectives within

organizations, the ideas themselves are necessary for learning and improvement. The

presence of new ideas is the foundation for learning, but is also important to note that not

every new idea is guaranteed to yield learning (Bauman, 2005).

     Cultivation of doubt. Bauman (2005) found that organizations most successful at

learning, openly questioned and challenged commonly held knowledge and existing

routines, with the goal of improvement. The dominant perspective contributing to the cultivation of doubt, is the idea of "past as a pest" whereby individuals in organizations view routines, norms, rules, and cultures as mutable and open to challenge (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). With this sentiment in mind, organizational learning literature highlights the need for an organization culture centered on learning and trust among members (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). Kezar (2005) identifies organizational learning a key contributor to a larger collaborative and socially constructed learning pedagogy, which challenges traditional hierarchies in higher education that may inhibit learning. Kezar (2005) specifically highlights the, "…emphasis on working in teams and of having groups work to develop a shared vision through sharing and discussion…" as important to the socially constructed view of knowledge (p. 19). Because of the varying positional and political power of individuals within higher education institutions, this approach works to support trust, "…everyone on campus – faculty, administrators, staff, and students – sees their role as a part of a process of organizational learning in the creation of a rich learning environment" (Kezar, 2005, p. 19).

Double-loop learning is identified as a useful strategy promoting the cultivation of doubt, as the process involves challenging initial observations and underlying assumptions (Argyris & Schon, 1996). A particularly popular strategy comes as individuals and organizations examine how congruent their actions are with their espoused values and beliefs, referred to as theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005). "Recognizing gaps between espoused views and theories in use (which

often requires the help of others) can be pivotal to deeper learning" (Senge, 2006, p. 780).

Bauman (2005) also promotes the value outside perspectives have in the cultivation of

doubt. The author contends "An outsider can act in a manner different from those situated

inside the culture and ask the seemingly ignorant questions as well as those questions that

many not be safe for an insider to ask without negative consequences" (p. 30). In

addition to outside perspectives, Bauman (2005) also highlights the ideas from Bensimon

and Neumann (1993) in their discussion of "real" versus "illusory" teams. Real teams are

different from illusory teams because they fulfill a cognitive function by exposing

individual team members to multiple perspectives, which expands their intelligence span

(Bauman, 2005; Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). For example, teams comprised of

members from across the institution, can expose individuals to new or different

perspectives on familiar or persistent problems.

Knowledge Transfer. As new ideas and perspectives make way for new

knowledge, organizations must find ways to capture, store, disseminate, and interpret this

knowledge for it to actually be useful. From this perspective organizational learning

occurs across two dimensions, "…the systems-structural dimension, which focuses on the

acquisition and distribution of information, and the interpretive dimension, which

involves the interpretation of that information" (Bauman, 2005, p. 30). Because cognitive

frames are thought to influence the interpretive function of organizations, they will likely

have significant influence on knowledge transfer within an institution (Huber, 1991).

Two compelling cognitive frames offered by Kezar (2005) are knowledge management and human resource management perspectives on organizational learning.

Organizational learning as knowledge management focuses on its usefulness in translating information and learning into useable formats for organizational decision makers (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). For example, having institutional decision-makers meet regularly with institutional researchers to support their interpretation of data, and their subsequent data-informed decisions. This perspective seems most congruent with organizational learning literature, as most scholars employ organizational learning for collective or organizational impact. Organizational learning as human resource management employs organizational learning as a tool for individual professional development, following trends in higher education toward human resource management and faculty development (Kezar, 2005). From this perspective, as the organization benefits from learning and resulting improvement, individuals' ambitions are stimulated in the process. An example is holding training workshops on assessment and evaluation for mid-career staff, which could support their use of data in addition to building their transferable skills. Also, because individuals inquire on behalf of the institution, their desire and ability to inquire is important (Kezar, 2005). The latter of these frames contribute to an increased orientation toward learning, and away from mere problem solving, a sentiment which Bauman (2005) promotes. Dispositions in favor of institutional onus are also import for organizational learning, according to Bensimon

(2005). Institutions should take responsibility for the process of learning, particularly in examining their current condition and moving toward desired outcomes.

There are a number of strategies that emerge from organizational learning literature on how best to facilitate knowledge transfer. This is represented through a number of perspectives encouraging shared organizational perspectives on learning, and a number of strategies to promote, and threats to avoid, in advancing knowledge transfer. The practices represent acquisition and distribution of knowledge, the second dimension of knowledge transfer. The most common practice in organizations, specifically higher education institutions, involves the use of groups or committees to address institutional change (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005). While the structure alone offers an enhanced capacity for learning, Bauman (2005) explored the attributes and practices of groups that capitalized on this capacity for increased learning. She identifies the powerful effects of "communities of practice" which are small groups of individuals within an institution, identified as both passionate and experts on the given topic. These communities thrive on situated learning, whereby members are thoroughly immersed and engaged in the inquiry, as opposed to passive consumers and reporters of others' findings (Bauman, 2005). This approach, "…establishes the condition for effective learning, which can bring about important changes in beliefs, values, and actions of individuals" (Bauman, 2005, p. 33). While the group or committee structure seems quite familiar to higher education institutions, rarely are these configurations

engaged in productive learning (Bauman, 2005). Communities of practice build on the

Bensimon and Neumann (1993) notion of real (versus illusory) teams mentioned above.

Organizational memory is one the ways organizations accumulate, store, and

disseminate the knowledge and experiences of individuals (Bauman, 2005; Levitt &

March, 1988). Knowledge and experience is accumulated and stored in documents,

formal procedures, informal routines, social and physical configurations of structures and

relationships, norms, and culture (Levitt & March, 1988). Knowledge and experience are

retrieved and disseminated though these same mechanisms, however organizations are

challenged with retrieval based on type of information and its use (Levitt & March,

1988).

Organizational learning literature offers a number of potential threats to

knowledge transfer that are also import to acknowledge. Overload is the presence of too

much data, such that institutions cannot effectively process and interpret all that is

collected (Bauman, 2005). Competence traps appear most commonly as, "…favorable

performance with an inferior procedure leads an organization to accumulate more

experience with it, thus keeping experience with a superior procedure inadequate to make

it rewarding to use" (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 322). Similar to competency traps;

defensive reasoning is when individuals or organizations continue with course of action

to avoid the risk of failure associated with an alternative path (Kezar, 2005). Superstitious

learning is a frequent occurrence where inferences are drawn from subjective experience,

which inhibits learning (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). For example, a leader in an

organization may subjectively associate previous success with their actions and

approaches and replicate those actions in a different context without considering other

factors or variables.

While organizational learning is the central lens for examining student success

literature this paper, it is important to note other frameworks that might contribute to our

understanding of this process. There are models and concepts, other than organizational

learning, that could be used to advance similar studies of student engagement in higher

education. Specifically, theories of knowledge management and knowledge flow have

complementary strands to the organizational learning literature.

Knowledge management theories involve understanding the processes involved in

assessing organizational information and data, and storing or translating that information

appropriately (Aggestam, 2006). Knowledge-flow theory is another similar and

promising concept, as it, "…examines the transfer of knowledge within and across

settings with the assumption that knowledge will result in learning, exchange of

information or perspectives, and acquisition of new perspectives and attitudes…" (Weerts

& Sandman, 2008, p. 78).

The learning organization concept emerged to encourage the cultivation of

learning environments within organization. There is significant overlap between the two

concepts, making the learning organization, as they draw from many of the same

scholars, namely Levitt and March (1988), and Argyris and Schon (1996). On one hand,

learning organizations are said to have a culture that supports learning, evidence by the

presence of certain recommended practices. The learning organization concept is outgrowth of decades of organizational learning scholarship (Aggestam, 2006). Learning organizations are seen as organizations that are focused on the exploring positive learning examples and are particularly aspirational in their approach (Kezar, 2005).

On the other hand, organizational learning is a set of practices or processes that contribute to enhanced knowledge or skills of individuals and organizations. Organizational learning takes a neutral approach to examining learning, with the possibility of learning being productive or unproductive. Organizational learning shares a desire to better understand and affect the processes and resulting impact of higher education institutions in their various responsibilities and endeavors. Its greatest utility comes from its systematic and iterative nature, and objective and perceptional lens on organizational functioning. Organizational learning also invites contextual perspectives that are vital to understanding the complex nature of change in higher education institutions (Aggestam, 2006; Boyle, 2003; McCormick et al., 2011).

Student Engagement and Organizational Learning

The body of student engagement literature, when viewed through an organizational learning lens, has helped to advance the Presence of New Ideas, Cultivation of Doubt, and Knowledge Transfer in the larger landscape of student success scholarship and practice. In this section, I will explore how the emergence and application of student engagement knowledge might be understood through the lens of

organizational learning literature. The ideas and perspectives offered from student

engagement literature show congruence with the principles of organizational learning,

and apply to the present analysis in multiple ways. Research on student engagement has

provided a prolific source for new ideas and perspectives related to student success. In

addition, student engagement research has also cast doubt on previous institutional

measures and strategies for student success, offering student engagement constructs as an

alternatives to previous measures, practices, and strategies. The goal of student

engagement is to inform and improve student success efforts by offering actionable

strategies and practices. Although student engagement work has contributed greatly to

our understandings of student success, it struggles to survive translation into practice

(Harper & Quaye, 2009; McCormick et al, 2013; Tinto, 2012). Considering

organizational learning in the application of student engagement concepts, offers

systematic strategies to ameliorate the student engagement theory to practice gap,

particularly the use of data to inform learning, decision-making, and action (Bauman,

2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005; McCormick et al., 2011; Tagg, 2007). Figure 1

illustrates the emergence and composition of student engagement literature, connections

to organizational learning concepts, and how the application of organizational learning

can continue to advance the translation of student engagement knowledge into practice.

Figure 1. Application of research to practice for student success

Application of research to practice for student success

Increased Demands on Higher Education

Student Success Dilemma

National Education Agenda

The Student Engagement Movement

Vehicle for student success

Critiques of the NSSE survey

Engagement experiences of Special Populations

Application of Student Engagement

Organizational Learning

Presence of New Ideas (PNI)

Cultivation of Doubt (CD)

Knowledge Transfer (KT)

Challenges with Student Engagement Application

Faculty   Programs
Administrators   Policies
Staff

RQ: How are institutions that are dedicated to improving student success exploring, adopting, applying, and evaluating research knowledge and best practice in support of student success?

Figure 1. Depicts the emergence of student engagement literature as an approach to student success, how the emergence is related to organizational learning literature, and how where organizational learning literature can be useful in translating research into practice.

Literature focused on student success. Literature exploring student engagement as a vehicle for student success offers a number of valuable insights for higher education institutions, when considering organizational learning as a theoretical construct. The NSSE has evolved over time, resulting in an empirically vetted set of benchmarks (Dowd & Tong, 2012). Benchmarking began as a popular strategy for organizational learning, particularly because it is an effective way to obtain new ideas and experimentation (Bauman, 2005). The benchmarks developed may offer challenges to institutional improvement from an organizational learning perspective. However, they represent static and external measures of institutional performance. Some organizational learning scholars advocate a shift away from external measures of accountability, like benchmarking, in favor of more tailored and internal measures, resulting in the stimulation of double-loop learning (Bauman, 2005).

Although the use of benchmarks to support organizational learning is somewhat contested, the continued work of scholars like Parscarella et al. (2010) help to update and reestablish their applicability, and subsequent usefulness. These benchmarks are also positioned to support the presence of new ideas and perspectives and as well as experimentation, contributing to greater learning in NSSE supporting institutions. The number of institutions represented in NSSE data offers institutions a quick and easy way to examine their engagement relative to others, which can be a useful external perspective and contribute to the cultivation of doubt (Bensimon, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). For

institutions with less than stellar engagement compared to peers, new targets can emerge,

as well as new strategies to move toward targets. According to Levitt and March (1988),

new targets and the process of achieving them, can translate into increased learning.

Amid such a prolific body of literature in the field of student engagement, the dissenting

perspectives of Porter (2011) and Campbell and Cabrera (2011) are important to

cultivation of doubt and subsequent learning of higher education institutions. Not only

does the result of the Pascarella et al. (2010) study affirm the usefulness of the NSSE as

an accountability measure for student learning, but the enhanced validity supports the

continued used of the NSSE benchmarks as a litmus for educational quality (Pascarella et

al., 2010). This expansion and extension of validity is also useful, as it helps to assuage

benchmarking concerns from organizational learning scholars (Bauman, 2005).

The increased granularity found in the Kuh and Umbach (2004) study of student

engagement lends to organizational learning, as institutions are able to evoke new

understandings of NSSE data (Bauman, 2005). This work moves toward a more intimate

understanding of the student engagement contributions to student success outcomes. This

helps institutions identify more specific areas to focus engagement efforts. It is also

evidence of progress toward the goal of establishing student engagement as a key piece of

the student success puzzle.

In addition, Carini et al.'s (2006) focus on student learning helps the research

community to expand beyond persistence and GPA, for a more rich understanding of

student engagement's impact on learning in higher education. They found student

engagement efforts to have the most pervasive impact on first-year students and students

with lower levels of pre-college achievement. These findings have undoubtedly

contributed to learning in higher education institutions, as there has been increased focus

on student engagement strategies for first-year and lower achieving. Furthermore, Pike et

al. (2011) findings represent both challenge and opportunity from an organizational

learning perspective. Specifically, they found institutional characteristics to have a

significant influence on the effectiveness of learning communities at enhancing student

engagement (Pike et al., 2011). Scholars identify a number of challenges in adopting

blanket strategies for a desired outcome, as they do not adequately consider the unique

individual and institutional context (Bauman, 2005, Kezar, 2005, Levitt & March, 1988).

However, the Pike et al. (2011) findings invite institutions to reexamine their use of

learning communities. Through double-loop learning, institutions can examine and

customize the learning community experience to best fit the needs of specific

populations, maximizing their effectiveness (Bauman, 2005, Kezar, 2005, Levitt &

March, 1988). This serves as an invitation for future research that is more applicable to

current higher education context and challenges, responding directly to the calls of

organizational learning scholars like Bauman (2005) and Bensimon (2005).

In his call for a more methodologically rigorous student engagement survey,

Porter (2011) advocated for a more precise and transparent interpretation of reported

correlations, explicit researched reasons for each prompt on the survey, a focus on

thorough explanation of nebulous concepts such as critical thinking, and employing a

time-diary model to collect student experiences as opposed to relying on student recall. This particular point is congruent with apprehensions around organizational memory. From this perspective, engagement data is stored within students' experiences, which is difficult to access (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). Martinez-Aleman et al. (2015) builds on this point as they challenge the implicit assumptions of uniformity in students' ability to reflect on and make sense of their experiences.

Porter (2011) encourages more strict standards of validity regarding surveys and resulting data. This is an explicit example of the cultivation of doubt promoted by Bauman (2005), as well as the need for increased training an development, supporting knowledge transfer (Kezar, 2005). While Porter (2011) opposes the current approach of student engagement surveys, he offered valid points to consider in identifying tools to assess and inform student engagement.

In considering organizational learning, Campbell and Cabrera (2011) also cultivate doubt around student engagement assessment tools, "Our findings question the extent to which NSSE benchmarks are a universal tool for appraising institutional quality, and whether it predicts such student outcomes as GPA" (p. 97). This critique evokes an important tension between applicability and validity. NSSE benchmarks were created with the goal of making NSSE findings easier to interpret and thus more actionable. Campbell and Cabrera (2011) challenge benchmark predicative validity. These are competing and necessary considerations as we consider how to best leverage student engagement for increased student success at higher education institutions.

Literature focused on student success offers extensive insight into knowledge transfer in higher education institutions. Because student engagement is framed around NSSE survey data and resulting benchmarks, it is complex. The complexity, and sheer volume of NSSE data may work well at institutions with similarly complex structure and capacity, like larger research institutions. At smaller institutions this may lead to an overload of information and actually inhibit learning (Kezar, 2005). The complexity of the undertaking, widely administering a survey and subsequently interpreting the data, can also serve as a deterrent for any institution wishing to begin using the NSSE survey. Institutions that commit to use of NSSE student engagement data or administer the survey on their campus may also be subject to competency traps. This is likely to happen if there is an extensive cost to the institution for administering the survey and processing the data. While comparing institutions' relative performance on engagement measures can promote new targets as mentioned above, this type of comparison can promote accountability to external – as opposed to internal – goals and measures, thus inhibiting learning (Kezar, 2005). The nature of NSSE data can also have a positive impact on learning for institutions, as the storage and uniformity of NSSE data can contribute greatly to organizational memory, especially if the survey is administered on a campus longitudinally (Levitt & March, 1988).

Literature focused on special populations. Special population literature calls attention to disparities in the engagement experiences of various student populations. This literature employs similar methods as student engagement literature focused on

student success. Special population studies contribute granularity to student engagement knowledge and experience limitations consistent with engagement literature focused on student success. Overall these enhanced perspectives inform meaningful change in research agendas to address persistent disparities and to encourage more customized approaches. Levitt and March (1988) would argue that the consistent limitations are a symptom of using routine approaches to explore student engagement, yielding low levels of learning. Even with new perspectives on current student engagement knowledge, the same limitations and blind spots exist. Also, just because great benefits are possible, does not mean they are likely. This, and similar nuanced understandings of student engagement trends encourage more accurate and actionable solutions by thoroughly and intentionally outlining the issues inhibiting student success. These new perspectives and understandings allow for more customized approaches to student engagement and more strategic and intentional uses of student approaches, resulting in opportunities for increased learning and performance (Bauman, 2005). This is of particular value as scholars seek to enhance student success for special populations, amid current efforts yielding limited results.

Harper and Quaye (2009) offered context around the engagement experiences and outcomes for underrepresented groups. They encouraged intentional, theory-guided intervention and institutional onus, similar to call from Bensimon (2005) in her study of organizational learning in higher education. Harper and Quaye (2009) invited diversification of theoretical perspectives used to guide research and practice. Here we

find opportunity to leverage organizational learning as a strategy to accommodate the Harper and Quaye (2009) invitation, whereby institutions could intentionally identify research and practice strategies for special populations, rather adapting more ambiguous strategies to merely accommodate those populations.

The findings from many of these studies also cultivate doubt around our understandings of persistent issues in higher education. For example, Harper and Quaye (2009) explore in detail which populations of students actually experience enhanced student success outcomes as a result of student engagement. Through this examination they find that equal measures of student engagement do not always translate to equal student success outcomes (Harper & Quaye, 2009). This helps explain persisting challenges certain students experience during and after their higher education experience, and invites more precision in leveraging student engagement knowledge to address persisting disparities.

Authors focused on the student engagement of special populations in higher education seem to embrace the presence of new ideas, and the cultivation of doubt as articulated by Bauman (2005). Studies within this body find unique and unexplored approaches to studying student engagement, zooming in more specifically on subgroups within the student population. The new perspectives uncovered are a nod to the learning that results from new ideas and cultivation of doubt. Continued use of NSSE data offers the same advantages to organizational memory and similar challenges to knowledge transfer as mentioned previously. Additionally, these scholars' calls for increased

accountability through faculty interventions and institutional onus fit directly with the

sentiments of many organizational learning scholars, particularly Bensimon (2005),

Bauman (2005), and Kezar (2005). This draws attention to a unique intersection and

potential area of focus for student engagement and organizational learning scholars.

Literature focused on application. Student engagement literature focusing on

the application of student engagement knowledge has already begun, intentionally and

unintentionally, to embrace organizational learning as a promising approach to address

persistent challenges. The three bodies of student engagement articulated above align

well with trends in organizational learning. Tinto (2012) establishes a compelling need

for a shared definition and conception of student engagement, as well as timely action by

institutions, which is congruent with Kezar (2005). Both Tinto (2012) and McCormick et

al. (2013) recommend increased professional development for faculty and staff, drawing

on Kezar's (2005) concept of organizational learning as human resource management.

Kezar (2005) focuses on the need for training and development that aligns with the

institutional mission and desired outputs of that organization. In this context, faculty and

staff would be trained or coached to offer pedagogies and practices that most effectively

support student success. McCormick et al. (2011) also discuss faculty and staff interest in

improving education as a common theme among institutions with high levels of student

engagement. While there is no specific mention of improvement of pedagogical

strategies, Bensimon (2005) argues that a favorable faculty orientation toward student

success is necessary and contributing to success in this regard.

McCormick et al. (2013) proposed creating teams to oversee the collection and interpretation of data as well as the subsequent development strategies around development, communication, and implementation of resulting interventions. This recommendation is in line with many organizational learning scholars who advocate for more collaboration across departments and levels within institutions (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005). McCormick et al. (2011) found a similar positive impact from collaboration, as institutions in their study attribute supportive structures, promoting collaborative exploration of data, and creation of data-informed practice to their high levels of student engagement.

The efforts demonstrated by the DEEP project offer the type of guidance and assistance to higher education institutions that organizational learning scholars would deem necessary to contribute to the transfer of knowledge and increased learning (McCormick et al., 2013). Researchers associated with the DEEP study examined the day-to-day practices of institutions with higher than average institutional NSSE scores (McCormick et al., 2013). The DEEP study calls for institutional policies and practices, "…working with students of different abilities and aspirations, and that signal the value attached to high-quality undergraduate teaching, diversity, and support for all students" (McCormick et al., 2013, p. 77). The efforts initiated by the DEEP project uncover and represent strategies for increased organizational memory, promotion of communities of practice, as well as knowledge diffusion (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988).

Organizational learning to advance application. The above sections highlight the ways that student engagement research has served to enhance understandings of student success. While literature focused on application offers ways to promote the translation of student engagement research into practice, scholars and practitioners have yet to find consistent success to this end (Harper & Quaye, 2009; McCormick et al, 2013; Tinto, 2012).

 Organizational learning has promise in helping to understand and address the persistent theory-to-practice gap in application of student engagement knowledge at the institutional level. Specifically, the Presence of New Ideas, Cultivation of Doubt, and Knowledge Transfer, offers systematic strategies to navigate application and translation challenges (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005; McCormick et al., 2011; Tagg, 2007).

Strategies and concepts related to the Presence of New Ideas can be helpful to understand how new ideas emerge and are introduced, and how they are received and considered by institutional actors. Exploring how Cultivation of Doubt emerges in institutional efforts to enhance student success can offer insight in the specific ways that institutional actors investigate institutional phenomena and interrogate existing practices. Identifying and understanding institutional approaches to Knowledge Transfer offers insight to the implicit and explicit barriers to using research knowledge, institutional data, and best practice from the field to enhance student success efforts. The research question guiding this study emerged after considering the utility of organizational learning in

addressing the student engagement theory-to-practice gap, in support of student success

efforts (see Figure 1).

Summary

Student engagement literature is comprehensive in its coverage of theoretical,

conceptual, and practical considerations. The progression of the student engagement

concept demonstrates its evolution and refinement over time. In examining this literature,

the work has seemingly reached a theoretical and conceptual plateau, and the exploration

of practical considerations and use has moved to the forefront of research agendas.

Literature focused on the application of student engagement knowledge serves to raise

issues and offer suggestions for improvement. As new uses for the student engagement

construct emerge, so do opportunities for institutions to explore these uses for increased

student success. Here, organizational learning finds a niche.

Current literature shows that student engagement data provides a rich source of

new ideas about the learning experiences of undergraduate students, offering insight

factors contributing to student success. Student engagement data also cultivates doubt, in

that uncovering the trends in student experience invites disconfirmation of previously

held perspectives and conceptions of what contributes to student success. The extensive

NSSE database, as well as institutional repositories for student engagement data support

organizational memory and promote recall of student experiences recorded in that

memory. The construction and use of NSSE Benchmarks are the more contended aspects

of student engagement. The benchmarks were created with the intention of distilling the themes in successful student learning practices into clear and digestible categories, easy for institutions to adopt and apply.

There is also heated debate on the validity of the NSSE. The debate represents a current area where continued studies of student engagement, through the lens of organizational learning, can shed light or cultivate doubt for its usefulness. McCormick and McClenney (2011) promote consequential validity to support NSSE validity, which focuses on the theoretical and practical alignment of the tool, resulting in meaningful and actionable information for decision-making. Porter (2011) and Campbell and Cabrera (2011) offer critiques of construct validity, particularly for the NSSE Benchmarks. While resolution, or at least tolerance, of the differing perspectives would be ideal, the dissention itself is important. This represents a cultivation of doubt and encourages increased rigor in vetting the NSSE Benchmarks. Employing organization learning to these perspectives could contribute to conversations around NSSE validity and use.

Student engagement scholars have called for a number of general considerations and specific recommendations for the future study and application of student engagement knowledge. Intentional faculty development, more contextual studies of student engagement, alignment of student affairs and academic affairs units, and more extensive research on how student engagement is translated into practice are the most prominent recommendations. These recommendations align with and are supported by a number of

organizational learning perspectives. This alignment is indicative of the possible synergy

between the two concepts. Student engagement needs what organizational learning offers.

The three bodies of student engagement literature fit well with the three

organizational learning concepts presented by Bauman (2005). Literature focused on

student engagement for student success seems largely influenced by and contributes to,

the presence of new ideas. Scholars explore new and novel ways to measure student

engagement and apply the concept within higher education. Special population literature

emerges from a cultivation of doubt around the experiences of various subgroups in

higher education. The findings shed light on areas of improvement and enhanced

customization for higher education practitioners. Application literature and knowledge

transfer have the identical goal of increasing the utility of research and practical

knowledge. With this in mind, organizational learning concepts and language will be

helpful tools to refine each of these groupings of literature, addressing the Tinto (2012)

call for common and consistent language across student engagement studies.

Also, because student engagement application literature is essentially concerned

with knowledge transfer, an organizational learning framework can help develop and

extend the efforts of student engagement scholars focused on application. Student

populations and institutional contexts are always growing and evolving. Kezar (2005)

finds this to be vital for the success of student engagement efforts; "Research from

organizational theory suggests that techniques and practices are more easily and

successfully adopted within an institution when the approach has been tested within that

particular context" (p. 14). Organizational learning is a systematic body of research focus what conditions and actions are required for an organization to learn, making it a promising tool, using student engagement application literature as a point of departure (Kezar, 2005).

Political, structural, theoretical, and contextual considerations contributed to the evolution of the student engagement concept (McCormick et al., 2013). These same factors must coalesce to address the complex and pervasive challenges faced by stakeholders in higher education as they wrestle with the application of accumulated student engagement knowledge to enhance student success. Organizational learning perspectives offer systematic strategies to explore these factors and their influence on the success of student engagement efforts in higher education institutions.

The student engagement and organizational learning concepts introduced in this chapter and depicted in Figure 1 serve as the conceptual framework for this study. The data collection strategy, and the conceptual framework's contributions to that strategy are presented in chapter three. The conceptual framework and data collection strategy will contribute to exploration of the research question presented in chapter one.

Chapter Three: Methods

Scholars have expansively documented the contributions of student engagement practices toward enhanced student success, but have grown frustrated with the lagging improvement in the actual engagement experiences of students (Tinto, 2012). This study seeks to explore how colleges and universities making efforts to improve engagement consume knowledge from the field of student engagement, and how this knowledge is used to enhance student success efforts. Knowledge and understandings that arise from this study can contribute to our understanding (and eventual reduction) of the theory-to-practice gap that persists in higher education. For these reasons, this study aims to meet the following objectives: (1) to better the understand the processes higher education institutions undergo to improve their student success efforts, (2) to explore what facilitates or inhibits translation of research knowledge into practice, and (3) to identify best practices for the application of research knowledge and best practice. The research question guiding this study is asks: How are institutions that are dedicated to improving student success exploring, adopting, applying, and evaluating research knowledge and best practice in support of student success?

Procedures

To address the research question I rely on a qualitative approach which aims to advance understandings of particular phenomena through a process of observation and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2007) adds that, "…qualitative research today involves attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry and situating the study within the political, social, and cultural context of the researchers, the participants, and the readers of a study. The interpretative approach in qualitative research lends to this study as it explores the *application* of a well-studied phenomenon in higher education – student engagement. Through interpretive processes, researchers can gain understandings that are both contemporary and contextual in the form of themes, categories, and concepts. Higher education scholars affirm the value of qualitative approaches for continued inquiry in higher education. Kezar (2007) asserts that "important learning can also be facilitated through stories, narratives, and other methods that capture experience in complex ways" (p. 582). Scholars call for rich and contextual data to yield deep analysis that will meaningfully inform student success efforts; which is particularly valuable for practitioners in higher education (Kezar, 2005; McCormick et al., 2013).

Kezar (2005) and McCormick et al.'s (2013) perspectives are germane to the current analysis as successful application of research findings in the domain of student engagement and organizational learning relies on understanding context. As Kezar (2005) suggests, "Research from organizational learning theory suggests that techniques and practices are more easily and successfully adopted within an institution when the approach has been tested within that particular context" (p. 14). Studies unearthing rich

contextual information about student engagement efforts within higher education stand to

"…inform the institution about the extent to which it is deploying resources to promote

engagement and success" (McCormick et al., 2013). These perspectives highlight the

interest, value, and utility of rich contextual data.

Case study methodology provides an avenue for generating context-rich data.

Specifically, case study approaches are useful for accruing contextual and contemporary

perspectives on process and experiences within organizations (Creswell, 2007; Merriam,

2009). Merriam (2009) highlights a number of features of case study knowledge,

beginning with the notion that "…case study knowledge resonates with our own

experience because it is more vivid, concrete, and sensory, than abstract" (p. 44). This

aligns with the need for more rich information to capture and address the complex nature

of higher education student engagement efforts. Merriam (2009) offers case studies as an

effective tool to explore people's experiences, "…our experiences are rooted in context,

as is knowledge in case studies. This knowledge is distinguishable from the abstract,

formal knowledge derived from other research designs" (Merriam, 2009, p. 45). Case

study approaches and the resulting information interact with the perspectives of readers

and old data, resulting in new knowledge, "…readers bring to a case study their own

experience and understanding, which lead to generalizations when new data for the case

are added to old data. (Stake considers these generalizations to be 'part of the knowledge

produced by case studies' [p. 36].)" (Merriam, 2009, p. 45). Information unearthed can be

used to support the efforts of practitioners at their respective institutions and populations,

"…in generalizing as described above, readers have some population in mind. Thus, the reader participates in extending generalization to reference populations (Stake, 1981, pp. 35-36)" (Merriam, 2009, p. 45).

Multi-case study is most appropriate in addressing the research question in my study for three reasons. First, Merriam (2009) identifies case study as useful in applied fields like education and complex social units like colleges and universities, within which this study is positioned. Case study is especially useful when examining improvements in practices, "Case study has proven particularly useful for studying education innovations… and informing policy" (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). Student engagement research offers a set of high-impact practices to stimulate innovation in the pedagogical approaches of higher education institutions, making case study an ideal approach for researching this phenomenon in this particular case.

Second, Merriam (2009) notes the strength of case study method in illuminating context, "Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences," case study offers the rich contextual information (p. 51). The robust information resulting from case study allows the readers to identify areas of congruence in their own organizational context, inviting the reader to determine what can be applied in their particular context, making the data most useful for each individual reader (Merriam, 2009).

Third, case study methods can help advance new knowledge that has not been captured through other methods applied to this topic. Case studies do not try to eliminate or overlook what cannot be discounted or simplified (Merriam, 2009). This study seeks to advance knowledge in the field by exploring the complex, and sometimes tacit, processes that facilitate use of research knowledge in institutional contexts. Based on these rationales, this study relies on multi-case study methodology to examine student engagement and organizational learning in institutional contexts.

This study also follows an interpretive paradigm as it seeks to describe, understand, and interpret the application of student engagement scholarship and practices in a higher education setting (Merriam, 2009). The interpretive paradigm looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations in a social context (Crotty, 2011). Rich information emerges and understandings are evoked as features of the institutional context are collected and considered (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Previous studies have included the cultural and historical influences of student engagement, in the broad historical context of American higher education. This study seeks to advance previous work by understanding how institutional context, culture, and perspectives on student engagement relate to translation and application of student engagement knowledge.

Case Selection. As discussed in chapter one, this study is concerned with institutions that have shown commitment to student engagement as a key institutional practice. This set of committed institutions is derived from case sites identified using the

National Survey of Student Engagement "Lessons From the Field" database. Lessons

From the Field and the associated database were established by NSSE as a result of

feedback and institutional solicitation after the NSSE Report Card for the purposes of

providing access to a repository of examples of how institutions have applied their NSSE

results (McCormick et al., 2013). This searchable database contains examples of

institutional accounts of their work to understand, share, and apply findings from their

NSSE results. Institutional contributions to the Lessons From the Field database suggest

an increased institutional interest in the use and application of NSSE data to advance their

student success efforts.

I choose to limit my study to large research institutions based on their unique

institutional context: specifically public, four-year, large, high undergraduate, with a high

research focus. I limit my analysis to this group for several reasons: 1) research on this

sector is important given the vast numbers of students enrolled at these institutions; 2)

several studies have identified these institutions struggle with improving their student

engagement measures (McCormick et al., 2013); 3) I would like to explore how research

knowledge is adopted to support student success in loosely coupled, anarchical,

institutions – thought to be difficult to navigate and direct (Birnbaum, 1988); and 4) I am

also interested in these institutions, as the research agendas of these institutions are

sometimes perceived to be in competition with or supersede students' learning experience

(Kezar, 2005).

Among the institutions that fit the above criteria, there were 30 that have administered NSSE between 2010 and 2014. This 2010 to 2014 window is ideal for this study as, 1) the NSSE tool was updated in 2010, and 2) schools with more recent NSSE administrations and attempts at application increase the reliability of information collected. I narrowed the group of 30 institutions to the six that have made multiple contributions to the Lessons from the Field database between 2010 and 2014. More recent participation in NSSE and use of associated tools suggest that participants from these institutions will have more direct and contemporary perspectives on institutional efforts.

This study seeks to understand how higher education institutions facilitate higher levels of student engagement, making it most appropriate to select cases in which (1) institutions have made concerted efforts to improve student success using student engagement knowledge, and (2) institutional leaders are intentionally involved in these efforts. Guided by this rationale, I selected three institutions with multiple submissions to the Lessons from the Field database based on their 2010 to 2014 administrations of NSSE. The case study institutions are categorized as large (full-time enrollment greater than 10,000 students), high undergraduate (76% - 90% undergraduate student population), research universities (doctoral granting universities ranked as "highest research activity"), by the most recent Carnegie classification (Definitions, 2015). Each case was given a pseudonym to ensure the anonymity of the interview participants, because the specificity used in describing their roles and work could make them

identifiable. The institutions are referred to as Midwest State University, University of Southern, and Southern State University throughout the study.

This approach is in alignment with current student engagement research as scholars are advancing, "…the national conversation about how institutions can improve performance to address widespread concerns about quality and success in undergraduate education" (McCormick et al., 2011, p. 25). Studying institutions making concerted efforts to use student engagement knowledge moves toward an increased focus on actionable improvement by institutions, congruent with calls for increased institutional onus (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 2012).

Data Collection. The primary information collected for this study includes transcripts resulting from semi-structured interviews. Interview participants were identified through a stratified purposive sampling strategy, which refers to the intentional selection of informants based on characteristics that would offer valuable and varied perspectives of the concepts or processes being investigated (Creswell, 2007). Within each case study site, I identified administrators what are traditionally responsible for student engagement offices and efforts. Interview participants were not limited by these criteria, however. Because student engagement initiatives can be both curricular and co-curricular I began with university officers that oversee academic affairs and student affairs, likely assistant vice provosts, deans, and directors. Additionally, I sought administrators associated with the units represented in each institution's Lessons from the Field submission, as interview participants.

Initial contact with these administrators was made via email, with further communication and coordination via their preferred medium. These administrators are ideal informants, as they are commonly responsible for reporting institutional measures of engagement to campus leaders, as well as oversight and decision-making regarding engagement initiatives. From here snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) was employed to identify additional informants, potentially those working more directly with specific student engagement initiatives. Communication with these informants was coordinated similar to above. Interviews were guided by an interview protocol designed (see Appendix A), to ask open-ended questions in relationship to my conceptual framework. Additionally, these informants were consulted to identify and gain access to supplementary sources of information (websites, policies, meeting minutes, etc.) to analyze in conjunction with text from interview transcripts. Information from interviews and supplementary sources were identified and collected until reaching saturation (Creswell, 2007). A total of 16 interviews were conducted within three institutions that were given pseudonyms: six at Midwest State University, five at the University of Southern, and five at Southern State University.

Data Reliability and Confidentiality. Yin (2003) and other qualitative methodologists warn against singular modes of data collection. In-depth interviews provide rich information via the lived experiences of interview participants, but may inhibit reliability if participants are not able to accurately recall events. Solely relying on documents can lead to incomplete accounts and exaggerate or overlook the biases of the

document authors. Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009) advocate the triangulation of data using multiple sources of evidence to support the reliability of findings. To accomplish this I solicited documents from each interview participant, representative of their student success work, including policies, meeting minutes, internal reports and communications. I also explored other institutional policies and documents that were publicly available, including strategic plans, student success websites, and public statements from institutional officials.

To ensure confidentiality of interview participants based on their unique roles at each institution, pseudonyms were created. Their position titles were altered using generic language to reflect their work roles. In addition to the identity of the participants, the identities of the institutions were also masked. In doing so, participants' references to their (or other) institutions, programs, and initiatives were similarly de-identified.

Conceptual framework.   Scholarship by Bauman (2005) introduced in chapter two, provides the foundation for the conceptual framework that guided my data collection and analysis. Bauman's work suggests that new practices at higher education institutions are shaped by the presence of new ideas, cultivation of doubt, and transfer of new knowledge. These elements are depicted in figure 1 in chapter two and illustrate 1) how the concepts emerge in the evolution of student engagement in the larger body of student success literature, and 2) how organizational learning concepts can be leveraged in the understanding the application of student engagement knowledge to advance student success efforts on an institutional level. My data collection strategy aims to draw out

understandings of these processes as they relate to student success efforts at research universities. Accordingly, my interview protocol (See Appendix A) aims to generate understandings about how the Presence of New Ideas, Cultivation of Doubt, and Knowledge Transfer emerge in the application of student engagement knowledge in support of student success.

Questions 3-5, 9, and 12 in the interview protocol focus on the Presence of New Ideas (noted as PNI in appendix A). Questions in this domain inquire about how new ideas are introduced, considered, and accepted by those involved in decision-making. The presence of new ideas involves new information, new perspectives, and the openness to new information and new perspectives (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005). There is also promise in exploring where and from whom, these ideas can originate. Learning in complex organizations like higher education institutions is ecological and asynchronous, occurring on individual, departmental, and institutional levels (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). Student success initiatives exist in higher education in a similar fashion, making it necessary to understand how new ideas and perspectives emerge at each of these levels.

Questions within the Presence of New Ideas category seek to identify and explore the presence of double-loop learning and collective inquiry in the processes institutions enact to field new ideas to support student success. Double-loop learning invites new ideas by seeking to address the root cause, rather than just the presenting symptoms, or organizational issues. Because of the complexity of higher education institutions,

stakeholders, and students, issues that arise are often very complex and allusive. Encouraging deep and interactive approaches like double loop learning evoke new ideas or invite new perspectives on institutional challenges in higher education (Tagg, 2007). Collective inquiry is also useful in cultivating new ideas, as it calls for a collective efforts from multiple institutional actors which can invited a breadth of perspectives on institutional issues. When working to inquire as a group, synergy can be achieved that expands the interpretive capacity of the group. Higher education institutions are known for exhaustive use of committees to examine and address institutional challenges, making these groups prime for exploration (Bensimon, 2005; Tagg, 2007).   My interview questions within the Presence of New Ideas domain will investigate these processes in understanding adoption of student engagement practices that support student success within a research university context.

Questions 6-8 and 11-12 focus on Cultivation of Doubt (noted as CD in appendix A). Cultivation of doubt is demonstrated by organizations that openly questioning past practices and perspectives, in the interest of troubling unchecked routines (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). Questions 6-8 align invites perspectives on past practices and routines. Many organizations, particularly higher education institutions, struggle with updating or discontinuing past practices and routines, even when those practices do not yield optimum outcomes (Bauman, 2005). Within the Cultivation of Doubt category, the application of double loop learning has been demonstrated as a useful tool in challenging the defensive routines and espoused theories that help resist adoption of perspectives and

practices (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Tagg, 2007) This is has been observed in the problem-solving and decision-making processes of higher education administrators (Tagg, 2007) and is investigated specifically in question 11 (See Appendix A).

Questions 7-8 and 10-11 focus on Knowledge Transfer (noted as KT in appendix A). The knowledge management perspective in organizational learning focuses the transformation of information into usable data for decision-making (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). Knowledge management is achieved through focusing on the interpretive and systems-structural dimensions of organizational learning. The systems-structural dimension focuses on the processes involved in making knowledge a part of the institution, specifically the acquisition and distribution of information. The interpretive dimension involves institutional actors making sense of the information accumulated, toward more informed action (see questions 10 and 11). While this approach can exist unintentionally, institutions demonstrate onus when intentionally and systematically structure and coordinate this process.

Knowledge Transfer is also investigated in my examination of group behaviors. Higher education institutions are known to rely heavily committees and task forces to carry out much of their knowledge management. Bringing together groups of institutional actors can be a useful systems-structural approach to acquire and disseminate information, but is often done with limited success (Birnbaum, 1988; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005) Organizational learning offers refinement to committee-like approaches to knowledge management, moving toward communities of practice (Bensimon, 2005).

Communities of practice are groups of professionals with a variety of positional

perspectives and levels of experience, passionate about the particular topic or issue being

addressed. These communities preference shared leadership and shared meaning making,

in efforts of evoking ideas from a variety of perspectives and positions. Communities of

practice also continue beyond the completion of immediate tasks or action. Shifting

toward communities of practice support the systems-structural and interpretative

dimensions of organizational learning in higher education. The interview participants'

perspectives on committee use and functionality are interrogated through interview and

discourses related to these practices will be highlighted as they emerge in textual analysis

(See Appendix).

Organizational memory contributes to the systems-structural dimension of

organizational learning as it highlights the how and where acquired information is stored

(see question 11). Documents, formal procedures, informal routines are some of the more

apparent areas where knowledge is stored. Information can also be stored in the social

and physical configurations of structures, relationships, norms, and culture.

The interview protocol is also designed to understand how threats to

organizational learning may emerge when considering knowledge transfer (see questions

7 and 8). Information overload occurs when and institution does not have reliable system

or structure to store and access the information accumulated, or when members of the

organization do not have the capacity or ability to interpret the information accumulated.

Competences traps are a common occurrence whereby institutions decide to continue a

practice, valuing familiarity with the practice over its quality or impact (Levitt & March, 1988). Defensive reasoning is a resistance to new ideas influenced by an aversion to risk or challenge (Kezar, 2005). Superstitious learning is when leaders' opinions and experiences alone are used to support decision making, as opposed to research or other evidence (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). The interview protocol and resulting responses explore the presence of these knowledge management practices and threats as well as their surrounding discourses (See Appendix A).

Documents Review. In addition to interviews, supporting documents were reviewed to achieve triangulation in support of data reliability (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). These documents are comprised of institutional strategic plans and reports, university committee meeting minutes, internal marketing materials for student success programs, research publications from interview participants, and several web pages, and were suggested by interview participants at each institution. Other public institutional documents and websites were also reviewed, to this end. The documents reviewed are used to mitigate potential pitfalls of interview data, particularly challenges with recall (Yin, 2003). They are reviewed to affirm or challenge the perspectives presented by interview participants. Additionally, the documents add an additional layer or context, as some represent institutional policy or historical accounts, and are mostly authored by institutional actors that were not interviewed for this study.

Analysis. Interview transcripts and supplementary documents were analyzed using an interpretive approach, seeking to identify patterns and themes within the

conceptual framework introduced in this study. This relies on Bauman's (2005)

categories: Presence of New Ideas, Cultivation of Doubt, and Knowledge Transfer.

Following the interview protocol developed from the organizational learning concepts

and Bauman's (2005) themes, I explored the use or perceived presence of organizational

learning concepts in carrying out student success work as discussed by institutional

informants. These use or presence of these concepts aid in helping address structural and

cultural challenges in higher education, and help account for the complexity of change

within higher education institutions (Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2001; McCormick et al.,

2011).

 The use or presence of these concepts are examined on individual and

organizational levels, examining how people are engaged in the process of implementing

initiatives, as well as how groups, departments, and institutions as entities take part in the

process. Examining individual actors, sub-groups, and institutions, embraces previously

disjointed perspectives of organizational learning toward a more holistic account of the

organizational learning process (Bauman, 2005). This expanded scope offers a more

fitting context, as individuals, sub-groups, and institutions exist, intersect, and operate

simultaneously. This approach also builds on previous analyses of student engagement

performativity in higher education.

 To extend the analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis is selectively employed to

continue building on understandings that emerge. Rogers (2011) describes critical

discourse analysis as, "…a problem-oriented and transdiciplinary set of theories and

methods that have been widely used in educational research" (p. 1). Rogers (2011) goes

on to assert that because Critical Discourse Analysis positions educational practices as

communicative events, "it therefore stands to reason that discourse analysis would be

useful to analyze the ways in which texts, talk, and other semiotic interactions that

learning comprises are constructed across time and contexts" (p. 1).

In the above discussion of organizational learning, the concept is established as a

series of interactions that invite new ideas, perspectives, and approaches within an

organization to bring about change. This is compatible with notions of social

transformation discussed in Critical Discourse Analysis. Rogers (2011) summarizes how

discourse analysis can be used to understand social change in organizations.

> To cut through the complexities involved here, we can say broadly that the
>
> openness of an organizations to transformations led by a new discourse, and the
>
> openness of the organization and its members to learning, depend on the extent to
>
> which there is a discourse or configuration of discourses in place within the
>
> organization and the field for which the dialectic of enactment, inculcation, and
>
> materialization is fully carried through, and the capacity for autonomy with
>
> respect to other fields (not, of course, a fully semiotic matter) (p. 125).

Organizational learning works as a configuration of discourses used to stimulate

understanding, as well as guide the enactment, inculcation, and materialization of

research knowledge and best practice to support student success in higher education institutions.

Consistent with the aim of this study, I rely on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to understand the process of learning and social change within the institutional context (Rogers, 2011). Critical Discourse Analysis considers organizational learning as social practice, which, "…can be thought of as ways to control the selection of certain structural possibilities and the exclusions of others, and the retention of those selections over time…" (Rogers, 2011, p. 120). From this perspective social practices like organizational learning are, "…networked in particular ways through orders of discourse. Orders of discourse comprise genres, discourses, and styles or 'ways of interacting,' 'ways of representing,' and 'ways of being'" (Rogers, 2011, p. 119). Excerpts of interview transcripts will be analyzed using CDA to grasp the discursive elements within the narratives from participants to understand how these elements interact to reiterate, reinforce, interrupt larger dominant social practices, such as organizational learning. Simply put, orders of discourse are the ways that text from interview transcripts, works together with discourse practices, to reveal relationships with larger social practices. Discourse practice is the production and consumption of text. A number of discourse practices that emerge throughout the analysis are explained below (Fairclough, 1993).

Modality. Modality attends to issues of truth in representation. According to Van Leeuwen (2005):

It relates both to issues of representation – fact versus fiction, reality versus

fantasy, real versus artificial, authentic versus fake – and to questions of social

interaction, because the question of truth is also a social question – what is

regarded as true in one social context is not necessarily regarded as true in

others… (p. 161)

People associate or distance themselves from topics or perspectives through their

language, revealed by high, mid, or low modality words and phrases. Take the statement

following statements as examples: I *may* go to the park; I *will* go to the park; I *must* go to

the park. The words *may, will,* and *must* demonstrate low, mid, and high levels of

modality, respectively.

   Interdiscursivity. Interdiscursivity represents the types of discourse used within a

text sample, particularly what genre, styles, and discourses that are used. Attention is paid

to how the discourse types work to characterize the sample, if there are multiple genres

represented, and if the sample (in its construction) is conventional or innovative

(Fairclough, 1993).

   Intertextuality. This feature of discourse practice is concerned with the

production of text. It identifies how discourses are created and represented in text and

what other texts are called upon or appear in the representation of text. Presupposition is

a feature of intertextuality, as it represents assumptions or prior knowledge alluded to in

text (Fairclough, 1993).

Cohesion. Cohesion is how sentences and clauses connect and relate to one another in text. Allusion and pronoun usage are examples of strategies that are used to connect to previous sentences in a text. These connections contribute to the rhetorical mode of the sample (argument, narrative, etc.) (Fairclough, 1993).

The themes and patterns that emerge from interviews help to explore how organizational learning, specifically the presence of new ideas, cultivation of doubt, and knowledge transfer, is involved in enhancing student success efforts at the case study institutions. These themes and patterns can illuminate the possibilities that exist for the improving the application of research knowledge in service of student success efforts. Analysis of the discursive features present in interview text can inform understandings about what happens in the application of research knowledge at institutions working to enhance student success. This will also show how institutional discourses may be involved in directing student success efforts, and ultimately the trajectory of student success initiatives.

Summary

This chapter outlines the methodological approach and guiding conceptual framework for this study. It follows an interpretive paradigm, employs a multi-case study approach, and uses interviews as the primary source of information. Secondary sources of information, such as policy documents, reports, and memos were identified using the snowballing technique based on the recommendations of interview participants.

Supplementary documentation were triangulated to offer the most reliable account possible, offering additional sources and perspectives of student engagement efforts. Interview texts and supplementary articles were analyzed to distill themes and Critical Discourse Analysis was employed to discern relevant discourses within and across interviews.

Chapter Four: Results

Organization of Results

The findings resulting from in-person and phone interviews conducted at the case-study sites are presented below. This study follows guidelines by Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009), in presenting the findings. These methodologists assert the need for rich, thick description in describing the cases, context, and the outcomes of participant interviews (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Specifically, each case is presented individually, with a description of the institution and context, an overview of each interview participant and their role at the institution, and an exploration of the dominant narratives from each site, and a case summary.

Midwest State University

Institutional Context

Midwest State University is a public, highly selective, highly research oriented, highly residential, doctoral degree granting, land-grant institution. This institution is located in a small city within a rural setting in the American Midwest. According to interview participants, Midwest State has increased in total enrollment from approximately 25,000 students to approximately 35,000 students over the past five years.

Table 1 illustrates a variety of characteristics about the Midwest State University that are useful to understanding the institutional context. The information included in table 1 is a select set of characteristics found in the 2014 IPEDS data (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Midwest State University is led by president, governed by a board of regents, and partially (and decreasingly) funded by the state in which it exists.

Table 1

Select Institutional Characteristics from Midwest State University

Select Institutional Characteristics from Midwest State University	
Undergraduate enrollment Breakdown	
Undergraduate (full-time, degree seeking)	27199
First-time	6016
Transfer-ins	1891
Continuing	19292
Undergraduate enrollment by race/ethnicity	
White	72%
Black or African American	3%
Asian	3%
Hispanic	4%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%
Two or more races	2%
Race/ethnicity Unknown	4%
Nonresident	12%
Undergraduate enrollment rates by residence	
In-state	58%
Out-of-state	37%
Foreign countries	5%
Unknown	0%
1st year retention rates	
Full-time	86%
Part-time	79%
Undergraduate graduation rates	
4-year	39%
6-year	71%
8-year	72%
Graduation rates by race	

White	71%
Black or African American	50%
Asian	66%
Hispanic or Latino	54%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	n/a
American Indian or Alaska Native	48%
Two or more races	n/a
Race/ethnicity Unknown	68%
Nonresident	63%
Transfer out-rate	24%
Total Number of Staff	
All Staff	5780
Instructional Staff	1779
Student and Academic Affairs	1024
State Funding	
State Appropriations (percentage of total institutional funding)	25%

Note: Select information from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center

for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2014).

Participant Background

Six interviews were conducted at Midwest State Universities across faculty,

academic staff, and administrative ranks (see Table 2). Among these interview

participants, were faculty, institutional researchers, academic affairs staff, and student

affairs staff. Shannon is a tenure-track faculty member in the higher education graduate

program at Midwest State University. Through the course of the interview, Shannon

identified herself as a woman of color, with more than ten years of experience as a

practitioner is student affairs and previous work experiences in private, religiously

affiliated institutions. Although she does not work directly with undergraduate students,

she teaches and advises graduate students in the higher education program, most of whom

aspire to work in student service roles in colleges and universities. According to

Shannon, she contributes to student success by helping aspiring student affairs

practitioners to see their roles as central to student success so they can provide high

quality work to that end.

Frances works as the director of the Midwest State University Office of

Institutional Research. Frances has served in this role for the past 16 years, and has

worked in offices of institutional research at comparable Midwestern institutions prior to

working at Midwest State University. Frances views their contribution to student success

as providing institutional and comparative data to units and offices that work to support

student success directly, as well as institutional leaders who work less directly with

student success efforts.

Aubrey is the Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Midwest State

University and has worked in that role for 18 months. Through the course of the

interview Aubrey identified himself as an African American man and also shared some of

his own experiences as an undergraduate student with a low-income background. Aubrey

impacted student success in daily work, as he was directly responsible for the oversight

of a number of student support offices within student affairs. Additionally, he served as

co-chair of the institutional taskforce focused on student success. He also mentioned his

informal role and direct student interactions through campus mentoring efforts for

African American male students.

Riley is the director of the Midwest State University Center for Teaching and

Learning, focused on supporting the faculty in providing quality teaching and learning

experiences. Riley saw this as sees this as their central contribution to student success efforts. Riley has worked in their role for two and a half years, and worked as the assistant director of the center for three years, prior to being appointed director. Riley has also been a tenured faculty member in the college of agriculture at Midwest State University for the past 13 years.

Brook has worked at Midwest State University for the past 24 years, with the eleven most recent years served in the provost's office. Currently Brook works to coordinate student success efforts across colleges, and also serves on the institutional taskforce focused on student success. Brook identified herself as a woman and an engineer when discussing her previous work with women engineers at Midwest State University. She also outlined her work compiling the necessary data for Midwest State University's current accreditation review.

Jaime began their time at Midwest State University working as a life science professor, 13 years ago. Five years ago Jaime joined their Center for Teaching and Learning part-time and after a year became a fully appointed in the center. Jaime views their contributions to student success as indirect; working as the director of Midwest State University's program to prepare aspiring faculty members.

Table 2 illustrates the number and affiliation of participants at Midwest State University.

Table 2

Interview participants at Midwest State University

Institutional Unit/Department /Affiliation	Pseudonym and Role	Total
Faculty	"Shannon" Higher Education Faculty Member	1
Student Affairs Professionals	"Aubrey" Associate Vice President of Student Affairs	1
Academic Affairs Professionals	"Riley" Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning "Brook" Director of Academic Quality and Undergraduate Education "Jaime" Assistant Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning	3
Institutional Research Staff	"Frances" Director of Institutional Research	1

My research question sought to address the question: How are institutions that are dedicated to improving student success exploring, adopting, applying, and evaluating research knowledge and best practice in support of student success, in a research university context. In exploring faculty, staff, and administrators' perspectives at Midwest State University, three dominant narratives emerged: 1) Conceptions of Student Success, 2) Research and Data Use, and 3) Student Success Tensions.

Conceptions of Student Success

　　Institutional measures. Midwest State University participants each called attention to the institutional measures, listing a variety of indicators like first-year

retention, second-year retention, four-year graduation, and six-year graduation rates, as

the focus of student success efforts. These measures are largely influenced by external

entitites, namely the governing bodies the make up the external accountability for

Midwest State University – board of regents, federal government, state legislators, and

accrediting agencies. These measures are aligned with the national discourses on

retention and time-to-graduation as well as the comparative and competitive environment

for institutions across the landscape of higher education (Ewell & Wellman, 2007). It was

evident from the narratives of administrators that these indicators were non-negotiable,

and thus somewhat contentious. The dissonance expressed around institutional measures

was often followed up with other perspectives on student success indicators.

Holistic conceptions. Shannon and administrators all shared in the perspective

that institutional measures alone did not represent student success in a comprehensive or

holistic way:

> …I don't know if everybody comes to work thinking about holistic learning and
>
> development… I wrestle with the holistic ideal as a piece of student success. I see
>
> that as core to what we do in higher ed, but I don't know if organizationally, at big
>
> institutions in particular, its set up to do that.

Institutional measures serve to track students progression and the number of students

who, matriculate, but fail to capture the quality of students' experiences, and how that

quality varies depending on students' lived-experiences and identities. This sentiment

was not represented in the comments from Frances. Each of the faculty and

administrators work in roles servicing students more directly, suggesting that they would

be sympathetic toward more holistic indicators of student success. There were also direct

and indirect references to their experiences before entering their current positions. This

points to the significance of those background experiences in influencing the dispositions

of institutional actors toward more holistic student-centered conceptions of student

success. This is especially true in the disposition of Shannon, who spent time as a student

affairs practitioner before entering the professoriate, "I think faculty is socialized to think

your job is to produce knowledge. That's what's rewarded. But because I'm in a field of

education, and because I am from a student affairs background, I can kind of back away

from that."

  Student-authored conceptions. Adjacent to narratives that encouraged thinking

holistically about students' success, are perspectives that supported advocacy for students

being able to determine for themselves, what success means. Aubrey and Brook

communicated the necessity of student-authored conceptions of student success in several

of their responses. It was also apparent that students' own conceptions of student success

were missing from the institutional discourses, although they provided explicit examples

of students' perspectives on their individual successes. This is well represented in an

excerpt from Brook as they articulated Midwest State University's student-centered

marketing to incoming students:

So I think that's another thing, student's vision of success - It would be interesting

to ask students, 'What is your vision of student success?' Because as

administrators we use numbers, we use post-graduation success rates or whatever,

but it would be interesting to know what students think student success means. In

talking with our previous student body president - she was on our committee

working on our post-graduation success initiative for our accreditation stuff - she

said, 'Student success? Getting a job! As long as I get out of here and get a job I

was a success. I survived college. I had fun. I survived college and I was able to

get the type of job [I wanted] when I graduated. That's a success.' That was her

total measure of student success... but it would be nice to know across students

what they view it as.

Other interview participants identified Brook as being among the campus professionals

who works most extensively with student success efforts. The above commentary

highlighted the absence of student-authored conceptions in institutional discourses on

student success as well as a desire for those conceptions to be explored. The above

comments also showcased a students' conception of success, which is distinctly different

from the particular institutional measures most-often employed by institutions. Others

advocating for student-authored conceptions cited employability as an increasingly

important goal to students at Midwest State University.

Perspectives on faculty and staff conceptions. Interview participants made it clear that, from their perspectives, some faculty at Midwest State University did not view supporting student success as central to their role. A mixture of narratives emerged relative to faculty commitment to student success, most of which positioned teaching as secondary to research. Jaime brought attention to the informal socialization new tenure-track faculty members received from older faculty,

> It's kind of a mixed message sometimes. If you're at a research university like [Midwest State]… it's made pretty clear to faculty that they're gonna live and die by their research and writing. And so it plays out, often, against what they do in the classroom. In fact a lot of people are advised - not by us, but others in their department - 'Just barely scrape by in your classroom. Get your tenure, and then you can do well.'

While, there was nothing suggesting faculty members were against institutional efforts to support student success, it was made very clear that structural, cultural, and political influences worked to undermine some faculty members' focus on teaching.

Practitioners were largely seen as supporting student success, particularly holistic and developmental approaches. Shannon attributed the practitioner focus on student success to larger perspectives on professionalism in the field of student affairs. She states:

What does it mean for the people in this program to be a good professional? And
there's no one definition of good. There's certainly some central organizing
concepts and things that we use, like rubrics from ACPA and NASPA, but what
does it mean for them to be a good professional? And, I think many of them
would agree that being a good professional means supporting students' success."

Conceptions of student success for practitioners are largely influenced by standards
asserted by national, professional organizations like College Student Educators
International (ACPA) and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA)
as well as less formal and more local perspectives amongst practitioner communities.

Even with broad consensus on the investment and dispositions of practitioners at
Midwest State University, Aubrey, Brook, and Shannon suggested that practitioners'
position within the institution can sometimes undermine their commitment, especially to
specific initiatives. Shannon cited institutional size and complexity as inducing very
narrow and limited conceptions of student success among practitioners, "…it's very easy
– because this is a big institution – that people see themselves as responsible for this
really narrow slice of a student's learning and development, like 'I'm here to help you
learn how to write resumes.'" Aubrey highlights advisors' perceived resistance to a new
advising initiative at Midwest State University,

> So we got this system that is coming in so our biggest concern in some academic
>
> departments, because our academic advising is decentralized, some departments
>
> might say, 'no we don't need that we can do it our way,' or 'I don't have time for
>
> that, I'm already using these two or three other systems and I don't have time to
>
> use a new system, how many things can I look at?'

Aside from the allusion to larger cultural and structural features of Midwest State

University, it was clear that even within those espousing holistic, student-centered

conceptions of student success, there was still dissent in the approaches to enacting

student success initiatives.

Driving conceptions of student success. A call for training and professional

development emerged as a potential approach to inform faculty and staff conceptions of

student success. Aubrey saw value in training advisors on the initiative mentioned above,

to help them connect it to their work and impact on students. Riley, shared in the

sentiment above, also identifying the value of aligning resources with efforts to more

intentionally and systematically support the professional development of staff,

particularly advisors;

> …we have a new position in our unit who is an undergraduate academic advising
>
> coordinator. …she is creating some online training modules that are for new
>
> advisors. She is creating, like an advising handbook, so a whole set of kind of

tools to help advisors be successful. So that speaks to putting resources not only

into short term but long term in the form of a position.

These perspectives on efforts to improve staff perform were thought to contribute to more

uniform conceptions of student success within functional areas across the institution.

Riley and Jaime both worked to support faculty in expanding their role in

impacting student success. They did this through professional development for existing

faculty, and by preparing future faculty. Riley articulated the impact of their work and

offered an overview of the process

Our impact is through the faculty who participate in our professional

development, or our grant programs, or some of those types of things, and how

they implement what they have learned in their classes. …So, we support each

semester, a 4-week long, what we call teaching and learning circle, on team-based

learning. Faculty participate in that, then they move into a faculty learning

community, which is a group of faculty working together around a particular

topic. Then, those people, kind of – it is a way to keep our programming more

sustainable – so they work together, and they continue to grow and to learn, and it

is not us necessarily then that are continuing to facilitate those programs it is the

faculty who are stepping up and doing that.

Space was created for faculty to learn and practice new approaches to teaching as well as

develop a network of mutual support with other faculty members. While these efforts

were not always centered on student success efforts explicitly, they helped faculty to

explore and refine approaches to teaching, and established an institutional commitment to

supporting their work in the classroom. Additionally, the grants offered supported

teaching and learning research. Faculty members across the institution were encouraged

to explore the impact of their enhanced teaching approaches on student learning through

research on their courses. This was an example of Midwest State University committing

institutional resources to professional development, as well as helping faculty to take

more ownership of the learning and subsequent success of students.

No need for consensus. Of the interview participants contributing to the

conceptions of student success narrative, none found value in a singular, shared

conception of student successes. Instead, a value in multiple and customized perspectives

emerged, based on various departments, offices, and programs working to support student

success in their own ways. The challenge articulated implicitly and explicitly throughout

each interview, was the need for articulation and coordination of the various conceptions

of student success guiding the various functional areas at Midwest State University.

Shannon says, in reference to multiple definitions of student success:

> …if we're gonna do the hodgepodge thing that's ok because the institutions is big.
>
> But how do those puzzle pieces fit together in a meaningful way? [This] is a piece

that I think can happen, and it would benefit us... I think there could be ways to

better coordinate these individual work-pieces to get an overarching institutional

sense of what it means. I mean for me, we can all work at it in different ways, but

let's at least acknowledge that we are working with different definitions, because

then we can figure out, if there are different definitions; okay, then what? But it

kind of stops at, lets just say student success and everyone just kind of fills in the

blank with what that means.

The size and complexity of the institution lent itself to a variety of definitions and

approaches to understanding and supporting students' success, largely based on people's

roles, where those roles were positioned in the institution, and any previous experiences

that informed their work. Shannon also highlighted the need, and possible reluctance, to

acknowledge that there are multiple and different conceptions of student success guiding

people's work. The puzzle analogy used in the above quote suggested the potential and

desire for the various conceptions of student success to be networked together in an

intelligible way.

Institutional measures, specifically retention and graduation rates, were the

explicitly defined conceptions of student success, and were the most prevalent and

pervasive. Outside of institutional measures, there were not explicit definitions of student

success. This induced units, departments, and individuals to develop and operate from

their individual conceptions. These conceptions varied, and were largely informed by the previous work experiences and current work of units, departments, and individuals.

Research and Data Use

The landscape of Midwest State University was largely dictated by its research focus. As a prominent, public, research institution, Midwest State carried out a robust research agenda. In addition to the research carried out by members of the various colleges and disciplines, a value for research emerged in discourses concerning institutional operations. Administrators and staff demonstrated an explicit value for research and data, which often showed up in decision-making and program evaluation.

Data-informed interventions. Midwest State University had a set of very intentionally data-informed projects and work groups at the institution. The most prominent of these was a student success taskforce, comprised of institutional leaders from several units departments including the institutional research office, student affairs, and academic affairs. The taskforce was co-led by senior leaders, one from academic affairs and one from student affairs. Aubrey offered an explanation of the scope of their work:

I think there are about 14/15 people from across different parts of campus. It's mainly Academic Affairs and Student Affairs, and I Co-Chair it with the associate provost for academic affairs. The people who are on it are the key departments or

academic programs that have a big role with student success initiatives. So, what

we do is, we are sort of coordinating body, there are a lot of student success

initiatives that go on across this campus we are very decentralized, extremely

decentralized environment… What the [taskforce] does is sort of act as a hub, to

really make sure those initiatives are focused in a strategic direction. So we

review data from time to time, we may drive or support new initiatives, whether it

be some funding or through sub-committees, and so forth. So, I co-chair that

committee that is probably my most direct tie to student success other than the

departments that I work with.

The student success taskforce represented an explicit institutional commitment to

continued improvement of their student success efforts. The taskforce spurred

collaboration between academic and student affairs units, leveraged institutional

resources, and employed knowledge from research and data to inform their work. Brook

also served on this taskforce and spoke on their work to cultivate a data driven culture

within student serving areas of the institution:

I think the culture of the institution, as a whole is data driven… All of our student

affairs programs will do assessments on their programs and orientation programs,

everything, and its just part of the idea of continually improving. So I guess that

would be a number fundamental culture thing is the idea that you use the data to

make next year's program better, you use the data to be able to expand your

program to someone else, or to say whether it's good or bad…

This task force used data to inform institutional student success efforts, and as an

incentive for accountability. All of these things supported an increasingly data-informed

culture within student success circles across the institution.

A major undertaking at Midwest State University, guided by the student success

taskforce was a shift toward using predicative analytics to support undergraduate

academic advising. The decision to use predictive analytics was influenced by growth of

the student population at Midwest State University, the demonstrated success of similar

institutions using predicative analytics to improve retention and persistence, as well as

results from an institutional self-study. The study surveyed undergraduate students at

Midwest State about their experiences at the institution, finding that advising was an area

for potential improvement. In response to these external and internal observations,

Midwest State University began to look more deeply at academic advising at the

institution. Through the direction of the student success taskforce and the pronounced

support of the president of Midwest State University, resources were allocated to partner

with a third party data analytics firm and hire 28 additional academic advisors across

their colleges. It also led to the creation of a full-time position responsible for centrally

coordinating advisors' training and professional development. This demonstrated how

data and best practice had been leveraged to inform student success efforts at Midwest

State University, but it was not clear how institutional actors were made aware of data analytics as a best practice.

In addition to data being used to guide structural changes, predicative analytics for advising provided a statistically complex, data-informed, approach to advising. Aubrey articulated the approach:

> They [third-party company] have created a big data analytic system… we have given them 10 years of our student success data, and so our academic advisors or people who are doing curriculum planning will have access to this system and they can say, to give you an example they could say: "…I am your advisor, your curriculum calls for you to take these classes in the second semester and I notice you haven't registered for these classes and I am concerned about that. Students have looked just look you, same major, same profile, and if they didn't take these classes and get a B grade in them they have trouble graduating." You know, so that type of interaction, plus then on an aggregate level we can look at departments, different types of students, what their behavior patterns are, and kind of plan our curriculum and strategies around that.

Midwest State University's commitment to student success manifested itself in how critical components of the student experiences were being supported, expended, and individualized to systematically support students' success.

In addition to the above efforts, which were more extensively discussed in interview participant responses, there are a number of other efforts that were briefly mentioned. The president of Midwest State University joined in a formal collaboration with other higher education institutions focused on improvement through innovation. Leaders of the student success task force were responsible for attending those meetings. There was also an internal enrollment research team that had existed for a number of years, using data analytics to predict the first-semester success of incoming students. The predictive analytics project was discussed as an expansion of this work.

Evidence-based teaching. Data-informed interventions were not solely discussed regarding academic staff and student affairs. Jaime discussed Midwest State University's efforts to support faculty members using data and research through evidence based teaching:

> …we have something called the [classroom improvement] program where they can do scholarship on teaching and learning on their classroom and they can get a grant to do that and they get guidance on IRB's and stuff so they can publish on what they are doing anyway in the classroom, and that contributes to their tenure promotion packet. So, while they are helping student have success, they're gathering the data, they're knowing how to intervene in the next time, but at the same time they're helping themselves. It's all aligned.

Faculty were being supported with knowledge and resources to help apply the research

skills from their discipline to exploring the learning experiences of students in their

classes, with the goal of contributing to the growing body of scholarship on teaching and

learning. Additionally, they were supported in analyzing data to create and apply

interventions to student learning in a systematic way, thus supporting students' success.

Both financial and professional incentives were used to stimulate faculty participation,

through grants and opportunities for publication.

Aspiring faculty members, specifically doctoral students and post-doctoral

researchers, were also offered exposure to evidence based teaching, training, and

resources through Midwest State University's aspiring faculty program. Riley, who

directed the program, shares:

> So on the graduate student side we try to really prepare them before they get in
>
> the classroom and prepare them as they're learning so then student success
>
> because a natural outcome of that, rather than just ignoring that and putting it on
>
> hold. And then, we also try to bring the scholarship of teaching and learning into
>
> it, so as graduate students they can apply for grants, I was just telling you about
>
> TAR - teaching as research. They can have their own grant, and their own
>
> research project, on teaching, in their classroom, as graduate students and post-
>
> docs. They can write it up, they can put that on their vitae and that helps them get
>
> a job because they've had some teaching experiences and they've had some

research on teaching, and that's something they can show, its something they can

talk about on a job interview, so it gives them a leg up.

The guiding philosophy of faculty preparation program was to socialize aspiring faculty

members with a favorable orientation toward supporting student success, particularly

through evidence based teaching. In the process these aspiring faculty members also

gained skills and experiences to increase the likelihood of their matriculation into faculty

roles.

Thoughtful consumption. Each of the interview participants highlighted the

pronounced role that data and research played in the function of the Midwest State

University, particularly in how the institution worked to support and advance student

success efforts. Frances identified his area as providing support for leadership, units, and

departments needing research or raw data in their student success efforts. Also the

institutional research office collected comparative data from other institutions through

their affiliation with a data consortium. Midwest State University uses comparative data

from similar institutions to rate their own performance and to set benchmarks and goals

for performance, particularly around institutional measures. Each administrator

demonstrated a value of thoughtfully consuming and analyzing data to support student

success and often referenced the "data-driven" nature the institutional culture. Also

representative of the highly data oriented culture among administrators, research and data

were cited by each interview participant as being integral to the consideration of new ideas and initiatives and the credibility of those presenting them.

The favorable orientation toward data was also represented in the aspiration goals that administrators had for enhancing data practices at Midwest State. Consensus existed around the desire for more coordination of the various data and research usage across campus to support student success. Brook and Aubrey were both members of the student success taskforce, and hoped to explore more qualitative approaches and indicators, in addition to established quantitative institutional measures.

Student Success Tensions

Interview participants were very clear and most times explicit in their excitement around the ways Midwest State University had been working toward supporting student success. Even so, a number of tensions emerged through the narratives of interview participants.

Conceptions of student success. Generally, having a variety of definitions and understandings of student success was accepted and valued at Midwest State University. Tensions around the inconsistent conceptions still existed, however. As mentioned above, Shannon and Aubrey expressed their desire for more holistic, student-centered, and student-authored conceptions of student success. Institutional size was often referenced alongside these issues, suggesting Midwest State University's large size as a challenge in providing more holistic, student-centered, and individualized experiences. Brook and

Aubrey also mentioned the desire for student-authored conceptions of student success.

Comments from Brook suggested a frustration with students' expectations, "Students are

gonna complain about whatever it is or they're gonna say this is an issue. We will try and

figure out some way to address it, and we may sometimes spend a whole lot of time

addressing things that are one-student issues." The conflicting perspectives expressed by

administrators point to some internal tensions, which will be explored more in the next

chapter.

Divergent Interests. Favorable and unfavorable perspectives of faculty members

at Midwest State University were discussed throughout the narratives presented. It was

evident that faculty were in a precarious position based on the mixture of positive and

negative sentiments expressed. Each of the interview participants, with the exception of

Frances, highlighted reluctance from some faculty members to see supporting student

success as central to their work. Brook also acknowledged the potential stress faculty

were under as the institution had grown and class sizes had increased over the past few

years. Faculty, specifically those in a tenure-track, were also identified to be under

increased pressure to research and publish, congruent with the highly research oriented

nature of Midwest State University. Faculty that had interest in supporting student

success efforts found themselves with institutional support, but limited time to do so

based on institutional pressures. Participants from the Center for Teaching and Learning

alluded to fact that participation in student success efforts is sometimes viewed as

inhibiting research productivity and subsequent tenure promotion. Jaime articulated the

divergence from research productivity as "professional suicide" and makes clear the need

for better alignment between the seemingly competing interests, "We are not wanting

them to, as I say, 'commit professional suicide' as they are helping students succeed…

There has to be alignment. Alignment of the students need, the faculty needs, the

departmental needs, the whole university needs."

Decentralization. The decentralization of the Midwest State University is

common at comparably sized, public, highly research oriented institutions.

Decentralization was referenced through the narratives of interview participants, offering

context for other phenomena at the institution. The decentralized nature of Midwest State

University was associated with the challenges in creating change, specifically around the

new predicative analytics initiative:

> So we got this system that is coming in so our biggest concern in, some academic
>
> departments, because our academic advising is decentralized, some departments
>
> might say, "no we don't need that we can do it our way, " or " I don't have time for
>
> that, I'm already using these 2 or 3 other systems and I don't have time to use a
>
> new system, how many things can I look at?" So my point is if we say, we are
>
> really working on how we implement this, because if we say "everybody needs to
>
> use this because it cost x amount of dollars and you better use it," it will not be
>
> accepted here.

Structural and cultural features of the Midwest State University landscape were

sometimes barriers in working to create change toward enhanced student success support

at Midwest State University. Even in the adoption of new ideas and investment in their

development, Midwest State University had to still be surgical in cultivating buy-in for

implementation ideas.

Decentralization had been referenced as a condition contributing the need for

multiple conceptions of student success across the institution. It had also been attributed

to the lack of synchronization of those various conceptions. Aubrey spoke to this directly:

>…I think the decentralization is good but also bad. I mean we can't wrap our
>
>heads around any cohesive strategy… Even if we are so decentralized, then
>
>maybe that is a combination of plan and what is the linkage between all of those
>
>different plans? We don't have that. We talk. We communicate well. We
>
>collaborate well. We're supportive of innovation and entrepreneurship and all
>
>those good things, but there isn't a direction. There is no strategic direction…
>
>Define where do we want to be, and what is the strategic plan to get us there. We
>
>don't have a strategic plan…. If you asked me to pull out a documented strategic
>
>plan for student success I couldn't give it to you.

Administrator comments suggested they understood the decentralized nature of the

institution, but experienced challenges when working to create change in support student

success. The absence of a centralized, institutional, student success agenda was seen as contributing to these challenges. The lack of such an agenda also inhibited setting aspirational goals for institutional impact on student success. According to Aubrey, this even inhibited the ability to assess the efforts already in place; "…how deep we go with assessment is sort of hit or miss, and that's again product of being so decentralized."

Data-driven. Interview participants shared in the sentiment that Midwest State University was highly research oriented in practice and in culture. The strong orientation toward research and data was discussed most often as a necessary component in vetting new ideas, and was a way to measure the impact of new or existing student success initiatives. Tensions around research and data arose in the kinds of data that were used, the perceived inconsistency of qualitative assessment, and inconsistency in data-informed decisions.

Retention and graduation rates were the most widely accepted measures at Midwest State University, and thus the majority of data collected and used was quantitative. Aubrey and Brook suggested the need for increased qualitative approaches to understanding students' experiences at Midwest State University, as well as for evaluating the impact of student success efforts. Ultimately the strong qualitative orientation gave numerical data more gravitas in conversations and decisions around student success efforts, explained by Shannon:

…the really measurable indicators around matriculation dominate the agenda.

Because you can count very easily, how many people graduate, what's the time to

degree... things that are data driven -hard data- I think that's what has the most

credibility. People who have expertise around that have the most credibility in

setting the agenda. Because they can say, "this is the research that we know

moves people towards these markers."

Aubrey and Brook both pointed out the inconsistency in departmental assessment

efforts. Overall they were confident in the culture of assessment Midwest State, largely

supported by its high research and data orientation. The most extensive and established

assessment efforts were found within colleges, specifically academic programs.

Departments within the student affairs unit were recently tasked with enhancing their

assessment efforts, which in some cases resulted in replacing department leaders.

Departments with sound assessment infrastructure sometimes struggled with analyzing

and interpreting data in meaningful and actionable ways. Brook spoke to this:

We are data rich and information poor… we've got a lot of data. We don't have

the time or the staff to really dedicate… But no one can really take the time and

sit and look at the data, I meant to really make progress on some of these areas it

takes people time. So we've got the data out there, but we haven't really spent as

much time as we could [have] in all of those areas looking at, "So what does it

mean and what do we do, and how do we do it." I mean, we're doing bits and

pieces of it but I think we've identified that there's a lot more that we could be

doing, but we're not because we really just haven't invested the time or the

resources in that area ore we haven't investigated thoroughly. We've got the data;

we know that African American males have a lower retention rate than African

American females. We have the data. But we haven't delved in deep enough to

know what is this really telling us. What are the reasons why this is the case…

we've done some of that. So we've got data but we haven't turned it into

information and action all the time.

This excerpt illustrates the sometimes-piecemeal efforts to analyze and interpret data,

resulting from structural features and a lack of resources, in this case, time. Additionally,

the excerpt includes an example of how the lack of analysis was a barrier for increasing

their understanding of African American male student retention, and lead to inaction.

This example is congruent with many other examples used to articulate shortcomings in

institutional assessment. These shortcomings inhibited movement toward more informed

students success efforts, particularly for students with marginalized identities.

There were some examples offered that represent data being used to inform

decisions around creating or discontinuing programs. Tension emerged in the reluctance

to end programs and initiatives, even when data from the institution supported

discontinuation. Brook shared an example of a program that had been struggling for the

past ten years, "We have… a scholarship program for minority students across the university. Well, they've tried for the last ten years, to get their second semester sophomore-on courses functioning. And it's just... we let it linger, we let them try." Whether it was inaction based on a lack of useful data, or the uninterrupted existence of underperforming programs, services for students from marginalized identities were loosely assessed.

Summary

Conceptions of Student Success, Research and Data Use, and Student Success Tensions emerged as dominant narratives from the responses collected. Conceptions of student success represented the definitions, perceptions, and understandings that explicitly or implicitly guided student success efforts at Midwest State University. The various conceptions that emerged originated and operated on individual, departmental, unit and institutional levels, and were sometimes in conflict. The sub-categories of the Conceptions of Student Success category are holistic conceptions, student-authored conceptions, perspectives on faculty and staff conceptions, and efforts to inform, and tolerance varied conceptions. Although these categories were distinct, they were not mutually exclusive.

Research and Data use represented how data and research were used to support student success and associated efforts. Within this theme were explicit and implicit attitudes toward research and data, perceptions of the climate for research and data usage,

as well as examples of how research and data were used, and to what end. Sub-categories

of the Research and Data Use theme spoke to data-informed interventions at Midwest

State University, efforts to promote evidenced based teaching, and promoting thoughtful

consumption (and analysis) of research and data.

The Student Success Tensions theme was a compilation of expressed frustrations,

implicit conflicts, structural incongruence, and cultural challenges related to student

success efforts within the institution. Sub-categories within this theme addressed tensions

in the varying conceptions of student success, the sometimes divergent interests of

institutional stakeholders, the implications of decentralization at Midwest State

University, and nuances of the data-driven culture observed by interview participants.

University of Southern

Institutional Context

University of Southern is a public, highly selective, highest research activity, highly residential, doctoral degree granting, land-grant institution. University of Southern is located in a small city within a rural setting in the American South. Table 3 illustrates a variety of characteristics about the University of Southern that are useful to understanding the institutional context. The information included in Table 3 is a select set of characteristics found in the 2014 IPEDS data (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

University of Southern is led by a President, governed by a board of regents, and has strong ties to state legislature.

Table 3

Select Institutional Characteristics from University of Southern

Select Institutional Characteristics from University of Southern	
Undergraduate enrollment Breakdown	
Undergraduate (full-time, degree seeking)	25259
First-time	5240
Transfer-ins	1281
Continuing	18738
Undergraduate enrollment by race/ethnicity	
White	70%
Black or African American	8%
Asian	8%
Hispanic	5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%

Two or more races	3%
Race/ethnicity Unknown	1%
Nonresident	5%
Undergraduate enrollment rates by residence	
In-state	87%
Out-of-state	11%
Foreign countries	2%
Unknown	0%
1st year retention rates	
Full-time	94%
Part-time	89%
Undergraduate graduation rates	
4-year	54%
6-year	81%
8-year	83%
Graduation rates by race	
White	85%
Black or African American	81%
Asian	86%
Hispanic or Latino	80%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	n/a
American Indian or Alaska Native	100%
Two or more races	82%
Race/ethnicity Unknown	100%
Nonresident	67%
Transfer out-rate	6%
Total Number of Staff	
All Staff	10108
Instructional Staff	2215
Student and Academic Affairs	439
State Funding	
State Appropriations (percentage of total institutional funding)	33%

Note: Selected information from the U.S. Department of Education, National

Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(2014).

Participant Background

Five interviews were conducted at the University of Southern across, academic and student affairs staff and administrators (see Table 2). Among these interview participants, Dorian is the Associate Director for Assessment in the Office of Academic Planning and has worked in this role for the past four years. Strategic planning, accreditation, assessment, and faculty support characterized the work of this position. This person worked across the University of Southern to incorporate student success enhancement into the university strategic plan, communicate those plans to accrediting agencies, and support faculty in enhancing their use of assessment to support learning and support.

Taylor worked as the lead administrative staff member for a division at University of Southern focused on academic support for students deemed "at-risk" by the institution. This person worked closely with the division director and often represented the division in his absence, particularly on university committees. Taylor has worked in this role for the past three years and at University of Southern for the past seven. The division made a recent shift from instruction, some of which included remediation, to focus on direct student services like tutoring and academic skill building workshops.

Alex worked as the director of an office supporting community based learning based on results from their NSSE administration. Alex has worked with this office since its creation twelve years ago, and notes the original focus was exclusively supporting

faculty in creating service-learning opportunities for their students. The program has

evolved to focus on how community based learning experiences broadly contribute to

student success and now offers leadership development and internship experiences for

students.

Jesse at University of Southern was housed in the provost's office with an explicit

focus on the academic experiences of students from marginalized backgrounds and

identities, specifically African American and Latino students. Jesse has served in the role

for the past four years, and has worked at the institution for the past 17 years. This person

worked to support goals set by the president and provost through programming and

institution-wide initiatives.

Terry is the founding director a University of Southern satellite program on the

American East Coast, established six years prior. This program is a mixture of classroom,

internship, and residential experience to support students in gaining internship

experiences outside of University of Southern, without interrupting their academic

coursework. Table 4 illustrates the number and stakeholder representation of interview

participants at the University of Southern.

Table 4

Interview participants at the University of Southern

Institutional Unit/Department /Affiliation	Pseudonym and Role	Total
Student Affairs	"Jesse"	1

Professionals	Vice President for Institutional Diversity	
Academic Affairs Professionals	"Alex" Director of the Office of Service-Learning "Terry" Director, Learning Communities "Taylor" Administrative Manager - Division of Academic Enhancement	3
Institutional Research Staff	"Dorian" Associate Director for Assessment in the Office of Academic Planning	1

In exploring administrators' perspectives at University of Southern, three

dominant narratives emerged: 1) Conceptions of Student Success, 2) Student-centered

Narratives, and 3) Institutional Tensions.

Conceptions of Student Success

Institutional Measures. Interview participants were consistent in their

acknowledgement of institutional measures of first-year retention, second-year retention,

four-year graduation, and six-year graduation rates, as the focus of student success

efforts. The University of Southern governing board and their state legislators, were cited

as the drivers of these measures. Dorian offered insight:

If you ask some of the higher-level administrators they will be defining student

success according to, well a number of things, but it may be how others are telling

them to define student success. Like how are state legislators telling them to

define student success and that might mean getting them out in four years,

retaining students throughout the four years not losing them after their freshmen

year, retention progression and graduation. There's been a big focus on that.

These measures were the focus of national discourses on student and institutional success

across the landscape of higher education. While interview participants were aware of the

prioritization of institutional measures, none of them spoke extensively on these

indicators, suggesting diminished value of these measures in favor of other conceptions

of student success related to student-authored perspectives.

Student-authored conceptions. Another perspective on student success

expressed by administrators at University of Southern was in favor of students defining

success for themselves. Jesse expanded:

> I think the University of Southern would define that in terms of a student's ability
>
> to meet the goals that they set for themselves academically, regardless of what
>
> those goals might be. So, for some students their goals may be a 4.0 and perhaps a
>
> national scholarship. For other it may be simply having the GPA and the
>
> requirements met so they can complete their course of study and get their degree
>
> from the University. We do not set a specific bar on how we would define student
>
> success; we really let that be gauged by the students themselves.

The focus on students determining their own measures of success also highlighted the potential variety in how they might define student success. In Jesse's example grade point average, financial support, scholarly recognition, and degree completion were all referenced as potential student-conceptions of success.

The inclination toward student-authored conceptions of student success also seemed to align with more subtle narratives that supported providing more individualized student experiences. Taylor conveyed the value of individualized student support in a large research institution:

> I think it helps when students can feel like they are cared for, they're not just a number. I hear that over and over, 'I just feel like a number.' We have a student that is called a 8-10 number or it has changed now because we have ran out of 8-10 numbers. But it's like, students just feel like that is all they are… it is very, very easy to get overwhelmed and isolated and lonely. So if we can help those students by getting them connected to student groups, and tutoring, and maybe a research opportunity.

Staff at University of Southern supported student success by empowering students to determine their own measures of success, and craft unique experiences for themselves based on the institutional initiatives at their disposal. Terry spoke to the students' agency in crafting their experience and its contribution to their experience and overall success;

"…with such a big place like this, there is so much going on I would think that the students feel like they have a tremendous amount of control. Whether they want to do something outside of the box, or if they want to follow a very traditional path, whatever it is." The agency that students had in crafting their own measures of success was also seen as a strategy to navigate the changing nature of students over time, according to Terry, "For a big place I think we have come a long way to realize that there is a lot of roads to the same desired outcome. I think that is really great at the institution because we are recognizing that progressing today's learners is very different than 50 years ago."

Post-collegiate success. A number of administrators were intentional about stretching the conceptions of student success narrative beyond student's undergraduate experience. Alex asserted, "We just don't want students to graduate in 4 years, we want them to be prepared to get a job, or to go to graduate school, or medical school or whatever it is they like to do. We want to make sure that they have opportunities to make decisions that are informed…" This made explicit the desire for students' to gain access to post-collegiate opportunities, as well as equipping them with the critical-thinking and decision-making skills. Terry highlighted the structural changes that represented University of Southern's increased focus on post-collegiate success:

> …a few years ago the university revamped its general education requirements, and talked about the various skills that we want our students to have when they left the university. While I can't recite them all, one of them that really applies to

the work I do every day is the fact that we want students to be able to apply their

academic learning in work settings. …the notion of applying their learning

somewhere out in their career, that is a really important way that we look at

student success.

Here, post-collegiate preparedness was identified as directly informing the University of

Southern approach to supporting student success. Enhancing the curriculum toward post-

collegiate preparation demonstrated the university's dedication to serving students and

the resulting industries and institutions that receive these students after graduation.

   Call for synchronization. Interview participants identified that there are various

conceptions of student success, attributed to the large size and decentralized structure of

the university. The various conceptions, some of which were mentioned above, vary

across units, departments, and programs as explained by Dorian:

I think the most important considerations would be asking the right questions

about what how are we defining student success. And that would be answered

differently depending on who you ask. So if its an academic program they're

gonna focus on student success in courses and students being trained in the

discipline and getting a job afterwards. If you ask some of the higher-level

administrators they will be defining student success according to, well a number

of things, but it may be how others are telling them to define student success.

Institutional measures, student-authored conceptions, and post-collegiate success

emerged as the dominant conceptions of student success at University of Southern. These

conceptions, along with the others that are likely to exist, were seen as disconnected and

uncoordinated at the institution. Dorian went on to explain:

> If that division defines it one way and this division defines it one way and that
>
> college defines it another way, how do you find alignment across those so that
>
> everyone is able to answer their question satisfactorily but the student is still
>
> having that rich experience and the student feels successful? Those are sometimes
>
> complicated conversations.

Associated with the call for synchronization of student-success conceptions,

Dorian highlighted the inconsistency in assessing various student success conceptions;

"So it just kind of depends. [At] a place this big it depends on where you look. Because

each entity kind of operates, tracks its own indicators, and then we at the university level

try to maintain a good eye on all those different activities." Alex built on this sentiment,

highlighting the need for more coordinated measurement of the various conceptions:

> … the assessment question is an important one. We have to do a lot more work in
>
> how we are going to assess different dimensions in student success. So, it is one

thing to track graduation rates – that will give you at least some indicator. But, we

need to have more rich data and be able to assess different experiences and see

how they are contributing to this kind of overall picture.

It was made clear that synchronization of student success conceptions involved

coordination of the associated student success ideologies and efforts, as well as increased

intentionality in the how those efforts were assessed.

Student-centered Narratives

Students emerged as the focal point of the student success narrative at University

of Southern. Interview participants reflected the institutional focus on students in their

comments and positions on student success at the institution. Aspects of this narrative

reflected how members of the institution think about students, how students have

emerged on the institutional agenda, the challenges that students navigated, and the ways

the institution could continue to enhance its consideration of students in its work to

support student success.

Explicit student focus. Administrators and staff expressed explicit and extensive

consideration of students, their needs, their experiences, and their goals at the University

of Southern. Taylor spoke to the importance of a student-centered focus:

One thing is it is so easy to forget your mission, to forget that students are what

we are working towards… I don't work with students in the capacity I used to, so

it is really easy to get caught up in paper work, and meetings with other faculty

and lose that student, but that is the very reason why we are here. We are here to

support that student, and we need to understand their needs and that informs what

we do.

This perspective asserted the importance of being student-centered at University of

Southern, as well as acknowledging that administrative responsibilities sometimes

inhibited that focus on the part of faculty and administrators. The scope and focus of

faculty and administrators' work may also contribute to how explicitly, and in what ways,

they are focused on students success.

Student-authored conceptions and post-collegiate success also represented an

explicit student focus. These narratives went beyond explicit consideration of students'

experience and needs, to invite voice and engender agency. Student voice and agency

allowed student-centered narratives to be co-created by the students represented in these

narratives. Considering post-collegiate success demonstrated investment in students'

lives beyond the University of Southern. Collectively, these considerations worked to

individualize the student experience.

Select interview participants discussed the changing student profile at the University of Southern, thus expanding these student considerations beyond the contemporary. In discussing student profiles, Jesse asserted:

> I think that one of the dangers that we do have is our current and future. As we become an increasingly competitive institution… students are admitted to the University because they were very high performing high school students. They get here and they may not be ready for that first level of chemistry, so how do we develop support systems so that we make sure that we do not fail those students. I think that that is one of our challenges, not just right now, but now and moving forward. When you become more competitive you admit more high achieving students and you say, "oh, our average 3.8, so our students don't really need much." Actually they do; those numbers could be somewhat deceptive in terms of that's what a high school student was able to achieve, but what will they be able to achieve in College might be very different.

Institutional goals to increase competitiveness caused Jessie to intentionally consider the implications on the student experience. Jesse argued that changing student profiles should not diminish efforts to support students, and instead, should translate to updated approaches to supporting students. A as part of this consideration, Jesse and Dorian called attention to the historical change in student profile characterized by increasing

standardized test scores and grade point average, and public commentary from

administrators in celebration of that increase. While the increasing profile contributed to

the institutional competiveness in some ways, Jesse warned against the harm to students:

>…this is a byproduct of the academic profile that we talk about. We talk about
>
>how smart our students are, and how great they are, and how each freshmen year
>
>including the one that is coming in this fall is better than the one that came last
>
>fall, which is better than the ones that came the fall before. It is that type of
>
>climate there is no room for students not to be smart, or not to do well, so I think
>
>the frustration came come from people who are actually working with the
>
>students, lets say an advisor or housing in some capacity, where they are seeing
>
>students who say, "I see what the university is saying about how smart we are, but
>
>I am not feeling too smart right now. I'm failing."

While students continued to gain admission to the increasingly competitive institution,

one-sided narratives celebrating student excellence didn't account for those who may

experience challenges during their time at the University of Southern. These perspectives

assert the necessity of considering students' experience as institutions and higher

education grows and changes.

Student-centered leadership. Interviews of administrators and staff yielded

extensive commentary surrounding faculty and senior leaders' support of student success.

Interview participants made it clear that the president and provost of University of

Southern have placed high importance on the student experience. Jesse shared a

perspective:

> Honestly, the messaging is a critical part of this entire conversation and the
>
> messaging at our institution is that the students are important. We have a
>
> relatively new president, and I have to say relatively new because he is in this role
>
> as President, but he has been at the University for over 20 odd years, starting out
>
> as a faculty member. He is the student president. He loves students, when he was
>
> announced as President, everyone knew that this was going to be great for
>
> students; and he is going to focus on things that are student oriented, as well as
>
> running a research one institution that is in the middle of a one billion dollar
>
> fundraising effort. So, lots of competing, but in terms of who he is as a person and
>
> what he values, the student piece is critical. Absolutely critical.

There were also a number of stories from administrators about the president's

commitment to students, demonstrated by his engagement in campus life and attending

student events. Having a new president with reputation for being student-centered, and

experience in various faculty and administrative roles at the institution cultivated buy-in

from those at the institution who also valued student-centered approaches. This also

suggested confidence in his ability to successfully balance supporting students, research, and fundraising.

The provost at University of Southern, also new to the role, had demonstrated a clear commitment to being innovative in advancing student success according to Dorian, "I think our Provost is very motivated for big ideas. What big things can the institution do to shake things up? We know that small goals can certainly impact that but there is certainly, now, things that make us question what [we can] do to have maximum impact." With a strong interest in serving students, the provost and president worked to cultivate student-centered approaches within other units and areas, as well as offering their time and resources to support these expectations.

The faculty also contributed to the emerging student-centered culture at University of Southern through their work to enhance the undergraduate curriculum. Within the last few years, the faculty governance council approved the addition of general education requirements focused on the development of skills students' would need after graduation. More recently, according to Alex, the faculty governance council approved the addition of experiential learning participation as a requirement for graduation:

> Two weeks ago our university council, which is our faculty governing body, approved a new graduation requirement that all undergraduate students will have to have an experiential learning experience before they graduate. That can be

either service learning, study abroad, undergraduate research, or an internship,

and some of those will either be credit or non-credit experiences. That is a huge

focus, and also very much connected to getting students prepared and competitive

for the work force. So once they graduate or are ready to go on to post-graduate

programs.

Supporting students' engagement with high impact practices demonstrated the faculty's

commitment to student success outside of the classroom, and beyond college. Faculty and

administrators actively and publicly worked to advance student success at the University

of Southern, to cultivate a culture that prioritized students' experiences. Their collective

work also came with resources dedicated to the success of their efforts, particularly

funding and faculty work-time.

 Challenges. The student-centered narrative was not new at the University of

Southern, but had definitely gained the ascendancy, as it had become a part of faculty and

administrators' rhetoric and work, according to interview participants. As new leaders

and new initiatives expanded the presence of student-centered approaches to supporting

and advancing student success, some lingering perspectives and some aspects of

institutional history presented challenges.

 As a number of offices had grown and evolved in response to updated approaches

to student success support, some members of the University of Southern staff were

reluctant to embrace these changes. Faculty and staff that had been at the institution for

more than a decade were among those that had difficulty shifting their perspectives on student support. Taylor recalled a specific example of this:

> Because, we were at one point, remediation… they will think of us like that, and not of think of us as tutoring for chemistry, or you know, freshman college, or things like that, that our department has kind of moved towards. Originally, it was just remediation courses for students that needed those courses before they could go on. We still have a few courses we don't call them remediation we call them learning support, but we do have courses we offer like that. We have a ton of other courses, you know courses, and services, so I think that is the primary frustration is you know, getting the word out.

The work duties of some administrators and staff drove them away from being student focused, as evidenced in the comments from Taylor:

> One thing is it is so easy to forget your mission, to forget that students are what we are working towards. I mean even though, I am not an administrator and certainly not upper administration, I don't work with students in the capacity I used to, so it is really easy to get caught up in paper work, and meetings with other faculty and lose that student, but that is the very reason why we are here.

> We are here to support that student, and we need to understand their needs and that informs what we do.

The nature of people's work or their position within the institution inhibited their focus on students, and the institutional or department missions that focused on students. This was congruent with interview participants' strong value of student-centered approaches to their respective work.

Institutional Tensions

The interview commentary revealed a number of tensions at the University of Southern, directly and indirectly impacting their student success efforts. Some of the tensions here come from institutional goals that were in conflict with student success efforts. Institutional goals of increasing admission competiveness, expanding research focus, and faculty pursuit of tenure were discussed as potential inhibitors of student success efforts.

Student tensions. The previous two narratives illustrated an extensive, leadership-driven, focus on students' experience and their resulting success at the University of Southern. In advancing that focus a number of tensions emerged. As mentioned before, the incoming student profile at the University of Southern continued to increase, creating challenges for those working to support students. These challenge were centered on how to accommodate the needs of students as the student profile changes,

"…we also need to recognize that they are 'smarter' [with] high GPAs, high test scores,

but they're also different. It's a different generation and different population. What do we

need to do to be able to meet the needs of this very different population?" Units,

departments, and programs were challenged to change at the pace of incoming students,

which presented a challenge depending on their capacities to change. Also, a dominant

message from the president at the University of Southern was that each year's incoming

students were better, brighter, and smatter than ever before. This created tensions for

students from previous years who were still at the institution, and for the incoming

students that came in and struggled to maintain the high levels of performance attributed

to their cohort.

Diversity tensions. Alex presented a poignant story of University of Southern's

contentious history of race relations. The following was presented, discussing a recent

celebration of desegregation:

> We also have a part of our history that happened after desegregation… we are in
>
> the south, where memories are very long. So, there has been a concerted effort to
>
> make sure that we are not wasting this opportunity. I would not say that it has
>
> been perfect, because there are certainly people who are against the whole notion
>
> of desegregation, fortunately those people are long gone. I would say when I
>
> arrived on campus we were getting, I guess I had been here for a few years,
>
> maybe 5 years when we started ramping up our 40th anniversary about

desegregation. It was a really interesting campus conversation, very eye opening

for a lot of people on campus, because it was the first time it had been a real

celebration and sort of academic look at that experience, and what it meant for the

university.

These comments highlighted the impact that regional history and culture had on their

institution. It also uncovered the recent history of people at the institution opposing

desegregation, which has implications for the work being done to diversify University of

Southern. Alex went on to identify progress the institutional had made, namely around

investments in recruitment and retention efforts for Black students, but acknowledged

that there was still much work to be done.

Moving into the discussion of contemporary issues, Riley highlighted student's

engagement in campus organizations in support of larger social movements:

I have some students that are really involved in the [University of Southern]

NAACP chapter, especially after the events in Ferguson this year. There was a

march and rally on campus, and you know… my husband and I were there, there

were a lot of people from campus there to support the students; it just wasn't a

diverse enough crowd there supporting the students.

This represented the types of connections that some administrators had with students at the University of Southern, while also highlighting the need for increased support and advocacy for students who are impacted by national and global issues. This suggested some concrete areas of focus moving forward and continued acknowledgement of the cultural and historical implications of racial tensions on University of Southern and its students;

> I feel like there is still a lot of work that needs to be done in terms of campus climate and some of those issues on race that we just have to deal with. I think some of them we are dealing with in a better fashion then in other locations, maybe partly because we have to because it is so steeped in our culture and history. For example, the graduation rates: our Black students are not graduating at as high rates as our white students, so that gap has to be closed, as well as for our Hispanic students.

Alongside the outcome disparities mentioned, the increase in student profile created a challenge for those working to diversify University of Southern. Riley explained, "…as we become more elite it becomes harder as well in some instances to recruit highly qualified students, because we are putting emphasis on standardized tests, that the research shows often disenfranchises some students." In context, the students referenced here were students of color and low-income students, particularly in-state students.

Faculty tensions. Perspectives on the roles and importance of faculty emerged throughout out each interview – some salutatory and others contentious. In responses to changes and increases in the duties of faculty members associated with new or enhanced initiatives, Dorian shared an example of the resistance of some faculty, "…one of the questions I've have had a few times with faculty is, 'Well, what if we don't do it and what's gonna happen if I don't do it?'" Faculty responses like this, invited questions around accountability for faculty, especially tenured faculty. Terry also acknowledged the reluctance of faculty, and attributed that to the pressures faculty experience, particularly around research productivity and tenure promotion. Taylor offered perspective on faculty issues associated with institutional culture and structure:

> I have a different view on faculty. I don't know if I should say this, but sometimes they can become complacent. Sometimes, people that have been here for a very long time, you know, that view about faculty that they will sit in their office and do their own research, especially research for the university, and then have their TA do all of the work. I don't at all think that is the norm. The faculty I met with love students, and they feel invigorated by interacting with them, but I do think there is potential for being complacent.

While there was a presence of engaged faculty members, there were concerns about complacent faculty, for reasons similar to those presented by Terry.

Dorian alluded to the precarious nature of faculty relationships, particularly around change, "If you risk discouraging faculty that you need, that might be more costly than having them do something that doesn't quite measure up to the goals of the program or whatever it is you're asking them to do. It's a balance." Interview participants were conscious and strategic about how they engage with faculty members around new initiatives, to ensure compliance, sometimes at the expense of program quality or effectiveness.

Data tensions. A number of comments presented by interview participants suggested challenges in research and data use at University of Southern. This sentiment was made explicit by a number of administrators, in particular. Terry offered a perspective on assessment, "I think assessment is always sort of the elephant in the room. At times we have really great goals, and you have to know how to measure them… and that can be off-putting to people majority of the time." Dorian spoke at length on the assessment culture at University of Southern:

> …I think it requires a culture shift to make everyone understand that assessment isn't just another task to do but if done right and at the right times, that it can be a way of ensuring that the other things happen. You know assessment is often viewed as a post-hoc activity after you get students most of the way through the program. You know oh by the way how did we do kind of thing…. what is the most common perception of assessment, we'll just count them going out through

the gates at graduation and say, "did you have an good experience?" So

thoughtful assessment done at the right times and in the right way gives you much

better information about all of the variables you may want to look at. But again, to

get everyone on board with that view of assessment is in itself a task.

These comments argued the move toward thoughtful assessment to produce useful data

that informs and guides student success efforts. These comments also reflected an

inexperience or reluctance at the University of Southern to enhance their research and

data usage, in favor of relying on traditional institutional measures (retention and

graduate rates). Based on these and other comments, University of Southern seemed to be

transitioning to a more data oriented culture, so goals and expectations were set, but

people at the institutional were still making sense of how to put that into practice.

The University of Southern provost was one who seemed to be setting clear

expectations around data informed decisions making, providing resources and support to

initiatives that align with these expectations; "Our provost has leadership meetings once a

semester… everyone from department heads and directors… and she kind of lays out

some data about issues and she has been very clear in those, even in the way she presents

the data, that data driven requests will get more attention." The priority given to data-

informed practice was accompanied by structural and cultural challenges. Riley offered

insight:

I think one of the things we have struggled with is that our leadership wants us to

make, what they call data driven decisions. We have trouble with that because we

don't always have the data we need to make those decisions or the data that we

have maybe interpreted in ways that, you know, some disagree with and some

agree with. There is always that question of, does it say what we think it says.

This raised the issue of if and how data was being collected and made accessible, and

how were people being supported in making sense of the data before making decisions.

As the University of Southern worked to move toward being more data oriented in their

efforts to support student success, interview participants were finding gaps in the capacity

of the institution and those within it, to make this transition. Faculty was a population at

the University of Southern that had been strategically supported in this transition,

according to Dorian, "…where I really spend the bulk of my time is in helping faculty

mostly at the program levels, some at the course levels in best practices and learning

outcomes assessment." This emerged as a priority, as accreditation standards require

concerted efforts to assess student learning in the classroom. It seemed that assessment of

student experiences beyond the classroom had not been supported as intentionally,

resulting in piecemeal assessment efforts across the institution (outside of classroom

spaces).

According to Taylor, even for those units, departments, and programs that did well in collecting and using data, the institutional culture inhibited collaboration with others around data:

> Like any place there are definitely some road blocks, sometimes, people think so narrowly, and I won't mention any offices, but some people are, what's the word, territorial about their data. Whether that is not sharing data, whether that's handing data off and saying they have nothing to do with it and you cannot access it because that is not their office, so hands off.

These sentiments exhumed the data practices at the University of Southern that likely inhibited the goals expressed by university leadership to establish a more "data-driven" culture. Additionally, this example offered insight into the culture of collaboration across the University of Southern.

Summary

Conceptions of Student Success, Student-centered Narratives, and Institutional Tensions emerged as dominant narratives from the responses collected. Conceptions of student success represented the definitions, perceptions, and understandings that explicitly or implicitly guided student success efforts at University of Southern. Student success was largely discussed in terms of institutional measures, student-authored

conceptions, and post-collegiate success and outcomes for students matriculating through the university. There was also a pronounced focus on intentionally configuring and synchronizing the various conceptions of student success that emerged.

Student-centered narratives were comprised of the comments from administrators and staff placing students as the focus of their work, or direct student impact discussed as an institutional priority. The student-centered narratives were presented by commentary on work and initiatives that directly impacted students, the expressed priorities and perceptions of university leadership that were student oriented, and comments that expressed the challenges that students faced at the University of Southern.

Institutional tensions emerged in many of the interview participant's comments about challenges to supporting student success at the university, as well as institutional cultures and context that may have directly or indirectly inhibited change. A variety of tensions emerged, organized in four categories: student tensions, diversity tensions, faculty tensions, and data tensions. These tensions encompassed, structural, cultural, human resource, and historical challenges at the institutions. These tensions were considered by staff and administrators in accomplishing their work-related goals, and sometimes seen as inhibiting those goals.

Southern State University

Institutional Context

Southern State University is a public, highly selective, highly research oriented, residential, doctoral degree granting institution. Southern State University is located in metropolitan, urban, setting in the American South. Table 5 illustrates a variety of characteristics about the Southern State University that are useful to understanding the institutional context. The information included in Table 5 is a select set of characteristics found in the 2014 IPEDS data (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

According to interview Participants, the governing board of Southern State University recently announced a pending merger with a large two-year college within their university system. This is referenced in a number of interview participant responses. Additionally, Southern State University has been making a transition from a commuter campus to being more residentially oriented, with much work underway to expand on-campus housing capacity. The interview participants represent five different offices and within three distinct units at the university.

Table 5

Select Institutional Characteristics from Southern State University

Select Institutional Characteristics from Southern State University	
Undergraduate enrollment Breakdown	
Undergraduate (full-time, degree seeking)	18839
First-time	3640

Transfer-ins	2169
Continuing	13030
Undergraduate enrollment by race/ethnicity	
White	33%
Black or African American	36%
Asian	10%
Hispanic	8%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%
Two or more races	4%
Race/ethnicity Unknown	3%
Nonresident	5%
Undergraduate enrollment rates by residence	
In-state	94%
Out-of-state	4%
Foreign countries	1%
Unknown	0%
1st year retention rates	
Full-time	81%
Part-time	57%
Undergraduate graduation rates	
4-year	20%
6-year	51%
8-year	56%
Graduation rates by race	
White	50%
Black or African American	56%
Asian	55%
Hispanic or Latino	55%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	n/a
American Indian or Alaska Native	17%
Two or more races	56%
Race/ethnicity Unknown	51%
Nonresident	55%
Transfer out-rate	17%
Total Number of Staff	
All Staff	4980
Instructional Staff	1686
Student and Academic Affairs	669
State Funding	
State Appropriations (percentage of total institutional funding)	32%

Note: Selected information from the U.S. Department of Education, National

Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(2014).

Participant Background

Five interviews were conducted at Southern State University across academic and student affairs staff and administrative ranks (see Table 6). Among these interview participants, Morgan is the director of a institutional research unit, and has worked at the institution for the past 14 years. Morgan's office oversees institutional surveys, as well as a collaborative research unit focused on higher education research. Morgan is trained as an anthropologist, which is referenced often as having a significant influence on their work.

Avery transitioned into the Director role in the African American Student Resource center nine months prior to the interview. Prior to that role, they worked as smaller school within the same state system as Southern State Univeristy. Their office was focused on providing programming and services to African American students at Southern State University, particularly in support of student retention. This office is positioned with the student affairs unit.

Jordan served as the Director of the Disability Resource Office at Southern State University. They began their work in that office three years ago as an assistant director, and one year later moved into the director role. Their office worked to increase access for students with disabilities, enhance the developmental experiences of students' that use their services, and serve as a resource for other units on campus in their efforts to

accommodate students with disabilities. In addition to directing this office, Jordan also served as the Title II reporter for Southern State University.

Devin has served as the director of the first year programs office at Southern State University for the past two years, and worked as a program coordinator within the same office for three years prior to talking the director role. The first year programs office focused explicitly on student success, in service to first-year student retention. The first year programs office was housed in the academic affairs office.

Kendall worked as the director of the outreach and academic support office, which was also housed within the academic affairs office. He identified himself as a financial aid dependent, first-generation college student and a man of color. He has served as the director for the past two years, and worked at the main two-year campus within the southern state system for five years prior to taking the director role.

Table 6 illustrates the number and stakeholder representation of interview participants at Southern State University.

Table 6

Interview participants at the Southern State University

Institutional Unit/Department /Affiliation	Pseudonym and Role	Total
Student Affairs Professionals	"Jordan" Director of Disability Resource Center "Avery" Director of the Office of African-American Student Success	2
Academic Affairs	"Kendall"	2

Professionals	Assistant Director for Academic Outreach, Office of Undergraduate Education "Devin" Assistant Director for First-year Programs, Office of Undergraduate Education	
Institutional Research Staff	"Morgan" Director of the Higher Education Analytics Center & Senior Research Associate	1

In exploring administrators' perspectives at Southern State University, three dominant narratives emerged: 1) Impact on Student Success, 2) Student-centered Narratives, and 3) Institutional Tensions.

Impact on Student Success.

Comments within this narrative represent interview participants' specific accounts of student success efforts. Interview participants spoke about how they and their offices' worked to support student success. Narratives here represented a mix of direct and indirect contributions to student success. Direct contributions represent institutional programs and individual efforts that engaged students directly. Indirect contributions represent policies, structures, and professional development that sought to improve the ways departments, programs, and individuals support students' success and experiences.

Synchronized student success efforts. Senior leaders at Southern State University expected other institutional actors to have fidelity to the larger institutional conceptions of student success, consistently referred to as "retention, progression, and

graduation." Administrators' conceptions of student success were consistent across interviews, all highlighting retention, progression, and graduation, as central institutional measures. Jordan articulated this sentiment and connected it the institutional strategic plan, "So our strategic plan, I don't know if you got a chance to take a peek at that. It's pretty straightforward. Any student that comes here, they should have the right to the opportunity to succeed. So we measure that obviously by retention and progression and graduation." The strategic plan was cited as a source for a common conception of student success.

Southern State University senior leaders have provided accountability to these conceptions according to Devin, "I would say we're reminded of that if somebody's not happy with how far the needle has moved towards a higher retention rate… My boss, she's the AVP for student success… And her boss is the vice provost. So it's a pretty much a direct line [saying] that the one-year retention is not as high as we like it to." Devin alluded to expectations around supporting institutional conceptions of student success, "I would say [Southern] State defined student success as getting students in, getting them out in a reasonable amount of time – what I mean by that is at [Southern] State, one of our fires or one of our problems that we're charged to put out is to decrease time to degree."

Some interview participants expressed interest in incorporating more student-authored conceptions of student success. Additionally, Devin referenced the institution expanding its efforts to incorporate qualitative approaches:

But more and more we're also looking at how well the students feel acclimated to

the university. Do they feel that the services that they are receiving is beneficial to

them? And things like that. So what we're, we're adding the qualitative

assessment bit a lot more recently. I would say the last year and that's pretty much

the goal of this year is to bring the qualitative assessment level of the same, ah, as

a quantitative aspect of it.

Post-graduation success, articulated as employment and citizenship, was also present in

many of the narratives of administrators, but was not an explicit institutional conception

of student success. Devin continues: "So success is really measured on progression and

getting students the skills to either go on as undergraduates and to further education or

into careers that they may want or into being productive human beings."

Participants talked about their individual and office contributions to student

success in very concrete ways. All of the administrators had very specific ways they and

their offices contributed to student success. These were sometimes referenced in relation

to the efforts of other offices or units, and sometimes alluded to synchronization and

collaboration. Morgan highlighted the collaborative sentiments at Southern State

University:

…so we have this wonderful window into looking at what's going on holistically, and recognizing that student success is really a collaborative effort on the part of institutional research's faculty and our staff. It's uh, I was pointing out to someone that when they talk about student learning outcomes, it isn't just dependent on faculty, because right now its always a focus on, "Okay what did that student learn in that class—the instructors." And that custodial worker plays an important role in student learning outcomes, because if that classroom is too hot, too cold, too messy, students don't learn. Well they learn but they don't learn in ways that would be efficient. So in a real sense, everyone contributes to successful student learning outcomes and everyone in the university contributes to moving students, progressing students through.

Building on the notions of collaboration, Jordan talked about the impact of their office beyond direct student service:

And then the other way that we promote or try to influence student success is by serving as a resource to our campus. And so not only do we provide tactical support to faculty, staff and administrators, but we also provide resources. So if they're unsure of how to do something if we can't ensure they have access to the resources to possibly accommodate a student or a visitor to our campus, we ensure they have access to that. We have course provided trainings. You know

we, all sorts of things, we try to influence policies on campus as it relates to

students that are registered with—not that those that are not, because not every

student with a disability chooses to register with our office, right, but we still want

them to have that same opportunity. So those are the ways we work to influence

student success.

Contributing to a more synchronous student success effort, this and other offices

leveraged their direct student experiences to inform institutional policy and professional

development.

Student success accountability. Multiple interview participants referenced the

direct accountability they experienced from senior leaders related to their personal and

departmental contributions to student success, specifically regarding institutional

measures. Continuing the student success accountability, administrators worked to

increase the quality of the services offered in their units. This had been done particularly

through training and development of professional and student staff working directly with

students. Jordan shared an example:

… we have a coaching service that we've enhanced to improve the quality of the

service that's rendered so we actually now provide training to our TA's or

graduate assistants, as well as students that work in the office to enhance the

services that students receive to improve the quality of those services and thus the outcome of those services.

Narratives revealed that having limited financial resources also contributed to increased accountability in multiple areas of the Southern State University environment. Kendall called attention to how limited resources impacted program efficiency and performance:

So there are things that are nice to do and there are things that we kind of have to do with the funds that we have. So something that I look at a lot is are we leveraging our funds, our resources and our time efficiently? When you've got seven people in four offices running a dozen programs you can't have a dud. We just don't have the time in the day to do that. If we have a dud we fix the dud or we scrap the dud and that's it.

Limited resources contributed to increased pressure, motivated increases in quality, but also limited space for mistakes. Many administrators also talked about having to "do more with less" based on tightening budgets, and sentiments about institutional politics influencing the resource climate for particular offices or programs.

Data. There had been increasing focus on using data to inform decision-making, particularly for student success efforts. Morgan talked about the importance of this shift toward data-informed decision-making,

> You don't want to mess up anything that's working so you're going to need data on what's working but you also need data on what's not working so that you can make changes. So it's no longer intuitive gut decision making, it's more you think this wants to be changed? Why? Show me the data. And that's been an important shift.

The strategic and intentional use of data was reflected in the university's enhanced advising efforts. The shift in approach influenced policy changes and contributed to the national recognition for Southern State Univeristy, according to Morgan, "So I think that has been a really important factor in making some big policy changes here. For example, advising has gotten a lot of press lately because it's looking at predictive modeling, in terms of students. So it's a really good focus I think." As Southern State University has been using predicative analytics to enhance advising and increase student success, a number of structural changes have followed. A number of additional academic advisor positions were created, as well as a center to coordinate and support advising efforts. This strategic use of data contributed to the overall impact of student success efforts.

Devin and multiple others talked very explicitly about the importance of data in affirming their work and continuing to garner support for their programs, "…there's a lot of pressure… to show the impact our programs have." The present data culture of Southern State University was highly quantitative, evidenced by many comments about the preference of quantitative assessment. Devin went on to talk about the shift toward qualitative approaches, "As I mentioned before that the quantitative is not as big of a problem. As always, or rather in the last five years. Because before I came on board one of my charges when I was hired in this office was to increase assessment; it was really to increase the qualitative assessment." This shows how hiring decisions were also influenced by the shift toward enhanced data use.

Student-centered Narratives

Students and their experiences were a pronounced part of the narratives offered from interview participants. Administrators talked about in-state students and institutional contexts, revealing the ways that students' were considered when developing and implementing student success efforts across the institution.

State context. Southern State University is a large and complex institution, within a large and complex university system. State legislature and state policies had significant impact on internal and external context of the university. Many of the comments about state context involved students, particularly state policies and decisions, and their impact on students. Multiple administrators referenced a state-sponsored program that funds

post-secondary education for students with low-income in the state. This particular

program offered students within the state that had a demonstrated record of high

academic performance financial support to attend postsecondary institutions within the

state. Comments about this program focused on access for students and the subsequent

impact on Southern State University. Students who would otherwise not be able to afford

Southern State University gain access to education at a research university, and the

institution benefits from a more diverse population of students, specifically in terms of

race and socioeconomic status. Morgan explained:

> One of the things that [our state], I think has done right is that we have the [State]
> Scholarship, and that has opened the door for so many students who would not
> ordinarily be able to afford a university education, particularly at a research
> institution. And, also it gives kids the opportunity without having to incur large
> debts as undergrads, of course they also have to maintain a grade point average,
> so that's an incentive as well.

In addition to access for students, and diversity for the institution, this type of financial

program also offered academic accountability and supported post-collegiate success by

freeing students from loan debt. This was represented in many comments about the

impact state policy had on the institution.

Governance. There were a number of comments that suggested ways that state legislature had recently influenced Southern State University. The pending merger with a nearby community college was discussed as a decision by the state, namely the board of regents (appointed by state legislature) for the institution.

> …[the] University System… has now decided that they are going to move some of these community colleges, they're going to consolidate them into the university system in a different way. So we're now supposed to have that consolidation done and in place next fall. That means taking two separate entities, like [Southern] State University, which is a big Research I institution, and [State] College which is a community college and merging them, and that is our biggest challenge right now and it goes into student progression and student success because the definition of student success and progression at… looking at how we modify this notion of student success because it can be defined differently depending on the type of institution and when you're merging two institutions that are really different, then that will be an interesting issue for us in the future.

While there are many implications for this merger, the popular focus across interview participants was the ways that this merger would require a change in institutional conceptions of student success and subsequent approaches to supporting students.

Interview participants discussed smaller but tangible examples of the legislature's commitment to student success support. As the institution worked to enhance their advising efforts, the board of regents decided to contribute financially by allocating funds to support the creation of the centralized advising center at Southern State University.

Student Profile. Within the institution, student centered narratives were also present, particularly in discussion of the student profile at Southern State University. Student profile was discussed from a number of perspectives. Morgan talked about the importance of considering students' previous experiences when deciding how to support them in college, based on their personal experiences as an instructor:

> I think for me one of the more frustrating things as an instructor was having students who came out of poor performing high schools and they were in a classroom with students that came from really great high schools and they were already starting - I mean in their first semesters, they were starting back. So it's being able to get those kids up front too, and we cannot as a university control, the high schools and the programs that they have. So it's really important that we understand.

This emphasized the importance of understanding who students are, what they need, and why, to more intentionally inform student success efforts. It also suggested how Morgan has drawn on previous experiences with students to inform current efforts.

Avery compared the Southern State University student profile to that of other research institutions in their state, "…many of their students come from out of state, you know. We still attract a lot of our in-state students… we really pride ourselves on keeping a majority of our students." Further comments suggested that the pride mentioned, translated to more nuanced understanding and passion for supporting students. This and many other similar comments revealed a desire to understand students' needs more deeply. Interview participants from Southern State University were intentional in considering the ways that students' profiles influenced their support needs. Interview participants express curiosity and reflection on how to better understand students' needs, in the areas where they did not have concrete answers or understanding of how to support.

Jordan introduced some perceptions of student characteristics, specifically the grit and resilience of students at Southern State University as articulated by colleagues:

…I was in a meeting today and there—someone said to me, that the [Southern] State student was once described as scrappy. But not as in a negative sense, but in the sense that they're fighters. They may get hit in the mouth but they're not going to lay down and stay there. [Note: Laughs] And I was like yeah so that would describe the most, not all, but many of the students that I have worked with in my time here. [Note: Laughs]

This comment invited additional characteristics beyond the standard consideration of students' social identity and previous academic performance. Understanding how students responded to challenge, in this case, informed how administrators developed support for students.

Student profile, as a part of institutional context, was discussed by Devin as key to successfully adopting other institutions' approaches to supporting student success:

…the efforts that other schools have done that are very successful may not work here. That doesn't mean that they're not good, that we can't be, you know, adapting them, but we need to be aware – can that be implemented here? And, will it work with our student population? Or, how can we make it work if we have to make it work with our student population? And, I think that if you don't understand who our students are or the resources we have where we are; if you don't have a good grasp of that, I don't care how good the program was at the University of X. It, it's not going to work [here].

Resources were also mentioned in the previous quote and in many of the comments shared by administrators during interviews. Interview participants conveyed the scarcity of resources, especially money, and that access to resources was political and required strategy and quantitative data. The resource landscape at Southern State University emerged as an important component of student success efforts.

Financial support. Participants at Southern State University were increasingly concerned about the financial pressures students faced, and considered how their respective work could be attentive to these pressures. Devin framed the need for good academic advising as an issue of affordability, suggesting that better advising increases students' efficiency in navigating degree attainment:

> So from an academic side every course you take matters. Every class you register for is precious. Your major decision has to be solidified sooner rather than later because it is too expensive now days to kind of have an exploratory, meandering academic journey. It's too expensive to change your major four times. It's too expensive to withdraw from any class. Every class counts. So you need to have great advising.

This perspective aligned with trends across higher education to support students in reducing their time to degree. This sentiment is in tension with some notions of liberal arts education, particularly the conflicting values of exploration.

Jordan talked about an emergency financial support fund that was created to remove barriers for student success, particularly as students near graduation:

> So institutionally we have employed a variety of data analytics to determine what our students, what are some of the barriers to our students actually graduating.

And we've implemented practices to respond to those barriers and as we, at all

possible, remove them. For many students that attend [Southern] State as with

most you know one of the biggest barriers there are – financial. And so I know

several students who… Couldn't get any more student loans. One class to go and

they received what's called a Stop Gap Grant from the university. And they were

able to graduate.

This perspective invited a more nuanced perspective of student's financial challenges.

Specifically at Southern State Univeristy, through the use of data, they identified that

financial challenges came at pivotal times in students' academic career and interruptd

their progression or graduation. Kendall also spoke to the gap funding, "We'll put them

through some financial literacy training on the back end and we'll have them have, fulfill

some requirements… That was an idea. And we scaled it. And now we're in the millions

of dollars that we're warding out of that program." The gap funding was used to support

student success in the short term, and as a tool for accountability regarding financial

literacy. Students were required to engage in financial literacy training to help them better

navigate the funding systems at the institution. Additionally, Kendall spoke to the growth

of the initiative from a small pilot program into a full-scale university program, which

was supported by use of data collected about the program.

The office lead by Kendall, acknowledged the intersection of financial aid and academic success and worked to support students to that end. In the explanation it was suggested that such an approach is not common:

> …we're moving into the space where finance is, the other side of the academic coin that oftentimes we overlook in higher education, where finances are being addressed. So we have a scholarship resource center that is actually housed at the academic affairs unit, which is atypical. We're going to bring online in the spring a financial literacy center. Also too, it's probably going to be housed at the academic side, which is atypical. So we could draw the connection between your academic and your financial decisions and how you can progress in earning that degree satisfying both of those…

Kendall attributed Southern State University's growing consideration of financial implications on student success as a response to students' changing financial needs:

> As we've progressed through the years, and this is not unique to our institution, we're finding more and more and more where students are in need of finances. Or are coming in with bigger amounts of money they need depending more on things like PELL or state run scholarship programs. So if anything, the changing

demographic of our student or rather the progression of their financial needs has

sparked what we do.

Coordinated approach. Avery referenced a shared aspiration for student affairs

units:

What we've done under the Dean of Students umbrella that includes my office,

office of disability service and the multicultural center. What we've said we want

to do, we want to be a part of our mission is we want to create this culture of care.

And so in doing that we want to do it in terms of access, in terms of equity and in

terms of inclusion. So that's kind of our tagline, I guess, if you will. Building a

culture of care and the three objectives that we do that are, equity, access, and

inclusion. So for us that's paramount.

These units were working collectively to cultivate a supportive culture in a student-

centered way.

The Southern State University central administration drove shared conceptions of

student success directly and indirectly through the university strategic plan. The strategic

plan was rarely referenced directly in participants' narratives, but many of their narratives

reference accountability and goal setting in relation to, "retention, progression, and

graduation" which is articulated in the strategic plan. These references were congruent

with the Southern State University strategic plan, paying specific attention to the ways

that it influenced their respective work directly. Departing from a shared conception,

participants also talked about how their works fits with that of others, and the importance

of collaboration to support student success based on more specific department goals.

Institutional Tensions

    Position and scope of institutional actors. A number of narratives spoke to one

or more of the various student success stakeholders at Southern State University and how

their position in the institution expanded or limited their perspective and influence related

to student success initiatives. Kendall shared his perspective:

> But to me at this level someone who is on the ground and talking to students has
>
> more access and in that regard has more credibility in that regard. Because you
>
> are talking to students, you are dealing with students every single day, you know
>
> what they need in order to be successful. You know what works, what doesn't.
>
> Are they happy? Are they unhappy? What are they unhappy about? Or are there
>
> things that they complain about that we can do about something? That's
>
> something that upper administration personally who doesn't deal with students on
>
> a regular basis may not have access to you know. They can be very aware of the
>
> politics and may be very aware about the power players and resources and things
>
> like that, but that on the ground level they may not have access.

The role of institutional actors that work directly with students is highlighted here, specifically the ways in which their experiences offer rich and nuanced understanding of the student experience. It also called attention to distance between some administrators and the daily lived experiences of students, and their utility in navigating policies and resources.

Student experiences. Morgan introduced the usefulness of student voice in a short story shared about a glitch in a survey run out of the institutional research office:

> I believe it was 2011, they were changing demographic labels… so we began to look at our demographics a lot closer and we found that we had a significant number of students coming in to Southern State University who did not indicate their race or ethnicity…. So administrators were walking around going, 'Oh well we must have resistance forming' or this or that, and they had all these explanations. So finally I told our director, 'hello why don't we just ask them? Why did you decide not to tell us your race or ethnicity? Let's just ask the students, instead of making these suggestions we had no clue about.' So we sent out a qualitative survey… And I'm reading statements like, "I'm proud of my race, of course I told you." Or, "[Southern State] needs to know who I am, I don't have a problem." but I'm looking at our data warehouse and they're saying, "No they didn't. It was not reported." And I'm thinking, this doesn't jive, what is going on here? So we went to the records and we began to look at their

application forms and they actually had told us their race and ethnicity but there

was a glitch in the system that didn't download it so it was coming back

unreported, if they filled out a particular application form online. So here we had

administrators suggesting, that it's this and it's this and it's this. Ask the students.

Just ask them and in this case we found that there was an error in the process.

Actually a processing error. It had nothing to do with resistance.

This was an example of how student voice, particularly in the form of qualitative

assessment data, was a necessity. It was also a depiction of the range of speculation that

is invited by the lack of student voice, and limited data sources and types. Devin

highlighted the value student voice had in understanding student success:

I was reading scholarships and one of the prompts was, "Are you satisfied with

your GPA?" And we had students at a 3.6 who are unhappy with their GPA. They

want it to be higher. And we had a student with a 2.8 who was like ecstatic about

his GPA and he was very happy. He was a successful student; because of where

he came from in terms of you know high school and what his GPA was and that

he adapted. He, he feels more connected to the university. So he's a successful

student. You know but they're both very successful students, but one say that I'm

not doing as well as the other. But yet their GPA is—tells a very different picture.

So to me, that's where I am, that's how I look at it, yeah.

Comments from interview participants highlighted the utility of student voice in enhancing and informing institutional actors' understandings, particularly in making sense of data collected from students.

Research and Data use. Southern State University was a data-rich environment, with increasing focus on data-informed decisions. Multiple of the participants interviewed, attributed this data-orientation to the research environment at Southern State University. Although the strong data-orientation of the institution seemed common to interview participants, contention emerged about which kinds of data were valuable.

Southern State University administrators all referenced "retention, progression, and graduation" as the guiding institutional conception of student success. This articulation of student success in traditionally quantitative measures reflects an high reliance quantitative data, which was mentioned explicitly by some of the interview participants. Kendall to the bias of this phenomena in his comment:

> There's not anything here we do that we don't assess, we don't grade, we don't score, we don't measure, we don't historically take a look at. I mean if we can't assess it and we can't quantify it, it doesn't matter. That's just kind of the culture that we have here. Again, the qualitative piece is nice, the stories are great, but if we can't put it on a spreadsheet, if we can't put it in access, if we can't put a

graph around it, it didn't happen. And that's just kind of the way it goes. That's

just the culture that we have here.

Other interview participants also identified the preference of quantitative data at the

institution, but Kendall asserted the institutional value of quantifiable data and the

decreased relevance of qualitative information. This comment was representative of the

tension around data and access to resources. Devin was among the interview participants

who call attention to the data hierarchy, but also suggested an institutional shift toward

qualitative information, "…one of my charges when I was hired in this office was to

increase assessment, it was really to increase the qualitative assessment." The

perspectives offered from Devin and Kendall called into questions the institutional

culture on qualitative and quantitative data.

      The competency of departments and individuals around data and assessment also

contributed to some of the tensions at the institution. Avery expressed frustrations with

the impact of assessment:

      It's interesting… I think assessment is a great tool, but I'm a firm believer that if

      you're not trying to change it then why are you assessing it? You know, if you're

      not going to do something with it then why are you assessing it? Just, are we

      assessing for the sake of assessing, because that's what they say we should do? Or

      are you really trying to effect change, so if you're not trying to effect change then

I don't really see the point in assessing, to be quite honest. You know a lot of times we assess for the sake of assessing and you know when end up with all these great pretty reports with graphs and all this stuff and they get stuck on bookshelves and collect dust, or in old file cabinets and no one ever looks at it.

This introduced tensions in the application of data collected from assessment. Beyond the varying data preferences of people within the institution, there were also challenges in acting on the data collected. The student affairs unit at Southern State University was actively working to address these challenges through collaboration with a third-party company. According to Avery, this third-party company helped student affairs units keep track of assessment data, met with department leaders quarterly to check in about students' progress with learning outcomes, and offered training on assessment.

Amidst the efforts to build capacity within the unit, Avery refered to assessment challenges associated with the larger student affairs field, "You know so, it's a double-edged sword. I kind of have a love hate relationship it, but I just really wish that we would really finally, and I say we as student affairs the entire profession would get a better grasp on that, and how we really make assessment purposeful." It seems that Southern State University set clear expectations around the role of data and research in supporting student success, but there was some variation in individuals' perspectives on those expectations, and their capacity to meet them.

Resources and politics. The resource landscape at Southern State University grew increasingly political as budgets shrank according to several of the participants interviewed. Morgan outlined this, "Oh I think the big shared frustration would have to be resource acquisition. You know we are subject to budget just like every other entity in the state, so there's always going to be that issue of, you know, how do we acquire these resources to support a program. So that will always be an issue I think." Comments from interview participants highlighted increased accountability as one of the consequences of limited resources. Accountability was accomplished by positioning data-usage as the litmus to secure or sustain funding.

Political influence emerged as a factor to resource acquisition. Devin drew a direct relationship between the influence of individuals and departments and their access to funding, "I think it really depends by which area because I think at a large university there are a lot of still silos. You know like, who is over overseeing what? And who is more politically strong and then gets a little bit more money? So yeah." Included here was the notion that certain programs or departments may be more likely to receive funding, possibly based on their alignment with the strategic plan or with decision makers' priorities.

As mentioned above, academic units were more inclined to receive funding, compared to student affairs units, according to several of the interview participants. Devin spoke to this, "…if academic [affairs] has more power, then student affairs may be left a little bit behind. You know they may not get as much resources or as much respect

and things like that." Power and influence were variable based on how resources were

allocated across student-focused units, usually in favor of academic affairs units. Devin

goes on to say, "student success… on an academic level it's easy to measure… Other

offices also contribute to student level, student success… but it's not as easily

quantifiable…" This sentiment represents the affinity toward quantitative data when

allocating resources, and suggests that academic affairs benefited from having outcomes

that were more measurable. Mounting difficulties result for student affairs departments

who are at earlier stages of developing their assessment functions, institutionally. Avery

explained:

> You know, so that's good to have and I think those are some of the frustrations
>
> people have and a lot of it is that people just don't know. They don't know how to
>
> assess. They just haven't been taught that you know, whether that was in school
>
> or on their jobs or whatever, they haven't been taught it or taught the value of it.
>
> You know, and so when you don't have that framework it's difficult to try and
>
> implement that in your work.

While there were comments from Devin and Jordan about the expansion of qualitative

assessment efforts, Southern State University was still more oriented toward quantitative

data. This translated to some departments and units experiencing more difficulty in

affirming their programs and sustaining funding.

The nature of resource allocation at Southern State University also impacted the future work of departments. Even when budgets are not reduced, departments were expected to increase their output using the same amount of resources. Devin articulated this tension:

> So the frustration sometimes is that, you know, we've been kind of like the victims of our own success... '…these 100 students did great in your program, now we're going to have 200 students in your program.' And the expectation is that they do [just] as well [even though] you know, you double the number of students who participate in this program. That is frustrating when you know we need more resources. So the lack of resources is a big issue. It's probably the biggest issue.

Devin built on this tension, asserting that offices or departments with tightening resources have decreased capacity to adapt to the changing needs of students, "I think other offices who may not have as much resources may not have… the ability to make the change[s]…" Even if some offices at Southern State University were able to maintain their financial support, increasing expectations make it difficult to serve students now and in the future.

Summary

Impact on student success, student-centered narratives, and tensions emerged as dominant narratives at Southern State University. The impact of student success reflected the ways the institution and actors within it were working to drive student success. Conceptions of student success were discussed but rarely debated, which reflected the consistency and synchronization of student success conceptions across the institution.

Student-centered narratives highlighted the various areas where robust student-centered commentary emerged. Interview participants referenced students in relation to state context, institutional governance, financial support, and other coordinated approaches.

A number of tensions emerged throughout the narratives of interview participants. The position and scope of institutional actors, student experiences, research and data use, and resources and politics were the most explicit or most discussed areas of tension. The tensions that emerged addressed a number of challenges including, limited understandings of the student experience, keeping up with changing student profiles and needs, and working with limited access to resources and data.

Chapter Five: Bridges to Theory and Practice

Organization of Themes

This study began with the intention of exploring how institutions dedicated to improving student success explore, adopt, apply, and evaluate research knowledge and best practice to enhance student success efforts. Participants brought forth narratives that positioned the institution as an important intermediary. The data presented in chapter four represents the dominant narratives that emerged at each institution, and offers a vivid and local picture of the student success landscape at the institutions included in this study. Chapter five seeks to interrogate and interpret those narratives through the organizational learning lens outlined in chapter two. Additionally, excerpts from select narratives from chapter four will be examined using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Chapter five is organized into three sections, 1) a reintroduction to the study and key concepts of the conceptual framework, 2) presentation of emergent themes by case and CDA of select excerpts each case, and 3) a cross-case analysis, discussion and implications. Themes are organized in categories based on the organizational learning conceptual framework. These themes are most closely, but not exclusively associated with their respective categories, with many of the themes contributing to multiple organizational learning categories. The cross-case analysis incorporates both thematic and critical discourse elements from each of case to offer a comprehensive summary of the study.

Conceptual Framework Revisited

The results from this study are interpreted through the conceptual framework outlined in detail in chapter two. The core elements are briefly summarized below and include Presence of New Ideas, Cultivation of Doubt, and Knowledge Transfer.

Presence of New Ideas. Scholars have identified the presence of new ideas and new perspectives as vital to organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005) This manifests in institutional culture and individuals' interpretive processes (Bauman, 2005). Levitt and March (1988) assert that institutional structure is also important to consider. Learning can come from individuals, subunits, the organization itself, as well as those outside of the organization (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). The presence of new ideas and perspectives requires a comprehensive understanding of where and whom these ideas and perspectives can come from. Presence of New Ideas is comprised of a number of explicit dispositions and approaches: experimentation (Levitt & March, 1988), double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005), and collective inquiry (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). The presence of new ideas is the foundation for learning, but is also important to note that not every new idea is guaranteed to yield learning (Bauman, 2005).

Cultivation of Doubt. Cultivation of doubt is represented in the work of institutional actors to openly question existing practices and challenging commonly held knowledge, with the goal of organizational improvement (Bauman, 2005). Cultivation of

doubt is guided by the idea of "past as a pest" whereby individuals in organizations view routines, norms, rules, and cultures as mutable and open to challenge (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). Double-loop is also a useful strategy promoting the cultivation of doubt, as the process involves challenging initial observations and underlying assumptions (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Theories-in-use is another concept within cultivation of doubt, whereby individuals and organizations examine how congruent their actions are with their espoused values and beliefs (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005). Cultivation of doubt also supports Kezar's (2005) perspective of organizational learning a key contributor to a larger collaborative and socially constructed learning pedagogy, challenging traditional positional hierarchies in higher education that may inhibit learning.

Knowledge Transfer. Organizations must find ways to capture, store, disseminate, and interpret knowledge for that knowledge to actually be useful. This transfer of knowledge occurs in organizational learning occurs across two dimensions, "…the systems-structural dimension, which focuses on the acquisition and distribution of information, and the interpretive dimension, which involves the interpretation of that information" (Bauman, 2005, p. 30). Additionally Kezar (2005) offers additional ways of conceptualizing organizational learning that align with knowledge transfer, namely the knowledge management and human resource management perspectives of organizational learning. Institutional onus is also import for organizational learning, according to Bensimon (2005).

There are a number of strategies that emerge from organizational learning literature, on how best to facilitate knowledge transfer. Communities of practice thrive on situated learning, whereby members are thoroughly immersed and engaged in the inquiry, as opposed to passive consumers and reporters of others' findings (Bauman, 2005). Communities of practice build on the Bensimon and Neumann (1993) notion of real (versus illusory) teams. Organizational memory is one the ways organizations accumulate, store, and disseminate the knowledge and experiences of individuals (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988).

Organizational learning literature also offers a number of potential threats to knowledge transfer. Overload is the presence of too much data, such that institutions cannot effectively process and interpret all that is collected (Bauman, 2005). Competence traps appear most commonly as "…favorable performance with an inferior procedure leads an organization to accumulate more experience with it, thus keeping experience with a superior procedure inadequate to make it rewarding to use" (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 322). Similar to competency traps; defensive reasoning is when individuals or organizations continue with a course of action to avoid the risk of failure associated with an alternative path (Kezar, 2005). Superstitious learning is a frequent occurrence where inferences are drawn from subjective experiences, taken as objective, which results in the inhibition of learning (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Midwest State University

Presence of New Ideas

Theme 1: Decentralization for new ideas. Culturally, decentralization at Midwest State University supports the Presence of New Ideas. New ideas that emerged from all levels of the institution were celebrated and welcome, aligning with the ecological view of organizational learning asserted by Levitt and March (1988). Structurally, however, new ideas require resources and quantitative backing to be put into practice, which were not accessible by all levels of Midwest State University. Decentralization supports the emergence of new ideas and simultaneously limits which ideas were actually institutionalized. This suggests that many of the changes that happen at the institution, regardless of where they originate, are driven from the top down. The top down approach engenders reluctance and hesitation from lower levels of the organization, evidenced by advisors' reluctance to support the predictive modeling initiative at Midwest State University. It seems that everyone is invited to craft new ideas but only ideas that fit within the decentralized structure, and have resource backing will survive translation into practice. At Midwest State University, decentralization contributes to the presence and variety of new ideas, but inhibits the possibility of which ideas were put into practice.

Theme 2: Decentralized conceptions of student success. The absence of a consistent understanding and coordinated approach to student success reflects sentiments from Bensimon (2007) and is attributed to decentralization. This lack of coordination is discussed as a tension at Midwest State University, but also indirectly contributed to the Presence of New Ideas. The lack of coordination allowed for the emergence of a variety of conceptions of student success that depart form the institutional measures of retention and graduation. The emergence of these conceptions represents openness to new ideas as asserted by Bauman (2005). A resistance to retention and graduation rates as the sole indicators of student success also emerged and was discussed explicitly by several interview participants. This resistance, however, led to the emergence of new ideas to challenge these indicators. The emergence of these new ideas is congruent with double loop learning, as institutional actors engaged in reflection and investigation to expand what student success means, and for whom (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005)**.**

Theme 3: New understandings about supporting students. The space for new ideas to emerge allows for increased focus on populations that had been overlooked or underserved. Undergraduate students were a growing focus in some participants' conceptions of student success. Double-loop leaning done by individual institutional actors led to increasingly student-centered considerations in the advancement student success, namely more holistic and student-generated conceptions of student success. Double-loop learning on the part of institutional actors sets the stage for collective

inquiry, driven by the institution. Bensimon (2005) defines collective inquiry as a group of individuals within an organization working collectively to investigate an issue on behalf of the organization. The student success taskforce at Midwest State University, comprised of mid- and senior leaders from academic affairs and student affairs, and one undergraduate student, was a prime example of this inquiry. Increasingly sophisticated and student-centered understandings of student success at Midwest State emerged as a result of this inquiry. The student representative on this taskforce was cited for offering perspectives that helped to enrich taskforce interpretations of student success, specifically that students' cared most about the experiences that would get them a job after graduation. This supports the premise of double-loop learning and collective inquiry.

   Theme 4: Cultivating buy-in to new ideas and approaches. Efforts to increase data use through predictive analytics led to new approaches to undergraduate student advising. In efforts to increase Knowledge Transfer, new ideas and new possibilities for supporting student success emerged. As Midwest State University worked to bring their predictive analytics model to life, administrators were met with resistance from parts of the academic advising community. This resistance represents a lack of openness to new ideas, rooted in advisors' perspectives of the utility of predictive analytics. Administrators engaged in double-loop learning to gain a deeper understanding of advisors' reluctance by working collectively to anticipate advisors' apprehensions and challenges. Those new understandings were used to craft a strategy to cultivate buy-in with advisors.

Exploring the Presence of New Ideas concept at Midwest State University revealed areas of the institution that were not open to new ideas. Midwest State University faculty members were identified as a group reluctant to embrace new ideas, particularly regarding student new teaching approaches to support success. Faculty reluctance is representative of the competence trap concept: "…favorable performance with an inferior procedure leads an organization to accumulate more experience with it, thus keeping experience with a superior procedure inadequate to make it rewarding to use" (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 322). Traditional, sometimes ineffective, teaching approaches from faculty were maintained instead of exploring new approaches that had been demonstrated to contribute to student success. Administrators working for the teaching and learning center viewed faculty resistance as a result of competing priorities for faculty, namely research productivity and tenure promotion. This emerged in how new tenure-track faculty were socialized in some departments, where more senior faculty encouraged them to prioritize research productivity over quality teaching.

To stimulate openness to new ideas for teaching that supports student success, administrators at Midwest State University created faculty specific incentives, including grants, training, and communities of practice. These efforts are congruent Kezar's (2005) view of human resource management as a strategy for organizational learning. Kezar (2005) says that investment in the aspirations of individuals, builds their capacity to work on behalf of the organization. Administrators at Midwest State leveraged this strategy to cultivate participants' buy-in to new teaching approaches. The small but growing body of

faculty engaged in these communities of practice was cited for improving their teaching strategies, according to the center for teaching and learning staff. Communities of practice are a common strategy for the Knowledge Transfer, but here, are employed to stimulate openness to new ideas for teaching and learning. Communities of practices are deemed ideal for addressing faculty socialization or reluctance, as they create a space to facilitate understanding around the utility of new approaches to teaching (Bauman, 2005).

Theme 5: New staff, new faculty, and new ideas. New faculty and staff were important to the Presence of New Ideas, congruent with the human resource management perspective of organizational learning from Kezar (2005). Participants from Midwest State University looked to changes in personnel as opportunities for institutional change, namely through new information being brought into the organization, or new approaches to leading change efforts. After outlining the areas of growth around assessment in some student affairs units, Aubrey said "…we have a new director of [Multicultural Student Affairs]… and I know that is on his radar screen, to do better assessment..." This is an example of how new staff, particularly administrators, have been tasked with leading change as they transition into Midwest State University. This is also an example the Birnbaum (1988) policy-windows concept, where changing staff or leadership is viewed as a ripe opportunity to create change.

Multiple participants focused attention on the informal socialization that new faculty receive as they transition into their respective departments, likely through solicited and unsolicited advice. To disrupt this, the transition of new faculty was used to:

1) interrupt the messages received from some tenured faculty that were divergent form the ethos of student success, and 2) stimulate openness and interest of the new and aspiring faculty members in advancing student success approaches. This approach demonstrates how administrators value and promote openness to new ideas to promote organizational learning. A number of structured programs were created and initiated to interrupt and guide the socialization of new and aspiring faculty. Participants, working most closely with faculty, spoke to the promise of instilling values and skills that support student success in aspiring faculty. This approach is thought to drive a shift in faculty culture across higher education, toward being more supportive and engaged with student success efforts. Supporting the development of institutional actors in coordinated and future-focused ways is a promising approach to driving change in institutional culture.

Cultivation of Doubt

   Theme 6: Challenging and complicating dominant conceptions. Cultivation of doubt emerged very clearly in participants' perspectives on student success at Midwest State University. The faculty members, staff, and administrators interviewed, all called attention to 1) the limitations of quantitative institutional measures (retention, graduation, GPA) as the dominant institutional conception of student success, and 2) the variability and incongruence of student success perspectives across the institution, congruent with sentiments from Bensimon (2007). These sentiments led to double-loop learning on the part of some institutional actors, as they actively explored the utility of student-authored

conceptions and qualitative measures of student success. Double-loop learning here happened when institutional actors questioned institutional practices, and acted on those questions to gain deeper understandings.

Participants called into question Midwest State University's espoused commitment to student success, representing theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005). They challenged quantitative institutional measures, in favor of more student-centered considerations of student success, and even invited student-authored definitions of student success. The absence of student perspectives in interpreting data was made clear by Morgan and Jaime in their stories about how new, previously absent, student perspectives enriched their understandings of data and subsequent decision-making. In these instances, double-loop learning supports cultivation of doubt by challenging traditional institutional perspectives and hierarchies (Kezar, 2005).

The position of individuals within institutions was salient when exploring the various conceptions of student success at Midwest State University. Certain conceptions of student success were perceived to be associated with individuals' positions within the institution: faculty, student affairs, academic affairs, senior leadership, etc. This understanding contributed to focused efforts and initiatives designed to influence or drive individuals' conceptions of student success. For example, aspiring faculty members' participation in faculty development programming was intentionally used to cultivate an affinity for supporting student success before they entered the professoriate.

Pushing past the frustrations that were present due to the lack of coordination, some participants explored the value in having varied, synchronized conceptions of student success. Participants recognized the utility of having conceptions that align with institutional actors' respective functional areas. Shannon suggested that the conceptions of student success be networked together in a way that capitalizes on the variety of foci across the institution. This suggests a socially constructed view of knowledge, congruent with Kezar (2005): "…everyone on campus – faculty, administrators, staff, and students – sees their role as a part of a process of organizational learning in the creation of a rich learning environment" (p. 19).

Theme 7: Diversifying data to expand understandings. Midwest State University had a number of persistent and emergent routines involving quantitative data usage. The persistent routines were related to the institutional measures (retention, graduation, and grade point average) that were relied on to track student success efforts. These measures had been tracked systematically over time. These routines represent a threat to organizational learning, if they are not regularly reviewed to ensure their relevance and utility. These trends relate to the accountability measures institutional actors had to navigate to get approval or continued support for new programs supporting student success.

Critiques of the quantitative data preference are an example of double-loop learning (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). Institutional actors experienced limitations in the utility of quantitative data in helping guide and enhance their student

success efforts. Many participants called for more broad perspectives to be used, particularly in decision-making around student success efforts. For example, Avery said:

> "…if a student graduates and they are not happy with their experience but they just got out… or they graduated in a profession and they are like 'you know I really did not even want to do this, but I was stuck in it and had to finish. I don't know what I'm going to do' from a career perspective. They met our numerical success measure, but do they feel successful?

This highlights the fact that students can be represented as "successful" in quantifiable ways but may not be satisfied, and that dissatisfaction would not be captured or represented. Such a shift challenges the quantitative data routines that have propagated over time, and even those that are emerging (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). This is an example of the ecological approach to organizational learning, whereby institutional actors interrogate and shape the path of organizational routines and processes (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). Understanding the limitations that arise from homogeneous data may also help institutional actors to interrogate previous efforts' failures, leading to new perspectives on historical accounts and approaches, in line with the "past as pest" concept that guides Cultivation of Doubt (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988).

Midwest State University used a third-party data analysis company to support their application of predicative data analytics for undergraduate academic advising.

Theme 6 and Theme 7 also contribute to Knowledge Transfer, specifically the systems-structural and interpretative dimensions; "…the systems-structural dimension, which focuses on the acquisition and distribution of information, and the interpretive dimension, which involves the interpretation of that information" (Bauman, 2005, p. 30). Increasing the depth and complexity of the types of data collected can contribute the overall capacity of an organization to apply data and research knowledge in decision-making.

Knowledge Transfer

   Theme 8: Enhanced data consumption to improve student success practices.
Decentralization emerges as an obstacle to Knowledge Transfer. Midwest State University did well with the acquisition and distribution of information, supporting the systems-structural dimension of Knowledge Transfer. Institutional challenges emerged when considering the interpretation of information acquired. Specifically, Midwest State University suffered from overload, identified by Bauman (2005) as a threat to organizational learning. Overload is an organizations' inability to consume and analyze the data that it collects (Bauman, 2005). This was attributed to the size of the institution, the volume of student-data by Brook who said, "We are data rich and information poor…no one can really take the time and sit and look at the data…" This comment explicitly identified their challenge to translate data into usable information. The data analytics company mentioned above was contracted to analyze a huge store of data and develop a predictive model, using archived data, to inform academic advising efforts.

This is an example of efforts to increase the interpretive dimension of knowledge transfer. In support of this effort, Midwest State University also worked to centralize the coordination of advising efforts to create consistency in the use of predicative analytics in advising across campus.

Theme 9: Navigating decentralization to enhance student success. Multiple participants attributed challenges in enhancing student success efforts to the decentralized structure, particularly the lack of a common or coordinated vision for student success at Midwest State University. This relates to the systems-structural dimension of Knowledge Transfer, as there was no specific, coordinated, documented, and accessible definitions or conceptions of student success offered by the institution. The interpretive dimension of Knowledge Transfer emerged as well, represented by presence of various, unsynchronized, and sometimes competing conceptions of student success. These challenges resulted in calls for synchronization from multiple participants. Synchronization could take many forms, including challenging individuals or units within the institution to more intentionally explore the lack of coordination in this area.

Communities of practice were thoughtfully employed to mitigate decentralization, and enhance synchronization in Midwest State University's efforts to improve student success. A student success taskforce was created with members of academic affairs, student affairs, institutional research, and students, to work as a research team and clearinghouse for student success efforts. The taskforce began to address the challenges faced by student success efforts, largely dealing with decentralization. This is also an

example of collective inquiry, as the diverse group of institutional actors was tasked with

investigating student success, and supporting or implementing initiatives to enhance

student success. The structure, composition, and frequency of taskforce contributed to a

robust interpretative function, as members were challenged to spend time understanding

research and data to inform the decisions of the taskforce. Institutional actors' accounts of

the taskforce are supported several sets of meeting minutes, provided by Aubrey.

Theme 10: Quantitative data driven culture. There was a strong orientation

toward the collection and use of quantitative data to affirm the promise of emerging

initiatives, and to measure the success of current institutional efforts. This aligns with the

system-structural dimension of Knowledge Transfer. Retention and graduation rates

were the dominant conception of student success offered by senior leadership. Some

participants affirmed the utility of quantitative data, particularly for the ease in collection

of data and communication of findings. Institutional measures such as retention and

graduation rates were also valued because they allowed for comparison with other

institutions. Institutional comparison represents Cultivation of Doubt, as national

discourses on student success induce institutional comparison through rankings and other

measures. Tracking these measures fit with double-loop learning, as institutions

continually examined and challenged their performance against these measures. This

helps to differentiate individual and institutional double-loop learning. Individual double-

loop learning emerges when institutional actors reflect on and challenge their own mental

maps and assumptions. Institutional double-loop learning occurs when institutional actors

or institutional entities engage in processes to more deeply understand institutional phenomena.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The excerpts used were selected from the interview transcripts analyzed using critical discourse analysis. Excerpts are from one or multiple dominant narratives from Midwest State University, presented in Chapter 4; Conceptions of Student Success, Research and Data Use, and Student Success Tensions. Potential excerpts were identified during the coding phase of analysis. The dominant narratives that emerged helped to narrow the group of potential excerpts. The final excerpts used for analysis were selected based on their connection to discourses on organizational learning and student success. The application of CDA is used to elicit a more nuanced understanding of the narratives as well as explore the potential of CDA as methodological approach to studying student success issues in higher education. A transcription of the excerpts used here can be found in Appendix E.

Excerpts from Conceptions of Student Success Narrative. The samples taken from the Conceptions of Student Success narrative, offers additional perspectives that complement the emergent themes above. Theme 1 in the previous section highlights the lack of consistent definitions of student success across the institution. Institutional actors also seemed to understand, value, and articulate student success in different ways. Coordinated approaches to student success were attributed to decentralization. The tone

and lexical of choice of these samples expands on the "inconsistency" that emerged in Theme 1. Language like "hodgepodge" and "puzzle" used by Shannon, convey the disorganized, chaotic, and potentially confusing nature of student success efforts at Midwest State University. In this particular context, the "hodgepodge" of student success efforts is seen as inhibiting institutional efforts to support student success, yielding sentiments of chaos. The tone and presupposition in a comment form Shannon suggested that some ignored the chaotic nature of student success, "…let's at least acknowledge that we are working with different definitions." Larger decentralization discourses were referenced to make allowance for the "hodgepodge" of definitions, but an overall sentiment of complacency and negligence emerged. The use of tone and insinuation by Shannon supports this claim as student success seemed to be an institutional buzz-word, lacking clear and consistent meaning, "But it kinda stops at, lets just say 'student success' and everyone just kinda fills in the blank with what that means [to them]."

Conceptions of student success were represented similarly in the perspectives of other institutional actors. Avery, a new senior level administrator, affirmed his contribution to student success while acknowledging an overarching lack of direction, "…we don't really know where we are going. We are doing well but we don't know where we are going to do better. I consider myself part of that, even though I haven't been here long, you know, I need to drive that agenda." Agency emerges in the awareness and openness of this administrator, as they immediately acknowledged and took ownership of the issue. Comments from Jaime, who works extensively to support teaching practices of

faculty, added depth to the "chaotic" sentiments above by referencing interests that need

to be considered in the move toward alignment, namely faculty, students, departments,

and the university as a whole. The comment presupposes the each of these groups has

different and likely conflicting needs and interests. In calling for alignment, Jaime said,

"You don't get there quickly, you have to gather the data that way too." This statement

suggests a slow pace of change, the necessity for data, and is taken as an absolute based

on the register and tone employed.

   Excerpts from Student Success Tensions narrative. The following excerpts

focused on faculty, and are found within the Student Success Tensions narrative. A

number of comments from interview participants positioned student success efforts in

opposition with faculty members' success using a "life and death" as an analogy. The

institution seemingly relinquished responsibility for student success by placing it on

faculty – having to choose life (research, writing, tenure) or death (quality teaching). The

use of "faculty" is taken to mean tenure-track, particularly pre-tenure faculty members.

This analogy is a false dichotomy that emerges from the culture of the institution and is

reinforced by faculty and others. Jaime used hyperbole to convey a dire tension between

student success and faculty success at research institutions, "We want them to do well in

the classroom but also don't want them to, at a research university, commit professional

suicide." The use of "suicide" connotes despair, hopelessness, and victimization and

places agency on the faculty members. This comment suggest that "we" (the institution

and members acting on behalf of the institution) want quality teaching, but

sympathetically, do not want to force faculty to "kill" themselves, professionally. Interdiscursivity emerges as this, and similar comments, referenced national discourses on faculty expectations at American research universities.

Devin and Jaime both worked in the center for teaching and learning, an office that promotes quality teaching and learning approaches amongst faculty. Both of them have faculty appointments in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics) department. The nature of their work suggested faculty performance and expectations are a contested topic at research universities. Jaime said, "In fact, a lot of people are advised - not by us, but others in their department – 'Just barely scrape by, in your classroom. Get your tenure and then you can do well.'" In this excerpt, "In fact" insinuates and presupposes that the subsequent information is sensational because it is unexpected or egregious. This also called attention to faculty socialization in departments at Midwest State University that was counter to student success efforts. Several comments about faculty at Midwest State University impose a contentious dichotomy between tenured and pre-tenure faculty. Because securing tenure was positioned as the dominant priority, tenured faculty had power and influences compared to their untenured counterparts. The excerpt reveals that pre-tenure faculty members were socialized, but omits the power dynamics that existed between them and the tenured faculty members offering advice. Tenure status, formal power from department roles, and influence from social or political capital of the faculty members offering advice were key in the process of socialization. For example, suggestions about navigating tenure would have been received differently if

they came from a pre-tenure faulty member compared to a tenured department chair. Omitting these considerations undermines the power being exerted by the faculty members doing the socializing, absolving them of responsibility in maintaining problematic faculty cultures.

While they did work to advocate for teaching and learning, excerpts suggest that Devin and Jaime worked more as faculty advocates. "…I am all about student success but I don't want to kill my faculty in the process." The distant "we" as well as the "suicide" metaphor were replaced with first person perspective and first person action. This positioned Jaime as responsible for faculty success (life), connoting nurturing and protection (from death). This extends the faculty-as-victim sentiment and reinforces the prioritization of tenure before student success.

The comments related to special populations within the Student Success Tensions narrative offered insight into the challenges in supporting marginalized student populations at Midwest State University. Tone and connotation in select excerpts convey a dispassionate regard for students of color and other marginalized student populations. When discussing things that need to be addressed at Midwest State University to support student success, Kendall said that there was, "A whole long laundry list of student populations or things that we haven't had time to get to." This statement *suggests* departmental or institutional good will and conscientiousness. A critical reading of this statement evoked a different perspective. The "laundry list" metaphor employed conveys the volume of pending tasks that their office or the institution needed to attend to related

to student success. This metaphor also suggests populations or items on the list will be addressed individually and sequentially, as is a common function of lists. Further, this "laundry list" metaphor associated the needs of these populations or tasks with being chores, connoting burdensome, laborious, and trivial sentiments. This metaphor also suggests that those waiting on the list should be patient and understand their needs within the context of the overall list. Regarding agency, this metaphor relinquishes institutional responsibility for anything or anyone who does not get served. The institutional actors are busy, but "doing their best". This also minimized the impact that poor service has on the populations impacted.

The juxtaposition of "student populations" and "things" associates groups of students (likely marginalized students) with "things" making them, their needs, and experiences inanimate. This trivialization, or subtle dehumanization, of "student populations" undermines urgency of the institutional actors responsible for addressing these students' needs. The discursive elements presented here suggest an awareness of students' needs but a lack of institutional urgency.

Kendall, who works in the provost's office coordinating institutional student success efforts, more explicitly articulated one of the issues facing student of color populations at the Midwest State University:

Yeah, well, we haven't narrowed the gap of majority versus minority student success rate. We pay lip-service attention to it sometimes and we look at the data,

we've got programs in place; that's another one where, we've got lots of programs

in place but the programs maybe aren't doing exactly what we need them to do

because we still have a significant gap there.

Reference to a "gap" and "rate" in this case presupposes previous quantitative evaluation,

a persistent gap, and an institutional interest in equal numerical performance between

students of color and white students. The lexical choice of "minority," a contended and

deficit-oriented label for students of color, reveals that problematic terms are still in

use which could have implications on how people understand and carry our their

work. It could also suggest that Kendall and other institutional actors had not been

exposed to or accepted more contemporary literature or discourses on students of color in

higher education.

The use of "lip-service" in reference to the student success gap at Midwest State

University connotes feigned interest, and the low modality of "sometimes" suggests

inconsistency. Efforts to support student success for students of color were, likely,

symbolic and inadequate in addressing the observed gap. The next comment, "…we look

at the data, we've got programs in place;" associate data with programs, suggesting that

programs were in response to or informed by specific data and presupposed that

"programs" help to narrow the student success gap. The sentence immediately following

undermines the previous reference to "programs" as Kendall suggested the programs in

place were possibly ineffective. The low modality the use of "maybe" evokes passivity

and skepticism. The low modality and tone from the use of "…aren't doing exactly…" establishes and minimizes the underperformance of these programs. This is extended through the omission of details that could illustrate the dissonance between programmatic expectations and performance. The excerpt also presupposes that programs are designed to effectively meet the institutional needs.

Critical Discourse Analysis of select excerpts from Midwest State University revealed additional areas to focus change efforts in support of student success. Each of these interview participants worked to support student success, each in different ways. The narratives offered by each of the participants lend great insight into the institutional efforts and challenges in supporting student success, and demonstrate their individual commitment to their work. A critical analysis of the discourses pointed to Midwest State University having a symbolic commitment to supporting student success efforts, congruent with the espoused theory and theory-in-use concepts from organization learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005). Through a number of offices and initiatives, Midwest State demonstrated a commitment to supporting student success, but that commitment had not fully materialized. The espoused commitment to students, likely gained the institution favor with students and other stakeholders committed to student success, regardless of their actual success.

In addition to the larger system-structural challenges, the deeper and less-visible ways that problematic cultures may influence or co-opt institutional actors' work were revealed through the application of CDA on the selected excerpts (Martinez-Aleman,

2015; Rogers, 2011). I am left with following questions: In what ways are offices, programs, and initiatives that commit to improving student success, co-opted or influenced by agendas and priorities that work against student success? What is the responsibility of institutions to demonstrate urgency in their commitments to student success? How do institutions consider individual dispositions and ideologies in selecting people to lead student success initiatives? These questions represent perspectives that could help to enhance institutional understandings of student success support lead by institutional actors.

University of Southern

Presence of New Ideas

     Theme 1: Complicating conceptions of student success. Student considerations and students' voice were made a priority in determining what constitutes student success in units within University of Southern. Interview participants highlighted increased student focus at University of Southern with the incoming president and provost. This was evidenced in the provost's establishment of a taskforce focused on student success and student learning at University of Southern. A document provided by interview participants outlined specific aspects of the taskforce's charge, highlighting the need for innovation in student learning practices that are "commensurate" with today's students and their needs. The enhanced student considerations contributed to more robust and complex conceptions of student success; a function of the Presence of New Ideas (Bauman, 2005) as well as collective inquiry. Double-loop learning contributed to student-centered approaches, specifically on the part of institutional actors working closely with units that serve students directly. The increased desire for student-authored conceptions of student success emerged as double-loop learning challenged the lack of student voice in crafting student success efforts. Taylor asserted the need for student voice in her comment, "But as I said earlier you just have to keep that in mind when you are doing things that it is all for the students, so how do you know what they want if you don't ask them."

The student-authored conceptions and increasingly student-centered interpretations challenged the specificity of existing conceptions of student success. Specifically, students may not place the same value as faculty, staff, or administrators on attaining a high grade point average, or for the same reasons. They may have to consider the affordability of participating in the High-Impact Practices that are often expected to support student success. This was demonstrated by a grant created to supplement the cost of students with high financial need participating in cost-prohibitive engagement experiences, like study abroad programs. New ideas and perspectives on how to enhance student success emerged from the increased focus on students and their experiences. Increased student agency was an outgrowth of students authoring their own definitions of success. Students themselves took on the role of institutional actors, working to enhance student success efforts for themselves.

Building on the expanded conceptions of student success and the changing national demands of higher, University of Southern recently recalibrated their general education requirements, some of which included a focus on post-collegiate application of knowledge. Alex, Terry and Taylor, all in academic affairs, highlighted the importance of students' experience at University of Southern in helping them achieve their post-collegiate goals. The focus on post-collegiate success suggests a focus on students beyond their time in an undergraduate program, as well as an acknowledgement of the needs of industries and other stakeholders outside of higher education. This emerged as more perspectives were leveraged to craft definitions of student success, and

conventional four- and six-year time bounds are overlooked. Here, the Presence of New Ideas challenged structural and interpretive conventions, and contributed to new and expanded conceptions of student success.

Cultivation of Doubt

      Theme 2: Navigating decentralization. Organizational learning offers considerations and approaches to organizational change that consider culture and structure of organizations (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005). Narratives from interview participants suggested that working to support and enhance student success efforts required skillful navigation of the institutional culture and structure. The complexity of University of Southern is largely attributed to the decentralized structure, and seen as contributing to the various conceptions of student success and approaches to supporting student success that existed at the University of Southern. Instead of viewing the various perspectives on student success as problematic, they were discussed as nuanced and necessary. This is an example of double-loop learning, in that a presenting problem is understood on a deeper level, offering new and useful perspectives (Bauman, 2005). Decentralization was not viewed as a hindrance, but as a contextual nuance for institutional actors to navigate. As a result, multiple interview participants called for selective synchronization of student success efforts, as opposed to centralization of student success definitions or conceptions.

Synchronization, articulated by participants, was also about creating efficiencies that would increase institutional capacity to serve students. This suggests that the decentralized nature of the institution also inhibited student success efforts. The structural implications on student success efforts align with the systems-structural dimension of Knowledge Transfer. They also represent knowledge management perspectives of organizational learning, particularly in how the institution was involved in disseminating information or resources that advanced student success efforts (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). A significant part of the synchronization narratives also involves the need for more synchronized and robust tools and strategies for assessing student success in its various forms. Synchronization of assessment efforts was sought to facilitate Knowledge Transfer. This also indirectly supports Cultivation of Doubt and the Presence of New Ideas, as departments within the institution developed more robust understandings of the myriad of efforts that existed and the conceptions of student success that guide those efforts.

Theme 3: Increasing individualization. There was an increasing interest helping students create experiences at the University of Southern that best suited their individual needs and served their personalized goals. The shift toward individualization came as the profile of incoming students rapidly changed and interest in student-authored conceptions of student success gained ascendancy. Interview participants discussed individualization as a new approach, challenging previous blanket approaches to supporting students. Individuals' dissenting perspectives led to double-loop learning as they enlisted other

institutional actors and institutional resources to trouble previous monolithic assumptions about students' experiences. For example, Jesse challenged assumptions about which students were in need of support, and what types of students' needed support; asserting that high-achieving students of color were often underserved because support was narrowly focused on low academic performance. These challenges were brought to leaders of departments and programs that may have been operating from this narrow perspective. Double-loop learning, through challenging underlying assumptions and interrogating espoused values, facilitates the interruption of problematic or ineffective routines related to student success, leading to more informed approaches (Bauman, 2005).

Student-authored conceptions of student success invited input from students about how to support them in their goals. The increased presence of student voice in enhancing student success efforts contributes to cultivation of doubt as new voices and perspectives led to new information that challenge or disrupte current routines toward more inclusive, socially constructed, approaches to supporting student success (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Theme 4: Student Success for whom? A number of interview participants referenced the local history of race relations as important to context to University of Southern. One interview participant offered an extensive and emotional perspective on desegregation at the institution and surrounding communities. This narrative called attention to the impact that societal issues may have on institutional actors, and their

work to support student success. Multiple interview participants celebrated the progress University of Southern had made since racial integration in the 1950's but made reference to a select few faculty members and staff who still held biased perspectives, in support of racial segregation. Organizational memory emerged, related to how information about internal and external events had shaped the institution and individuals' experiences. Other institutional actors were referenced as having a "long memory" and that learning the history of racial contention was a necessary part of transitioning into University of Southern as an employee.

Local context and contemporary issues regarding race may impact students' experiences and subsequent success, especially students of color. One interview participants' conception of student success is rooted in a holistic perspective, with specific attention to students' needs related to coping with or navigating societal issues. Moving beyond institutional context to include local and contemporary contexts challenges previous understandings of supporting student success and invites new ideas to support students. Because each student's lived experiences is unique, this also support individualization of student success in theme 3, particularly in service of special populations at the University of Southern. Additionally, this is congruent with literature advocating for increasingly diverse faculty, and extends that sentiment to administrators (who make decisions about student success), and staff (who also work directly with student to support their success).

Theme 5: Individual work, institutional goals and student implications.

Interview participants called attention to the ways they observed that routine administrative processes sometimes took priority over interacting with students and supporting their success directly. From this perspective, administrative routines were called into question, as potentially in conflict with student success. For example, the president and provost of University of Southern have made clear declarations of support for student success through the creation of several campus work groups. These groups are discussed in a campus report, provided by interview participants, that outlines the various student success efforts instituted by senior leaders. This comes alongside the University of Southern efforts to increase their institutional ranking and profile. The desired shift in institutional profile has contributed to higher admissions standards and more academically competitive incoming students. Administrators, through double-loop learning, challenged traditional notions of students' support needs, by advocating for the unique needs of high-achieving students of color. Also, public comments from senior leaders celebrating the increasing incoming student profile were made with little consideration of the impact on students who do not fit that profile, specifically students already at the institution. Jessie highlighted this dissonance in several comments about the institutions work to support student success. The dissonance is an example of espoused theory versus theories in use, whereby some actions from institution leaders were incongruent with espoused institutional values (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005). Institutional actors' recognition of this dissonance, however, contributed to

organizational learning; "Recognizing gaps between espoused views and theories in use (which often requires the help of others) can be pivotal to deeper learning" (Senge, 2006, p. 780).

Knowledge Transfer

Theme 6: State agenda for student success. State legislators and institutional governing board set specific measures and expectations for student success through policy. This policy-driven approach to compliance, is a commonplace in higher education, and represents a systems-structural approach to Knowledge Transfer (Bauman, 2005). University leadership put these expectations into action through institutional accountability efforts, namely their allocation of resources to efforts that aligned with these expectations. This represents knowledge management perspectives of organizational learning, as articulated by Kezar (2005). The president and the provost of University of Southern set clear and high expectations for academic and student service units across the institution. While some dissonance existed among administrators about the utility of the largely quantitative institutional measures, there was little contention. This was a clear demonstration of institutional onus by University of Southern, particularly in support of student success, which is necessary for organizational learning (Bensimon, 2005).

The focus on quantitative measures like retention, progression, and graduation align with larger, national discourses on student success. While the specific interpretive

processes of state legislators and governing board members were important to

Knowledge Transfer (Bauman, 2005), they are beyond the scope of this research project.

It is important to note that these interpretative processes happen outside of the institution,

but largely influence the institutional student success agenda.

Theme 7: Top-down commitment. The student-centered focus was not new at

the institution but the presence of new, student-centered, senior leaders was associated

with the increased consideration of students' experiences. The president had gained this

student-focused reputation over the course of a 20-year career at the institution, prior to

presidency. Changes in leadership create opportunities for change, articulated as policy

windows by Birnbaum (1988). This contributed to Knowledge Transfer and aligns with

the human resource management perspective of organizational learning. As people

stimulate their ambitions in taking on new roles with the institution, the organization

benefits from their growth and learning, resulting in improvement (Kezar, 2005). Also,

because individuals inquire on behalf of the institution, their desire to inquire and

commitment to improvement is important (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005). It is important

to acknowledge that not all movement into new roles within an institution are welcomed,

and that some, even if celebrated, may come with contention.

Senior leaders made similar student-centered commitments and put them into

action through calls for innovation. For example, in recent media coverage, University of

Southern president said, "With a spirit of innovation and a deep commitment to student

learning, faculty at the [University of Southern] continue to push the boundaries of

undergraduate education." This demonstrated a personal openness to new ideas as well as systems-structural support for new ideas (Bauman, 2005). The president's prioritization of new ideas contributed to Knowledge Transfer as it brought together resources (human and financial) that were necessary to put new ideas into action. This was supported through a million-dollar federal grant recently secured by the University of Southern, and earmarked for programs that contribute to student success.

The top-down prioritization and support for innovative and student-centered approaches to student success demonstrated institutional onus, contributing to Knowledge Transfer (Bensimon, 2005). The interpretive dimension of Knowledge Transfer was stimulated, as institutional actors were encouraged to consider their work through a student-centered lens. The increasingly student-centered focus and structure corresponds to ecological perspectives of organizational learning (Levitt & March, 1988).

Theme 8: Faculty. Participant narratives teased out the complexity of faculty as institutional actors at University of Southern. Faculty members impacted student success individually, in the classroom, and collectively through shared governance. Their collective impact was evidenced by their engagement in the recalibration of University of Southern general education requirements. Faculty leaders worked collectively with senior leaders and administrators to review, revise, and approve a new set of requirements more fitting for the current needs of higher education stakeholders. The assembly and collective efforts of multiple institutional actors is a demonstration of collective inquiry, which contributes to the Presence of New Ideas, and ultimately advances organizational

learning (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005). The institutional actors in this group also represent a community of practice in that each reprehensive offered a certain level of passion and expertise from their position in the institution, ultimately contributing to Knowledge Transfer (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Interview participants called attention to the precarious nature of faculty buy-in regarding campus initiatives. Select narratives highlighted faculty unwillingness to engage in emerging student success efforts, in favor of familiar and less effective faculty practices. Faculty reluctance represents a competency trap, which threatens organizational learning; "…favorable performance with an inferior procedure leads an organization to accumulate more experience with it, thus keeping experience with a superior procedure inadequate to make it rewarding to use" (Levitt & March, 1988, p. 322). Similar to competency traps; defensive reasoning is when individuals or organizations continue with course of action to avoid the risk of failure associated with an alternative path (Kezar, 2005). Faculty that experience tensions balancing teaching efforts with mounting research pressures may choose to continue with familiar and less effective teaching practices rather than risking new efforts that could disrupt established teaching and research norms.

The structural position of faculty is important to consider, especially among tenured or tenure-track faculty. Faculty with tenure may not respond to structural approaches to institutional change in the same ways as administrators and staff would, since their roles, through tenure, are more secure. Pre-tenure faculty members operate on

a finite clock for tenure-promotion, which informs their priorities in ways that could

compete with institutional priorities focused on student success. One interview

participant recalled being asked by a faculty member what the repercussions would be if

they did not participate in a particular university imitative. They were not able to give a

very clear or explicit answer to this question. This suggests an unclear or lacking system

of accountability for faculty members, making faculty buy-in pivotal to the success of

institutional student success initiatives. These phenomena are features unique to the

context of higher education institutions. As such, these features contribute to an

ecological understanding of organizational learning at the University of Southern (Levitt

& March, 1988). Administrators also made efforts to incentivize faculty participation in

student success efforts, aligning with views of organizational learning as human resource

management (Kezar, 2005).

     Theme 9: Understanding assessment and access to data. Multiple interview

participants called attention to the assessment and data culture at the University of

Southern. Dissonance existed between the expectations of senior leaders regarding

assessment and some institutional actors' ability to meet those expectations. Some

institutional actors were found questioning the value and role that assessment and data

play in supporting student success efforts. Dorian called for a shift in culture, both in

people's understanding of assessment, and in the variety of data collected and use to

inform decisions. These challenges, associated with institutional culture, represent a

challenge to the interpretive dimensions of Knowledge Transfer at University of Southern

(Bauman, 2005). Institutional actors had varying perspectives on assessment and data, some unfavorable and some ill informed. This suggests a frustration with the utility of data, or a limited capacity in their ability to use data.

Regular meetings for unit leaders about data usage, and requiring evidence from data to support funding new initiatives were systems-structural approaches from the provost to stimulate a data-driven culture. Systems-structural challenges emerged as interview participants explained instances of data hoarding in units and departments – even those that demonstrated skill in assessment and data usage. Individuals' and units' protective and even territorial treatment of data worked against Knowledge Transfer, which is about the acquisition and dissemination of data and knowledge within organizations (Bauman, 2005). The limited sharing of data and information was also discussed as a barrier to collaboration across units, which inhibited the Presence of New Ideas, and engendered mistrust between some units and staff members; threatening organizational learning (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Excerpts are from one or multiple dominant narratives from University of Southern, presented in chapter four; Conceptions of Student Success, Student-centered Narratives, and Institutional Tensions. Potential excerpts were identified during the coding phase of analysis. The dominant narratives that emerged helped to narrow the group of potential excerpts. The final excerpts used for analysis were selected based on

their connection to discourses on organizational learning and student success. The

application of CDA is used to elicit a more nuanced understanding of the narratives as

well as explore the potential of CDA as methodological approach to studying student

success issues in higher education. A transcript of the excerpts used here can be found in

Appendix F.

        Excerpts from Conceptions of Student Success narrative. Analysis of excerpts

from the Conceptions of Student Success narrative revealed dissonance between

espoused institutional goals and actual student success practices. In discussing the

institutional position on student success, Dorian said, "Well, we have a number of

indicators of success. And I guess one of the things we do at a large institution like this

even though we have an institution strategic plan and there are benchmarks for student

success in that plan, we operate in a very decentralized manner." The opening statement

in the excerpt framed the following comments on decentralization, and is an example of

topicalization. Topicalization refers to the strategic positioning of topic sentences for

increased emphasis (Martínez-Alemán et al., 2015). Referencing the multitude of

indicators offered context and support for the decentralized operation. Reference to the

strategic plan and benchmarks is interdiscursive and intertextual. Strategic plans are

actual policies, usually texts, and also represent discourses of structure, direction, and

change in organizations. Benchmarks were positioned as an integral part of their strategic

plan, and also allude to student engagement discourses, particularly the NSSE

Benchmarks. The excerpt highlights pronounced decentralized behavior despite the

presence of a strategic plan informed by benchmarks, presupposing that the institution deviated from centralized student success efforts. Institutional size was used as a rationale to support this deviation.

Excerpts from Student Centered Narratives. In the Student-centered Narratives, analysis shows a pattern of referring to students as commodities or placed in false dichotomies. When discussing the role of faculty, Jesse said, "Some of our really great faculty who are world renowned and winning national awards and always on the website and the paper, often those are the folks who are teaching honors students, so for them is sort of like a utopia of smart kids." In this comment, being a "great" faculty member is associated with national and local acknowledgement and publicity. The utopia metaphor suggests working with "smart" students was a highly desired, potentially euphoric, experience for faculty. It presumes that honor students are smart, and that teaching these students is more desirable than teaching others.

Jesse spoke about the frustrations of institutional actors working to support student success at University of Southern:

It is that type of climate there is no room for students not to be smart, or not to do well, so I think the frustration came come from people who are actually working with the students, lets say an advisor or housing in some capacity, where they seeing students who say "I see what the universe is saying about how smart we are, but I am not feeling too smart right now, I'm failing."

Modality, voice, and presupposition in this excerpt convey the tensions experienced by students and staff. There is a rigid expectation that students are "smart" asserted through the high modality of "no room" in discussing their academic performance. This is likely measured by grade point averages. The use of "climate" suggests this expectation is associated with the institutional culture, meaning the institution only values and celebrates a narrow window of student performance. Similar to above, this creates a dichotomy of "smart" and "not smart" students, likely determined by students' grades, which overlooks other less measurable displays of value and intelligence.

The low modality of "I think" in introducing the frustrations distanced Jessie from the comments that follow. In this context, this positioned Jesse as an advocate for those "actually working with students." Also, a divide between those "actually working with students" and others was insinuated, suggesting those who do not work directly with students may be less frustrated or unaware of the students' issues. The reanimation of student voice was used to advocate and also invited sympathy. The "universe" metaphor created a more exaggerated contrast between expectations of others and their actual performance. This also suggests that school is students' "universe," magnifying the impact of dissonance between institutional expectations and student performance.

Dorian discussed barriers in the efforts to diversify the University of Southern campus, "We obviously want the most qualified students we can get, but sometimes that works against some of our diversity efforts…" The use of "obviously" suggests that

wanting the most qualified students is a commonly accepted and clear goal of the institution. The notion of qualified wasn't explicitly stated but surrounding text suggests standardized test scores were a component. In this excerpt "qualified students" were treated as a commodity that the institution sought to amass through the admission process. The institution exerts the agency in this example, collecting quality students for their benefit. Juxtaposition of "most qualified students" with "diversity efforts" presupposes that the two are mutually exclusive, suggesting that diversity efforts yield less qualified students. The desire for qualified students presented first, established it as a priority, sometimes "interrupted" by diversity efforts. This is an example of topicalization. Subsequent comments reinforced these points, "…there is a lot of pressure. Every year our president wants to be able to say this is our most highly qualified class. I think what we also want him to say is that University of Southern is also more diversified." The president's goal of perpetually increasing the level of quality of incoming students was positioned as the source of pressure. Modality emerges in this quote as well. "Every year our President wants" represents high modality in that there iss a clear and regularly occurring desire, evidenced by "Every year" and "wants." Low modality is apparent in the following statement, "I think what we also want him to say," evidenced by "I think" and "also want him to say." The juxtaposition of the 'rigid' and 'absolute' desire of the president (high modality) to the 'hopeful' and 'uncertain' wish of others (low modality) revealed that the president's desires were prioritized over the university community, from the perspective of institutional actors. This was made

increasingly clear by the fact that the university community, represented by Jesse, desired

for their "wants" to be voiced by the president, affirming his power and authority.

Excerpts from Institutional Tension narratives. Institutional Tension narratives

offered a number of potential places for Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly in

regard to students, faculty, and data. This excerpt from Dorian offered insight into the

reluctance that some faculty display regarding the assessment of student learning.

> Just from my perspective working with faculty in assessment to some that is a
>
> new idea. It's been around for a long time [and] the push to assess student
>
> learning is something they've heard for a long, long time, but it's sort of loomed
>
> out there like this thing that eventually they have to do. "When and where and
>
> why?" That's one that I think there is a little more foot dragging.

The use of "eventually" (low modality) suggested a lack of urgency or accountability.

This reanimation of faculty questioning highlighted the agency that faculty possessed, to

be able to question institutional initiatives or decisions. The continued use of faculty

voice demonstrated phases of resistance, ranging from bold resistance to reluctant

agreement; "The climate has shifted from 'no way no how, that's just big brother,' to "I

don't want to do that,' to 'alright this thing's not going away I need to learn how to do

that'." The lexical choice of "climate" suggested that these sentiments fit within a larger

culture of faculty reluctance.

Comments from Taylor highlighted other challenges with assessment related to student success at University of Southern, "Like any place there are definitely some road blocks. Sometimes, people think so narrowly, and I won't mention any offices, but some people are, what's the word, territorial about their data." The territorial behavior mentioned positioned "data" as scarce commodity to be collected, or as a source of vulnerability to be protected. Both interpretations suggest departments' livelihood were associated with data. Presupposition, through the use of "Like any other place," suggests that territorial practices are normal and acceptable. The omission of specific offices in this excerpt raises questions about openness for critique within the institution.

Analysis from the above excerpts revealed several things. First, despite critiques of the decentralized nature of the institution, some were intentionally working against centralized efforts. Second, although institutional actors may have been committed to student success efforts, their problematic perceptions of students and student onus inhibited their commitments. Third, there was a lack of accountability for faculty who demonstrated reluctance and complacency toward student success efforts. These three findings from CDA suggest a persistent yet subtle culture at University of Southern that supports problematic practices and behaviors related to student success. I am left with the following questions: What responsibility do institutional actors feel in regard to addressing cultural issues? How it the performance evaluated for institutional actors responsible for student success efforts (or supporting efforts)? How are efforts to

advocate for students (and those who advocate) received and perceived at University of Southern?

Southern State University

Presence of New Ideas

Theme 1: State context and student success. State context played a pronounced role in how Southern State University worked to support student success. Interview participants drew connections between state priorities and institutional student success efforts. Southern State University governing board, appointed by state legislature, had also directly impacted student success efforts at the institution through structural changes and financial support. A pending merger with a state system community college had administrators and staff revisiting and reenvisioning their conceptions of student success, as the student population would be changing. Aside from the system-structural dimensions of organizational learning that would be impacted by the merger, this action stimulated openness to new ideas and double-loop learning about student success, all of which contribute to the Presence of New Ideas (Bauman, 2005). Administrators at Southern State University had successfully petitioned the governing board for financial support for larger advising initiatives at the institution as well. Support from the governing board suggested openness to new ideas from the highest levels of institutional leadership (Bauman, 2005), as well as theory-in-use, as commitments to student success were demonstrated by various levels of leadership (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005).

Interview participants' narratives highlighted their focus on serving students from their state. Participants were very clear about Southern State University's niche, based on their urban setting, research focus, and the population of students they serve. Southern State University and University of Southern are both in the same state, so several administrators juxtaposed the two universities to offer context. All interview participants referenced the specific population of state students they serve, the trends in their student profiles, and how that informed their approaches to supporting student success. These considerations demonstrated the extensive consideration of contextual factors that subsequently informed their student success efforts. Institutional actors employed double-loop learning to reflect on and respond to these contextual nuances (Bauman, 2005).

Participants alluded to the impact of state policy in their discussion of funding structure for students with high need. Access to high quality education, diversity in the undergraduate student body, and reduced student debt were the ways the state access program was mentioned to contribute to the institution and students of the state. Student funding structures conveyed state priorities and were seemingly aligned with student and institutional needs regarding student success support.

Theme 2: Shared conceptions and synchronization of student success.
Interview participants' narratives all included "retention, progression, and graduation" as a guiding institutional definition of student success. This was driven by the Southern State University strategic plan, which explicitly outlined retention, progression, and graduation as institutional measures for student success outcomes, according to interview

participants. This was consistent with the university strategic plan, accessible through the

intuition's website. Consistency in the articulation of institutional student success goals

resulted from theory-in-use, in that institutional priorities were clearly and consistently

communicated to and supported by institutional actors across a number of offices and

units.

Institutional actors had supplementary conceptions of student success, most of

which invited qualitative considerations of the student experience. These supplemental

conceptions accounted for what "retention, progression, and graduation" did not capture,

according to administrators and staff. These varying conceptions of student success,

when considered together, invited new ideas for supporting student success. New ideas

that emerged at Southern State University sought to provide more encompassing and

holistic support to students, according to several interview participants. Cultivation of

Doubt and the Presence of New Ideas were stimulated through double-loop learning on

the part of administrators and staff by thinking about what ways students were not being

supported and how support efforts could be networked together (Bauman, 2005). Specific

examples at Southern State University included the creation of a new administrative

position to coordinate student success initiatives across campus, grant funding for more

equitable participation in High-Impact Practices, an institutional task force focused on

understanding Southern State University as a learning environment, and public

commitments to worthwhile student experience demonstrated by the president.

Administrators often referenced their work in the context of other student success efforts across the institution. Several interview participants argued the necessity of collaboration at Southern State University. Interview participants found it important to consider how student success conceptions and goals differed across collaborators, and that successful navigation of those differences was central to fruitful collaborations. Devin articulated this:

> Because we're a small office we depend on a lot of other offices to contribute or collaborate and there are priorities. Well they're priorities is not necessarily student success. So we do have to you know so it does complicate things when we're running into processes or procedures that does not lend themselves very well for our purpose. So that, in those, those situations it's, it is frustrating.

Despite the challenges, these partnerships and networked understandings have also contributed to the emergence of new, more substantial programs that make the collaborations more permanent. For example, Kendall was able to create a program that served students' academic and financial aid advising needs.

Theme 3: Aspirations. Jordan and Avery, in their work to support student success, had the goal of creating a culture of support that students' value. This cultural aspiration was cited as a part of their unit goals and impacted how they worked to support students on department and individual levels:

> What we've said we want to do, we want to be a part of our mission is we want to
> create this culture of care. And so in doing that we want to do it in terms of
> access, in terms of equity and in terms of inclusion. So that's kind of our tagline, I
> guess if you will. Building a culture of care and the three objectives that we do
> that are, equity, access, and inclusion. So for us that's paramount. You know we
> want to make sure that all of our students have access to our services.

Attending to students' perspectives of student success initiatives indirectly invited student voice. Students were seen as source of feedback and accountability for the quality of the services provided, which included students' experiences with these services.

Several interview participants shared aspirations for the data culture at Southern State University specifically: 1) the capacity of individuals and units to consume knowledge and data, 2) having easier access to data for data-informed decision-making, and 3) an increase in qualitative assessment related to student success. The aspirations articulated by interview participants represented targets for institutional performance, and new ideas for institutional culture. As administrators imagined possible cultures they were simultaneous challenging existing cultures, which supports the Presence of New Ideas and the Cultivation of doubt, respectively (Bauman, 2005).

Theme 4: Pilot and scale student success initiatives. Several interview participants from Southern State University referenced new programs to support student

success emerging from smaller pilots. The Southern State University environment supported the emergence of new ideas from staff and faculty, as long as they were supported by research and institutional data. The pilot-and-scale approach is popular in innovation scholarship and worked in support of the Presence of New Ideas at Southern State University, as new ideas were welcomed and explored in the institutional context (Bauman, 2005; Weerts, Rasmussen, & Singh, 2015). The use of research and data was especially important to secure funding and other resources from senior leaders. Senior leaders also asserted the necessity of assessment plans to make the case for expanding programs beyond the pilot phase. Senior leaders' expectations demonstrated support for the Presence of New Ideas, as well as the prioritization of Knowledge Transfer at the Southern State.

Especially successful pilots at Southern State University were those that positively contributed to institutional measures and could be scaled to serve large numbers of students. Considerations of the scalability demonstrated institutional value of new ideas as well as the scope of their potential impact. Institutional measures of retention, progression, and graduation were explicitly outlined in the Southern State University strategic plan and accountability to those measures was displayed through senior leaders' expectations. Accountability to the espoused goals in the strategic plan is an example of theories-in-practice, whereby institutional resources and efforts were mobilized to support institutional goals and commitments (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005).

Theme 5: Asking for help with data. All interview participants made reference, directly or indirectly, to the capacity of Southern State University to collect, consume, or apply research and data. The most extensive example of institutional efforts to address data capacity was revealed through their extensive data analytics project. A third-party company was contracted to analyze stores of student performance data and collaboratively interpret and apply resulting understandings to inform ongoing advising practices. This effort worked to mitigate overload, a threat to organizational learning. Overload is the presence of too much data, such that institutions cannot effectively process and interpret all that has been collected (Bauman, 2005). The Presence of New Ideas and Cultivation of Doubt is supported by successful consumption of data, exposing institutional actors to new information, perspectives, and issues.

Third-party companies were also contracted to work with student affairs units and Southern State University to build and expand individual and unit capacity to collect, consume and apply institutional data, in support of student success efforts. One interview participant from student affairs associated the unit's assessment challenges to the skill and attitudes of some staff in the area, and alluded to the weak assessment culture of student affairs as a field. Devoting institutional resources and staff time to expanding assessment acumen is an example of professional development, which aligns with human resource management approaches to organizational learning (Kezar, 2005). Third-party companies, used in these ways, support the systems-structural and interpretive dimensions of Knowledge Transfer (Bauman, 2005).

The hiring of new staff and administrators was also a part of institutional efforts to expand their capacity to consume and apply data. Two of the administrators interviewed referenced being hired to increase the use of qualitative information in their respective areas. These same administrators also found themselves challenged to increase qualitative approaches in a quantitatively dominated culture. Staffing considerations represented human resource management approaches to organizational learning, as well as system-structural approaches to Knowledge Transfer (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Cultivation of Doubt

Theme 6: Double-loop learning about students. Interview participants at Southern State University spoke extensively about students, and ways to rethink how they are supported. These sentiments explicitly challenge institutional histories and patterns of how students have been considered, signifying the Cultivation of Doubt (Bauman, 2005; Levitt & March, 1988). Student affairs administrators challenged the underlying assumption that student success support was for underachieving students, as they explored what ways high-achieving students of color also need support. The impact of financial support on academic success also emerged in participant narratives, as they observed high achieving students' college trajectory interrupted because of financial need alone, and not academic success. Kendall outlined the creation of a pilot, which evolved into a full-fledged program for financial aid support, housed in academic affairs. These examples represent the interpretive and systems-structural dimensions of Knowledge

Transfer, induced by double-loop learning of administrators as they challenged their understandings of students' experience (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Huber, 1991).

Interview participants and other administrators at Southern State University engaged in deep reflection about students' experiences, review of student survey responses, and invited student representatives to help interpret student data, which demonstrated double-loop learning (Bauman, 2005). As a result, students were recognized as a more significant part of the institutional context. Multiple participants discussed the necessity of considering student profile when adopting or creating new initiatives that support students. Administrators' proximity to students, discussed as their frequency of student-interaction, was also associated with the quality or frequency of this double-loop learning. Institutional actors, who worked closely with students more often, were suggested to reflect on students' experiences in more thoughtful ways, making their perspectives more valuable in decision-making. In addition to administrators and staff engaging in double-loop learning on their own, multiple participants cited the need for student voice to be invited as a tool to stimulate double-loop learning, especially through the use of qualitative assessment. This is another example of double-loop learning occurring on the individual and institutional level, as institutional actors reflect on their own understandings and create forums for collective reflection and inquiry (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Knowledge Transfer

  Theme 7: Internal and external accountability and support. Having

accountability to and support for student success goals at multiple institutional levels

contributed to Knowledge Transfer at Southern State University. Narratives from

interview participants suggested accountability and support from the governing board,

down to student workers. The president, provost, other senior leaders, and unit leaders

were seen as being accountable to making progress on the improvement of institutional

measures; retention, progression, and graduation. This was important to interview

participants, as people in these roles had positional power and resources to promote

Knowledge Transfer. This wass evidenced by their increased focus on assessment,

structural realignment to support advising, and increased training for staff members

working directly with students. Additionally, administrators within Southern State

University capitalized on structural changes to enhance student success efforts in the

selection and hiring of new administrative staff, and by revising conceptions of student

success in preparation for a large institutional merger. The systems-structural and

interpretive dimensions of knowledge transfer were promoted through these efforts

(Bauman, 2005).

  Select policies emerged to drive accountability and support. The Southern State

University strategic plan was referenced as a source of direction for student success

efforts. This was demonstrated as the president, provost, and other administrators sought

to align their work and resources with the goals of the plan, and held others accountable

to doing the same. Retention, progression, and graduation was the dominant conception

of student success, which contributed to Knowledge Transfer as multiple functional areas

all clearly understood and worked toward the same targets. Additionally, the state policy

for funding low-income students was cited by several interview participants as

contributing to student success in a variety of ways, especially through relieving students'

post-collegiate debt. This policy, although external to the institution, played an important

role in supporting the Southern State University student success goals. These are

additional systems-structural aspects of Southern State University that supported

Knowledge Transfer in their student success efforts (Bauman, 2005).

Professional development was an intentional strategy to increase the quality of

student success efforts. For examples, student success tutors received specific training to

increase their effectiveness in supplementary instruction, and professional staff within

student affairs areas received training and support in building their assessment capacity.

These two examples reflect systems-structural and interpretive approaches to supporting

knowledge transfer, specifically in advancing organizational learning through human

resource management (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Theme 8: Resources, data, and access. The presence of and access to financial

resources and personnel was as a vital consideration for those working to support student

success. Each interview participant referenced shrinking financial resources at Southern

State University and the ways that they have carried out their work in lieu of these

constraints. Increased accountability efforts, more specifically the demand for assessment

and data-informed decisions, were attributed to decreasing financial resources. The resource landscape set the stage for the increased data usage. Reliance and value of quantitative data in directing or affirming student success efforts at Southern State University represents increased Knowledge Transfer, particularly in the systems-structural dimension (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Quantitative data emerged as a valuable commodity at Southern State University, particularly in how it was used to gain access to resources and assess the performance of students and student success efforts. Institutional actors abided by this sentiment, using quantitative approached to assess and affirm their work. Narratives from several interview participants revealed the necessity of quantitative data to create change, juxtaposed with a disregard for qualitative data. Some institutional actors dissented from the quantitative oriented culture, exhibited by an adamant preference for qualitative work and disregard for the utility of assessment as a whole.

Tensions exist for some administrators who experience the limitations of quantitative data, particularly the misinterpretation of data by some university leaders and the limited capacity of some staff and administrators in consuming quantitative data. Interview participants discussed barriers to accessing data and the reluctance of offices and departments to share data freely. These particular tensions inhibit Knowledge Transfer, particularly the interpretive and systems-structural dimensions respectively (Bauman, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

Challenges with data were being addressed through the selection and development of professional staff. A number of staff had been recently selected, with particular attention to their qualitative assessment skills in order to strengthen Southern State University's qualitative assessment efforts. Avery outlined the professional development experiences provided by a third-party company, to student affairs staff to enhance their disposition and capacity for assessment. These efforts align with the Kezar (2005) human resource management approach to organizational learning, which is associated with the interpretive dimension of Knowledge Transfer. Huber (1991), Bauman (2005), and Kezar (2005) assert that expansion of people's sense-making capacity (in this case through professional development), contributes to interpretive dimension of Knowledge Transfer in organizations. Additionally, Southern State University's data analytics project was an example of how the institution was using a third-party data analytics company to support their interpretative capacity. This approach addressed overload, a common inhibitor of knowledge transfer and also served to improve the interpretive capacity of the institution (Kezar, 2005; Bauman, 2005)

Critical Discourse Analysis

Excerpts are from one or multiple dominant narratives from Southern State University, presented in chapter four; Impact on Student Success, Student-centered Narratives, and Institutional Tensions. Potential excerpts were identified during the coding phase of analysis. The dominant narratives that emerged helped to narrow the

group of potential excerpts. The final excerpts used for analysis were selected based on their connection to discourses on organizational learning and student success. The application of CDA is used to elicit a more nuanced understanding of the narratives as well as explore the potential of CDA as methodological approach to studying student success issues in higher education. A transcript of the excerpts used here can be found in Appendix G.

Excerpts from Impact of Student Success narratives. Analysis of excerpts from the Impact on Student Success narratives revealed a confident and aspirational culture within student success focused units and staff. Tone, modality, and intertextuality in excerpts from Morgan helped explain their work to impact student success. Morgan said, "I think the fact that we're data-driven in our decision-making, [and] that we're not afraid of assessment," which affirmed their work in support of student success. The use of "data-driven" called on institutional discourse and documents related to data-driven decision-making, evidenced by several supplementary documents collected from Southern State University interview participants.

Rather than referencing data-driven aspirations (low modality) or expectations (medium modality) from senior leaders, using "we're data-driven" (high modality) establishes data-driven decision-making as a current and regular practice at Southern State University. This comment conveys confidence in their use of data and suggests that assessment is something that made others "afraid" or less confident. It is also important

to note that other types or sources of data, outside of institutional assessment) were not referenced. Morgan continues:

> The one really great thing about having a strong institutional research unit at a university is that we become, as an anthropologist I hate the word, objective. We really don't spin data and people trust us because we don't spin it and that I think is critically important for institutional researchers.

The confident tone was extended, establishing the institutional research office as an authority when it comes to assessment. The "objective" approach of the institutional research office was attributed to their "strength" as a unit. Assertions of objectivity were reinforced through the modality employed in the excerpt. Low modality toward objectivity was established with the statement "as an anthropologist I hate the word, objective." Morgan suggested that despite devaluing objectivity in their formal training, they are proud to have demonstrated objectivity on behalf of the institutional research office. "We really don't spin the data" represents cohesion, as it connected to the "subjectivity" indirectly referenced in the previous sentence. "We really don't" asserted an emphatic tone with high modality that further reinforced their trustworthiness and credibility as researchers. The excerpt above also suggested that other institutions' research offices or other spaces at Southern State University may "spin" data to suit their needs. These and other comments from Morgan established the credibility and

trustworthiness in their assessment of student success and the performance of specific programs, suggesting they are not influenced by political agendas.

Excerpts from Institutional Tension narratives. Institutional Tension narratives provided a number of institutional and individual challenges to explore through CDA. Kendall presupposes that resource efficiency was as established priority of student success offices: "So something that I look at a lot is are we leveraging our funds, our resources and our time efficiently. When you've got seven people in four offices running a dozen programs you can't have a dud. We just don't have the time in the day to do that." The modality in this excerpt reinforced the narrow margin of error for programs' effectiveness. Kendall established their authority on the resource efficiency based on how frequently they consider it, through using the phrase "something that I look at a lot" (high modality) in the opening sentence. The narrow margin of error was established by the medium modality of "When you've got" and "you can't" used to set the context of their office, specifically highlighting limited human resources and heavy workload. In following sentence, adding "just" used high modality to reiterate that that the demand for efficiency left little space to make sense of failing programs. This also operated off of an assumption that if a program is ineffective, the issue lies with the program itself, which overlooks individuals' roles as well as the institutional context. Kendall closed with, "If we have a dud we fix the dud or we scrap the dud and that's it." The use of "and that's it" (high modality) emphasizes the limited time used to understand why programs haven't worked, or how they could work better.

Devin spoke to the challenges of limited time as well: "I think other offices who may not have as much resources may not have, I want to say this how—luxury. Or maybe even the ability to make the change if it requires more man-hours or something like that." The low modality of "I think," "may not have," "or maybe even" convey empathy for those low-resource offices by establishing Devin as a distanced advocate. The connotation of "luxury" asserts that the ability change was a rare privilege, limited to offices with a surplus of resources.

Larger questions of the necessity and implications of student success efforts were introduced from academic affairs administrators. Kendall said, "And this is, this is my kind of view of the landscape. It's a very fine line or it can be a very fine line between academic support and hand holding and where do you cross the line?" The excerpt presupposes that there is a threshold of appropriate academic support, with too much support being detrimental. Lexical choice of "landscape" alluded to larger discourses related to the "landscape of higher education" often employed to discuss the American higher education system. The use of "my kind of view" has low modality, which positioned the perspective of Kendall among others' perspectives, being careful not to overstate a potentially controversial opinion. The "hand holding" sentiment was presented as a dilemma for *all* of higher education, which works to substantiate the legitimacy of the claim. In the following commentary it was made clear that the negative impact would affect the value of degrees, demonstrating a focus on the institution and not students.

Devin spoke on the absence of 'weeding out' as faculty practice and institutional culture:

What I see more are faculty members who want students to understand that the success depends on them on the student side. Not so much on the faculty side. So that you know that I was sharing the stage with a colleague and she's in economics. And one thing she said that was, and I've stolen it many times since then, is that, it's like, "I've never failed a student in my class, students have failed my class but I have never failed a student." And that distinction to me is critical, that I'm not here to fail you.

The agency and tone of the opening sentence convey the authority of faculty, as their desires for student onus were heralded. A binary relationship between faculty and student effort was present, omitting staff and administrators' role in student success. Voice was used to authenticate the faculty perspective on students' responsibility for their success. The faculty member's quote reemphasized student onus, making students solely responsible for successfully navigating courses, which is divergent from contemporary student engagement perspectives (Harper & Quaye, 2009). The use of presupposition suggests the "course" is infallible, abdicating responsibility of the faculty member. While the institution had moved away from intentionally "weeding out" students, CDA of the

faculty quote, and its wide use by Devin maintaine the perspective that students were

largely, if not solely, responsible for their success (and failure).

Critical Discourse Analysis revealed confidence and trustworthiness in Southern

State University institutional research functions, particularly in unbiased collection and

interpretation of data made available for decision-makers. As the central data collecting

entity, this supported Knowledge Transfer at Southern State University, particularly in

the interpretive dimension (Kezar, 2005; Bauman, 2005). In an environment that

prioritizes data-driven decision-making throughout, access to quality data is necessary for

sound decisions. CDA also uncovered the implications of limited resources at Southern

State University. Discourses on the resource landscape at the institution were found

throughout interview narratives. A critical look at select excerpts revealed that limited

resources impacted offices interpretive functions and inhibited change. Increasing

workloads meant less space to explore and understand why certain student success efforts

were less effective than desired. Offices were limited in their capacity to change,

commensurate with their limited human and time resources. The Presence of New Ideas,

and Cultivation of Doubt are inhibited by limited capacity for reflection and revision

(Bauman, 2005). CDA also revealed challenges to the utility of academic support efforts

and lingering sentiments of student onus. Administrators responsible for student success

were found questioning the impact of too much academic support on the quality of

degrees, drawing on larger discourses of quality in higher education. While faculty may

have moved beyond the past practices of intentionally creating obstacles for student

success, CDA revealed a strong disposition toward student onus remained, going against

the contemporary and prominent student success literature (Harper & Quaye, 2009, Tinto,

2011; McCormick, 2013). I am left with the following questions: How has the

prioritization of quantitative data informed (or limited) the development of student

success efforts? How does the allocation of resources support or mitigate institutional

change efforts?

Cross-case Analysis

This section draws on common themes across case study sites. Table 7 offers a

brief summary of the themes from each case, presented above. Table 8 presents a side-by-

side comparison of the institutional characteristics of each case site presented in chapter 4

(U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2014). Table 9

shows the results of cross-case analysis and the individual case themes that are associated

with each cross-case theme.

Table 7

Summary of themes across cases

	Midwest State University	**University of Southern**	**Southern State University**
Presence of New Ideas	Theme 1: Decentralization for new ideas. • Decentralized structure contributed to the creation new ideas • Decentralized structure made enacting new ideas challenging Theme 2: Decentralized conceptions of student success.	Theme 1: Complicating conceptions of student success. • Increased student focus driven by campus taskforce • Faculty and admin adjusted General education requirements to	Theme 1: State context and student success. • State agenda explicitly influenced institutional student success efforts • State financial support for

- Decentralized structure viewed as cultivating multple view of student success
- Tensions emerged about measure of student success

Theme 3: New understandings about supporting students.

- Double-loop learning invited more nuanced understandings of students' needs
- Student voice contributed to new understandings about student support

Theme 4: Cultivating buy-in to new ideas and approaches.

- Organizational learning strategies were employed to stimulate openness from staff and faculty around new initiatives

Theme 5: New staff, new faculty, and new ideas.

- Changes in staff and faculty were used as opportunities to interrupt or drive student success culture

better meet students' needs

- Student voice invited to inform student success conceptions
- Exploration toward post-collegiate conceptions of student

students and institutional efforts was celebrated

- State dictated merger with nearby community college leads to double-loop learning
- Governing board was responsive to institutional requests for support related to student success

Theme 2: Shared conceptions and synchronization of student success.

- "retention, progression, and graduation" is the shared conception of student success
- Subsequent conceptions of student success networking with "retention, progression, and graduation"
- Institutional actors experienced challenges collaborating on student success

Theme 3: Aspirations.

- Student affairs administrators set aspirations for how students value their services
- Aspirations for data and assessment culture are offered after reflecting on critiques and challenges

Theme 4: Pilot and scale student success initiatives.

- Pilot and scale approaches work well to translate new ideas into practice
- Scalability of successful programs was of particular interest of senior leaders
- Tensions emerged about resources to support scaling successful programs

Theme 5: Asking for help with data.
- Training and development from a 3rd party company was used to expand data capacity of staff in student affairs
- Staffing changes (hiring new staff) were used as strategy to drive the assessment culture

Cultivation of Doubt	Theme 6: Challenging and complicating dominant conceptions.	Theme 2: Navigating decentralization.	Theme 6: Double-loop learning about students.
	• More directed critiques of the current student success efforts and conception emerged • Critique developed into new ideas about synchronization	• Institutional actors find value in decentralized structure	• Extensive and explicit conversations about how to deepen their understandings about students' experiences took place
	Theme 7: Diversifying data to expand understandings.	Theme 3: Increasing individualization.	• New programs and specific changes to existing programs resulted from double-loop learning about students
	• Quantitative routines were identified as limiting student success efforts • Calls for rich qualitative student success perspectives emerged	• Increased value of student driven conceptions of student success	
		Theme 4: Student Success for whom?	• Students, particularly in-state students are
		• Local racial discourses and history influenced student success considerations for students of color	
		Theme 5: Individual	

		work, institutional goals and student implications. • Competing priorities emerged that impact institutional actors ability to advance student success efforts • Desire for increased student profile is at odds with student success and diversity goals	considered as a significant part of the institutional context • Valuable outcomes from double-loop learning induced institutional actors to continue to interrogate their understandings of students' experiences
Knowledge Transfer	Theme 8: Enhanced data consumption to improve student success practices. • Predictive analytics was used to strengthen academic advising Theme 9: Navigating decentralization to enhance student success. • student success task force was created to stimulate collaboration between academic and student affairs units Theme 10: Quantitative data driven culture. • Extensive use and prioritization of quantitative data related to student success • Double loop learning from institutional comparison	Theme 6: State agenda for student success. • State agenda influences student success efforts • Compliance with state expectations around "retention progression and graduation" Theme 7: Top-down commitment. • New president is know as the "student president" • Senior leaders offer accountability to student centered approaches to student success Theme 8: Faculty. • Faculty members engaged in recalibrating institutional student success efforts at the top • Challenges emerged with faculty buy-in and accountability in their classroom student success efforts Theme 9: Understanding assessment and access to data. • Dissonance between expectations of data	Theme 7: Internal and external accountability and support. • State legislators and governing board were actively engaged in student success discussions • Seniors leaders were responsive to governing board and engaged in creating structures and culture to support student success with SSU • Policies, professional development, and funding were the mechanisms used to drive student success efforts from the top Theme 8: Resources, data, and access. • Decreasing financial resources inhibited change efforts related to student success • Qualitative data was a valuable and guarded commodity • Persistent calls for more qualitative approaches in

		use, and accessibility of data • Institutional actors and departments reported to be territorial over data	student success evaluation • Success of the predictive analytics project was celebrated and attributed to Knowledge Transfer
Critical analysis (CDA)	CDA 1. Tenure versus student success CDA 2. Symbolic student success commitments	CDA 1. Narrow perspectives of students CDA 2. Faculty reluctance and accountability	CDA 1. Problematic faculty cultures CDA2. Power of quantitative data CDA 3. Access to resources and change

Decentralization and student success. Discussions of decentralization highlight the ways the decentralized structure of institutions impact student success and how administrators are working to navigate decentralization in regard to student success efforts. Decentralization emerges as an obstacle, as context, and as a tool for different aspects of student success. Decentralization is discussed across cases, explicitly at Midwest State University and University of Southern and implicitly at Southern State University, evidenced in the themes in table 9. Each case study institution deems decentralization a pervasive and necessary contextual feature to consider in their work to advance student success. This is particularly true when considering the various conceptions of student success and efforts to cultivate buy-in from institutional actors. This represents both Presence of New Ideas and Cultivation of Doubt being stimulated by decentralization at these institutions. Institutions engage in Cultivation of Doubt as they interrogate the varied conceptions of student success at their institutions. The Presence of New Ideas is represented by emergence of new understandings of student success and

how those understandings could be networked together to enhance institutional efforts.

Decentralization at Midwest State University is also discussed as an inhibitor to

Knowledge Transfer, however, due to the lack of synchronization of student success

efforts. Midwest State University demonstrates a dialectical perspective on

decentralization, seeing it as both contributing to and militating against their student

success efforts.

Table 8

Select institutional characteristics across cases

Select institutional characteristics across cases			
	Midwest State University	**University of Southern**	**Southern State University**
Undergraduate enrollment Breakdown			
Undergraduate (full-time, degree seeking)	27199	25259	18839
First-time	6016	5240	3640
Transfer-ins	1891	1281	2169
Continuing	19292	18738	13030
Undergraduate enrollment by race/ethnicity			
White	72%	70%	33%
Black or African American	3%	8%	36%
Asian	3%	8%	10%
Hispanic	4%	5%	8%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	0%	0%	0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	0%	0%
Two or more races	2%	3%	4%
Race/ethnicity Unknown	4%	1%	3%
Nonresident	12%	5%	5%
Undergraduate enrollment rates by residence			
in state	58%	87%	94%
out of state	37%	11%	4%
Foreign countries	5%	2%	1%
Unknown	0%	0%	0%
1st year retention rates			
Full-time	86%	94%	81%
Part-time	79%	89%	57%
Undergraduate graduation rates			

4-year	39%	54%	20%
6-year	71%	81%	51%
8-year	72%	83%	56%
Graduation rates by race			
White	71%	85%	50%
Black or African American	50%	81%	56%
Asian	66%	86%	55%
Hispanic or Latino	54%	80%	55%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific islander	n/a	n/a	n/a
American Indian or Alaska Native	48%	100%	17%
Two or more races	n/a	82%	56%
Race/ethnicity Unknown	68%	100%	51%
Nonresident	63%	67%	55%
Transfer out-rate	24%	6%	17%
Total Number of Staff			
All Staff	5780	10108	4980
Instructional Staff	1779	2215	1686
Student and Academic Affairs	1024	439	669
State Funding			
State Appropriations (percentage of total institutional funding)	25%	33%	32%

Note: Selected information from the U.S. Department of Education, National

Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(2014).

Discourses and perspectives on students. Case themes and discourse analysis

reveal varying perspectives and discourses on students. Narrow and potentially limiting

perspectives and discourses on undergraduate students at Midwest State University and

University of Southern emerge through the use of CDA. At both institutions, Critical

Discourse Analysis uncovers potentially problematic discourses about students and

diversity efforts. Students are discussed in very specific and narrow ways, with little

attention paid to the complexity within student populations. This occurs in the narratives

of several interview participants from student affairs and academic affairs at each

institution. CDA unpacks language in excerpts that equate "smart" with "qualified" and juxtapose "smart" students with non-smart (and thus not-qualified) students. Similarly, "qualified" students are juxtaposed with "diverse" students, suggesting a homogeneous population of high achieving students and associating "diversity" with deficiency.

Midwest State University and University of Southern have relatively sparse populations of students of color (compared to Southern State University), which may contribute to limited perspectives. While this study did not collect an inventory of the student success programs catered toward or used by students of color, this may be of interest to explore. Two questions emerge: 1) How do the types of institutional student success programs geared toward students of color, shape institutional actors' perceptions of those students; 3) How do the institutional actors' perceptions of students of color, influence the type of student service programs that are created?

All of the case study institutions engage in a level of questioning, interrogating their understandings of students through double-loop learning. Midwest State University and University of Southern work to develop more comprehensive understandings of students' needs, moving beyond basic understandings of student needs. University of Southern set goals for individualizing the student experience, and troubling the quality of support provided for students of color, especially driven by the history of race relations in their state and local community. Southern State University demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of their students needs, and pushes further to understand how their student success efforts could accommodate the intersections of students' identities and

experiences. Institutional actors at Southern State University demonstrate nuanced, robust, and reflexive understandings of students.

Table 9

Cross-case analysis and contributing themes

	Contributing Themes by Case Site		
Cross-Case Analysis	**Midwest State University**	**University of Southern**	**Southern State University**
Decentralization and student success	Theme 1: Decentralization for new ideas. Theme 2: Decentralized conceptions of student success. Theme 6: Challenging and complicating dominant conceptions. Theme 9: Navigating decentralization to enhance student success.	Theme 1: Complicating conceptions of student success. Theme 2: Navigating decentralization.	Theme 2: Shared conceptions and synchronization of student success. Theme 4: Pilot and scale student success initiatives.
Discourses and perspectives on students	Theme 3: New understandings about supporting students. CDA 2: Symbolic Student Success.	Theme 1: Complicating conceptions of student success. Theme 3: Increasing individualization. Theme 4: Student Success for whom? CDA 1. Narrow perspectives of students.	Theme 1: State context and student success. Theme 3: Aspirations. Theme 6: Double-loop learning about students.

Responsiveness to state context		Theme 4: Student Success for whom? Theme 6: State agenda for student success. Theme 7: Top-down commitment.	Theme 1: State context and student success. Theme 6: Double-loop learning about students. Theme 7: Internal and external accountability and support.
Predictive analytics and capacity building	Theme 4: Cultivating buy-in to new ideas and approaches. Theme 7: Diversifying data to expand understandings. Theme 8: Enhanced data consumption to improve student success practices. Theme 9: Navigating decentralization to enhance student success.	Theme 9: Understanding assessment and access to data.	Theme 2: Shared conceptions and synchronization of student success. Theme 5: Asking for help with data. Theme 8: Resources, data, and access.
Data politics	Theme 6: Challenging and complicating dominant conceptions. Theme 8: Enhanced data consumption to improve student success practices. Theme 10: Quantitative data driven culture. CDA 2. Symbolic student success	Theme 7: Top-down commitment. Theme 9: Understanding assessment and access to data.	Theme 7: Internal and external accountability and support. Theme 8: Resources, data, and access. CDA 2. Power of quantitative data. CDA 3. Access to resources and change.

	commitments.		
Faculty cultures	Theme 5: New staff, new faculty, and new ideas. CDA 1: Tenure versus student success.	Theme 5: Individual work, institutional goals and student implications. Theme 8: Faculty. CDA 2: Faculty reluctance and accountability.	CDA 1: Problematic faculty cultures.
Symbolic commitments	CDA 1. Tenure versus student success. CDA 2. Symbolic student success commitments.	Theme 5: Individual work, institutional goals and student implications. Theme 8: Faculty. CDA 2: Faculty reluctance and accountability.	Theme 5: Asking for help with data. Theme 8: Resources, data, and access. CDA 1: Problematic faculty cultures. CDA 3. Access to resources and change.

Responsiveness to state context. University of Southern and Southern State

University are in the same state and state context is seen extensively in narratives from

both institutions. This legislative agenda-setting is uncontested, and seemingly welcomed

from the perspectives of interview participants. Institutional actors highlight the influence

of state legislators on senior leaders, and ultimately the student success agendas, at

University of Southern and Southern State University. Both institutions' senior leaders

are directly influenced by their respective governing boards (appointed by state

legislature) to consider persistence and graduation rates as primary conceptions of student

success, guiding data collection and reporting. While these qualitative conceptions are

met with varying critique within the institution, participants from both institutions

celebrate the accompanying financial commitment from the state. Narratives from both

institutions are also heavily student focused, yielding student-centered sentiments in many of their respective themes. This suggests a functional relationship between state legislature and these two institutions, likely influenced by significant percentages of financial support from their state, and the supplementary support from state legislation mentioned by institutional actors at Southern State University. Top down influence from state legislature also manifests through the mandated merger of Southern State University with a local community college. The imposed merger is supported with resources and support leading institutional actors to engage in double-loop learning about how to facilitate the change, rather than resistance.

The statewide access scholarship for students of color invites attentiveness to their land grant missions. Both institutions have favorable views on the scholarship and its impact on diversity amongst the undergraduate student population. Administrators at Southern State University suggest that each institution attracts slightly different student populations from the state, congruent with their respective institutional student profile. Table 8 shows stark difference in the composition of enrolled students, with Southern State University serving a significantly higher percentage of students of color, slightly higher percentage of in-state students, and almost of twice as many transfer students as University of Southern. These considerations are associated with increased Knowledge Transfer at University of Southern as they worked to assess student success in alignment with state measures of student success. These perspectives are largely associated with the

Presence of New Ideas at Southern State University, as institutional actors consider how to serve the diverse and evolving student population coming from the state.

Institutional actors at the University of Southern and Southern State University demonstrate clear understandings about which in-state students they serve. University of Southern attracts the highest achieving students from the state, with Southern State University serving students that might not otherwise get an opportunity to attend a research institution. Southern State University is particularly explicit in acknowledging their student profile is less academically rigorous and significantly more racial diverse, demonstrated in table 8. Both institutions also share concerns about the continuously increasing student profile, and the impact on existing students and student success efforts. This demonstrates a nuanced understanding of regional neighbors, and how they might be considered in institutional student success discourses.

Institutional actors from both institutions speak to the significant role state demographics and state higher education policy playe in influencing their student success efforts. Both institutions place high importance on serving students of the state, congruent with their high percentages of in-state students shown in table 8. Sentiments about students of the state are absent from narratives at Midwest State University. This is possibly related to significantly lower percentage of in-state students at Midwest State University, but contradictory to its land-grant mission. The strong in-state student narratives are likely influenced by University of Southern being a land-grant institution

and by both University of Southern and Southern State University receiving

approximately one third of their funding from the state as seen in Table 8.

Predictive analytics and capacity building. Participants from each of the case

study sites name challenges with application of institutional assessment data. Midwest

State University and Southern State University have similar approaches to addressing

challenges with data and assessment, which contribute to Knowledge Transfer at each

institution. Midwest State University and Southern State University both use predictive

analytics as an approach to enhance academic advising. They both work with a third-

party company that provides analytical capacity for large stores of student enrollment

data. The analysis of this data yields perspectives that are used to more intentionally

direct undergraduate advising efforts. Southern State University has been using this

approach for several years and emerged as a national leader in this approach to student

success; supported by several articles provided by interview participants. The work of

Southern State University is repeatedly mentioned by interview participants at Midwest

State University as a successful example of this type of approach. Interview participants

at Midwest State University struggle with implementing predictive analytics, specifically

attributed to the reluctance of academic advisors. Their efforts to stimulate Knowledge

Transfer lead to calls for double-loop learning and other strategies to understand and

navigate resistance to the advising changes.

Each institution in this study strives to improve their data usage to ultimately

enhance student success efforts. Midwest State University and Southern State University

focus explicitly on individuals' dispositions on data usage and institutional capacity for collecting, interpreting, and applying data and research knowledge. Midwest State University is focused on expanding individual and institutional capacity for qualitative assessment to: 1) support the academic advisors' engagement with and use of predictive analytics and, 2) stimulate more comprehensive understandings of students' experiences, congruent with Cultivation of Doubt. Southern State University accomplished this through the coaching and training from a third-party company, and target hiring practices – intentionally selecting new staff members with robust assessment knowledge. All three institutions incentivize data-informed practice through: 1) structural accountability, like program funding requirements linked to demonstrated use of assessment data; and 2) offering financial incentives, such as grants, to faculty and administrators that use data drive the creating of new programs and efforts.

      Data politics. Institutional assessment data is central to campus conversations about student success. References to "data-driven" cultures emerge in each case, specifically the increasing prioritization of data-informed practice by senior leaders, governing boards, and state legislators. The emergent cultures, structures, and incentives around student success demonstrate an overwhelming prioritization and preference for quantitative institutional data. This quantitative priority is reflected in each institutions being primarily concerned with quantitative measures of student success, namely institutional measures of retention, persistence, graduation, or grad point average.

The ubiquitous focus on retention, persistence, and graduation at these institutions represent focus on a particularly narrow set of student outcomes. The exclusive focus on quantitative measures is a point of contention at Midwest State University and University of Southern, evidenced by the extensive critique from select participants from those institutions. The focus on "retention, progression, and graduation" at Southern State University is not contended, but several interview participants offered critique to make the case for the inclusion of more qualitative measures. Midwest State University and Southern State University both deploy resources for training and support to expand the assessment skills of institutional actors. It is not clear if these efforts include a focus on qualitative data. Findings from this study shed light on the tensions and barriers to student success that emerge when institutions operate within this narrow outcome focus. These findings provide empirical backing to the challenges that emerge within and across these institutions.

Issues accessing data are present at each case study site, but most explicitly at University of Southern and Southern State University. Interview participants speak about individuals' and institutional processes inhibiting their access to data, sometimes intentionally. According to comments from interview participants and CDA across cases, quantitative institutional data is necessary to garner support for new ideas or programs, to renewed funding existing programs, to create change in existing programs and departments. CDA at Southern State University reveals that change, even with access to data, is a luxury if not matched with necessary funding.

Faculty cultures. Faculty narratives present favorable and problematic faculty behaviors and cultures that impact student success in unique ways. Each institution is engaged, in some way, in providing opportunities for faculty to work in communities of practice to improve their classroom learning environments, work collectively with administrators to inform institution wide student success policies, or work to challenge problematic cultures and practices known to inhibit student success. These efforts contribute to the Presence of New Ideas, Knowledge Transfer, and Cultivation of Doubt, respectively.

Addressing problematic faculty issues is also a shared challenge across three institutions, evidenced in the themes and Critical Discourse Analysis. Interview participants' narratives call attention to faculty reluctance to engage in institutions student success efforts, divergent perspectives of student onus, and a lack of institutional accountability and consequence. Commentary from teaching and learning staff at Midwest State University, illustrate their intentional efforts to disrupt problematic cultures, but the faculty-as-victim discourse that emerged, potentially mitigates their efforts to change faculty cultures. Problematic faculty cultures and behavior are demonstrated in the socialization of new faculty, reluctance to engage in student success assessment, and perspectives of student onus. This is particularly interesting when considering that University of Southern serves fewer students than Midwest State University and have a hundred more instructional staff. Higher education teaching and learning discourses favor decreased student-to-faculty ratios and increased faculty

interaction (McCormick et al., 2013), but findings here identify faculty culture as an additional and necessary consideration.

Symbolic commitments. Participants at each institution reveal areas and efforts where individual or institutional practices did not match the individual or institutional commitments related to student success, congruent with espoused theory and theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005). These instances emerge in several themes and in Critical Discourse Analysis across each case. In exploring these cases of espoused theories versus theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Kezar, 2005) an additional consideration come to light based on the implication of the unfulfilled commitments. In some cases, institutions benefit from committing to particular practices, regardless of their success in implementing those practices. For example, institutional rhetoric committing to enhanced diversity and inclusion may assuage campus climate tensions and support increased enrollment of underrepresented students, which benefits the institution. If the institution falls short of their commitment, students who were influenced to attend the institution based on this rhetoric are left to endure tense, possible harmful campus environments. In these instances, not only are institutions not living up to their promises, they garner benefit while students are left underserved or negatively impacted, as was the case with Midwest State University.

Participants from each of the three institutions provide extensive commentary on the limitations related to data usage. Limitations in the institutional capacity to support

student success, particularly for historically underserved populations emerged at Midwest

State University. Access to data is inhibited at University of Southern and Southern State

University, affecting Knowledge Transfer. Despite the explicit "data driven" mandates

from institutional leaders, limited by resources and capacity inhibits the translation of

data into practice.

Discussion

Initially this study sought to explore the research to practice gap related to student

success in undergraduate higher education, focused particularly on NSSE student

engagement construct. The objectives stated in chapter 1: (1) to better the understand the

processes higher education institutions undergo to improve their student success efforts

and subsequent measures, (2) to explore what facilitates or inhibits translation of research

knowledge into practice, and (3) to identify best practices for the application of research

knowledge and best practice. The research question guiding this study is asks: How are

institutions that are dedicated to improving student success exploring, adopting, applying,

and evaluating research knowledge and best practice in support of student success?

Student engagement emerged as fitting point of departure, as most recent student success

literature is dominated by student engagement studies (Tinto, 2012). Additionally,

student engagement tools are a point of contention amongst researchers and scholars

(Campbell & Cabrera, 2011; Martínez-Alemán et al., 2015; McCormick & McClenney,

2012; Porter, 2011). Also, an assumed gap in the application of student engagement

concepts at higher education institutions exists, suggested by the stagnant engagement

measures at many institutions over the past decade (McCormick et al., 2013).

      In the initial phases of data collection, it became clear that the application of

student engagement knowledge was not a source of conflict or contention, with

institutions largely using student engagement strategies to facilitate student success. After

the first interview at Midwest State University, language in the interview protocol was

slightly adjusted to expand the scope of the study; student engagement language was

expanded to student success, and research knowledge was broadened to include

institutional assessment data. With that, the analysis of the information collected as a part

of this study attends to the research question and objectives in several ways. Findings

related to the first objective, uncover and challenge assumptions that influenced this

study.

      An assumption guiding this study, imparted by a large portion of student

engagement research, is that persistent institutional challenges with student success were

a function of the persistent research to practice gap. Additionally, the persistent research

to practice gap is attributed to reluctance, or inability, of researchers and practitioners to

work together effectively to explore challenges. While these assumptions may still hold

true, this findings from this study suggest structural, political, and cultural aspects of

institutional context play significant roles in inhibiting the effectiveness of student success efforts. Organizational learning concepts helped to identify practices that facilitate or inhibit the translation of research knowledge and institutional data into practice.

The most pronounced inhibitors are associated with decentralization as it pertains to student success efforts, faculty dispositions on student success, staff capacity for assessment and limited financial resources. Employing third-party companies to expand the structural and interpretive capacity for data use, and top-down accountability and support for data-informed effort are used to stimulate data usage. Best practices that emerged from this study include: hiring third-party analytics companies to analyze large stores of student data, using a pilot-and-scale approach to initiating new student success programs, considering assessment skills in the evaluation of potential new employees, and the creation of communities of practice across necessary student success stakeholders within institutions, particularly faculty.

Institutions with robust student-centered discourses have less dissonance in their conceptions of student success. Institutional actors at Southern State University and University of Southern offer consistent messages about their understandings of student success. Institutional actors, on behalf of units and departments, work to fit their own understandings and needs within dominant institutional conceptions of student success. While students are increasingly considered at these two institutions, there is still a lack of student participation in creating, guiding, and evaluating student success efforts.

Institutional actors see value in student-authored conceptions of student success, but no explicit efforts emerged in support of this goal.

Findings from this study uncover how research knowledge and data are used, addressing the four treatments (explore, adopt, apply, and evaluate) in the research question. Explicit references to research knowledge are rare, with an overwhelming preference toward institutional assessment data, prioritized by senior leaders. As such, exploration of research knowledge and data is largely dependent on quantitative institutional student success measures and political agendas associated with those measures, for example, the senior leaders' prioritization of second-year student retention at Midwest State University. Similarly, the assessment approach adopted aligns with institutional goals and political agendas of the institutions, which are extensively quantitative at all case study institutions.

Select interview participants do, however, speak to their personal adoption of qualitative assessment approaches to inform work in their respective areas. Participants allude to the use of research knowledge, but speak extensively about the application of assessment data. Research knowledge is cited in participants' reference to study abroad, internships, and other NSSE High-Impact Practices, although they are not references in association with NSSE. The extensive and explicit references to institutional data focus on the expectations of data-informed decision-making, barriers to accessing data and collaboration, building the capacity of institutional actors to consume and apply data, and

leveraging third-party companies to support translation of data into actionable information.

Tensions related to the use of assessment data are clear from participants' comments. It is clear that qualitative data is extensively used and almost exclusively preferred by senior leaders across institutions. Interview participants offer an abundance of critique, related to the homogeneity of "acceptable" data used to evaluate student success. Interest in more qualitative assessment efforts is seen across all cases, with Southern State University displaying the most progress in incorporating and valuing qualitative data.

Implications

Several implications emerge from the results of this study. Mentioned above, it is imperative that those seeking to advance student success expand their conceptions of the research-to-practice gap to include the institutional context(s) that structurally and cultural shape decision making of institutional actors, and the national and global higher education discourses that influence the creation and application of knowledge.

Synchronization and transparency. Institutions seeking to improve student success efforts should consider how stakeholders understand student success and how those understandings are networked together. It was clear that institutions displaying more intentionality and accountability in managing conceptions of student success across the institution spoke less about challenging conceptions of student success and more

about expanding and extending conceptions. Incorporating explicit commitments and

expectations for student success practice in institutional strategic plans, tenure

documents, and other policies could increase synchronization. Also, increased

accountability measures that support adherence to the aforementioned policy documents

are important.

Exploring the text and talk used to communicate individual and institutional

conceptions of student success is vital. Several participants across each case articulate

commitments to student success, but the application of Critical Discourse Analysis

reveals sentiments contradictory to student success efforts. These subtle but significant

contradictions likely inhibit the effective of student success efforts. This is clearly

demonstrated at Midwest State University, one of the efforts touted to support students of

color being is revealed to be largely symbolic and minimally impactful. The application

of Critical Discourse Analysis in the construction and review of existing and emerging

policies is a potential strategy. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis in the evaluation of

candidates for student success positions, especially senior positions can also help to

ensure institutional actors are fully committed to student success.

Prioritizing student voice. The absence of student-voice across cases emerges

explicitly and implicitly through the narratives of interview participants. Individuals and

institutions seeking to advance student success efforts should work to incorporate

student-voice in every step of the student success efforts at the institution. In the steps

leading up to the creation of new initiatives, student-voice can help to limit the need for

revision and adjustment later on. Student participation in the facilitation of student

success efforts, with appropriate training and support, can help to cultivate buy-in and

investment from students as evidenced in the supplemental instruction program at

Southern State University. When evaluating the impact of student success efforts or

student success data, student-voice is imperative to the Cultivation of Doubt, as they are

direct sources of experiences and data. To make the inclusion of student voice a priority,

institutions can work to expand the inclusion of students of campus committees and work

groups, as well as compensating students financially or academically (e.g. independent

study credits) to regularly participant in the assessment and evaluation efforts at the

institution.

Selection and development of human resources. The Bauman (2005) human

resource management approach to organizational learning is a pronounced strategy used

by institutions to expand their capacity for data use. Using this approach to lead hiring

efforts and guide professional development of those working to support student success

could be a long-term strategy in driving the student success culture within institutions.

This can be accomplished through evaluating explicit and implicit dispositions toward

students, specific academic support strategies, and other student success efforts. This will

likely involve reviewing human resources policies and practices.

Considering the professional development trajectories of those working to support

student success can work to stimulate ambition and innovation. Findings from this study

demonstrate institutions value in skill-building for those working to support student

success, as well as the promise in expanding and institutionalizing these efforts. This also

has implications for the training and development of aspiring higher education

professionals, namely graduate students. In addition to achieving successful measures, a

number of participants aspire to play significant roles in the experiences of students and

to create environments that students value as a part of their experience. These aspirations

invite more qualitative considerations, including student-authored conceptions of student

success.

Faculty socialization and student success. Results of this study call attention to

persistent and sometimes unaddressed culture within institutions and across higher

education that work to imped or inhibit student success efforts. Efforts are largely

oriented around building new cultures, with limited attention to dismantling problematic

cultures. The Center for Teaching and Learning at Midwest State University has

considerable efforts to cultivate new faculty that support student success, as well as

stimulating and incentivizing teaching innovations among current faculty. There was no

discussion, however, on interrupting the problematic socialization of pre-tenure faculty.

Institutions committed to enhancing student success must work to address and dismantle

existing cultures as well as building new cultures. Student success accountability is

limited by tenure. Reconstructing the tenure process to incorporate teaching and other

strategies for student success support will help drive this change. To this end, faculty and

administrators understanding of the tenure process, tenure documents, and the timelines

along which these documents are reviewed and reaffirmed is also important.

Resources, data, and power. Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the impact of data and resources across case sites. Quantitative data operates as currency, necessary for departments and programs to gain and sustain resources and influence. The increased focused on measurable outcomes also subtly prioritizes the student populations at the institutions with statistically significant representation. This becomes a particular concern when evaluating the effectiveness of specific programs on target populations at the institutions. Without reliable or compelling quantitative data, work to address the needs of particular populations is increasingly difficult and scarcely resourced. At institutions like those in this study, this has the potential to impact American Indian students, students with disabilities who chose not to register with disability services, and trans identified students. More equitable assessment and evaluation strategies can help to mitigate this challenge.

Having limited resources inhibits department change efforts, suggesting that programs with ineffective student success efforts and limited resources are likely to die before they are able to improve; with unknown impact on the students they seek to serve. Making resources available, such as institutional grants, is a rare but promising practices to support smaller institutional change efforts. Additionally, leveraging graduate students at these institutions could be a less expensive and more flexible way to expand human capital and stimulate innovative, research-informed change efforts. Leveraging the learning experiences for aspiring higher education professionals to enhance existing

efforts a strategy providing immediate institutional impact, and long-term benefit for the field of higher education.

Directions for Future Research

This study contributes to existing bodies of literature on organizational learning in higher education and student success in public research universities. Organizational learning concepts has been deemed useful several higher education scholars, but largely underutilized in contemporary work (Bauman, 2005; Bensimon, 2005). This study offers a contemporary application of organizational learning theories in the context of public research institutions. Building on the perspectives of Tinto (2012), Harper and Quaye (2009), and McCormick et al. (2013), this study offers perspectives to understand the process within institutions that contribute to or militate against student success. Findings from this study offer considerations necessary for the successful application of research knowledge, data, or best practices, particularly at public research institutions.

As sentiments within student success and student engagement literature have shifted from student onus to institutional onus (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Tinto, 2012), studies that explore institutional actors' roles in student success are needed. Also, future work exploring the impact of institutional context on the theory-to-practice gap, with specific attention to faculty and administrators is necessary. Current bodies of research are also ripe for increased use of innovative and interdisciplinary methodological approaches to study student success. Critical Discourse Analysis is one particular

approach, gaining momentum in higher education research that has helped offer new nuances perspectives to persistent higher education phenomena (Martinez-Aleman, et al., 2015).

Limitations

Several limitations exist that should be considered when reading this study and when considering application of the findings presented. First, the results from this study cannot be generalized to other similar institutions. Qualitative research and case study methodology are ideal for generating deep understandings situated in a specific context, rather than generalized meanings across settings (Merriam, 2009). The rich and contextual understandings here can, however, be used to inform practice or similar studies at other, similar institutions (Cresswell, 2012).

This study explores multiple sites with the hope of gaining a nuanced understanding of how institutional context contributes to success or challenges in promoting student success. Notwithstanding this effort, the institutions represent a very small portion of the large, public, research institutions. Additionally, because this study takes place and three major research universities, it usefulness may be limited to institutions with similar research profiles. The institutions were geographically located in two areas, one in the American Midwest and two in the American South. Results from this study may be less useful to inform practice for similar institutions in other geographical regions.

In addition to the small number of sites, each site provided between five and six interview participants. While, these participants oversee large functions or functional areas related to student success, they only reflect a small population of institutional actors at their respective institutions. Also, the information collected is based on participants experiences and perspectives of others work and experience, which is common in case study approaches (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

The application of Critical Discourse Analysis was use exclusively to interrogate the emergent themes. Future studies could expand the use of Critical Discourse Analysis and invite critical paradigms in the study design. Also, more can be done to connect the themes that emerged to larger discourses and social practices. Modality and intertextuality were minimally present in the analysis, compared to the use of tone and presupposition. Continued interrogation of the narratives presented, with a more intentional focus on modality and interextuality could strengthen the analysis and subsequent arguments.

Conclusion

Observations from Baer and Campbell (2012) on the demands of higher education are not likely to decrease as there are "…large and growing gaps between what the nation needs from postsecondary education and the current – and, likely future – production capacity of the system to meet these needs" (p. 4). Contributing to these demands is the constantly changing environment in which institutions exist, with particular attention to

the students whose success we seek to support, and what is expected of them when they

depart from higher education. Higher education institutions are well intentioned in their

desires to improve student outcomes, but are not equipped to respond to the changing

demands.

Continuing to challenge, complicate, expand our understandings of institutional

context, processes, and phenomena is important. Continuing to update, question, and

enhance our understandings of students, their needs, and what is demanded of them

during and after higher education is vital. Continuing to reconfigure, diversify, invigorate

our approaches to research and practice are paramount for higher education institutions to

not only survive, but also thrive in a rapidly changing national and global context.

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Appendix A

Interview protocol

Presence of New Ideas (PNI), Cultivation of Doubt (CD), Knowledge Transfer (KT)

1. Tell me about your position at the institution. What role do you play in supporting student success?
2. How does your institution define student engagement? How does this fit with your personal perspective on student engagement?
3. What is the history of student engagement at your institution? How do you fit within that history?
4. Describe the climate for new ideas in the areas you oversee. Is this congruent with or divergent from the institutional climate? – PNI
5. Who or what triggers new ideas and innovation in student engagement policy and practices? - PNI
6. What are the expectations around the creation of new and innovative student engagement practices? How are these expectations communicated and enforced? – PNI
7. In what ways has the institutions' history enhanced or inhibited current student engagement efforts?
8. How do you, or staff within your area, reject complacency in student engagement practices? – CD
9. What are shared frustration for those who support student engagement at your institution?
10. Who has credibility in conversations around student engagement efforts? Who does not?
11. Describe the role that faculty play in student engagement efforts?
12. Describe the relationship between assessment and student engagement efforts at your institution. – KT
13. At your level, what are the most important considerations necessary for decisions about student engagement efforts? - KT
14. What would students say about their engagement experiences here? Who would they say it to?
15. How much agency do students feel they have in crafting their student experience?
16. Notwithstanding your progress, what do you see as the areas of growth? - CD
17. Of all the things you have shared today, what would you reiterate as the most important to understanding student engagement at your institution?

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Letter

March 10, 2015

Dear Colleague:

My Name is Leonard Taylor and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Organizational Leadership and Policy Development at the University of Minnesota. I am conducting an original research study as a part of my doctoral study. The purpose of my study is to explore how higher education institutions use knowledge from student engagement research and best practices to improve their engagement efforts. The overall goal of this study is to offer higher education institutions strategies and best practices in applying student engagement knowledge to improve student success outcomes.

I have selected [Insert institution] as one of the sites for this study. In particular, I am interested in the approaches and perspectives of staff and administrators in support of student engagement initiatives on their campuses. I am asking you to consider a one-hour confidential interview to provide perspective on this topic. If you agree to this interview, I will provide you with more in-depth information about the study and measures to ensure confidentiality of your participation and responses.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Leonard D. Taylor
Doctoral Candidate
taylorl@umn.edu

Appendix C

Verbal Consent Script

My Name is Leonard Taylor, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Organizational Leadership and Policy Development at the University of Minnesota. I am conducting a research study on student engagement efforts in higher education. This research will help me to understand how higher education institutions facilitate student engagement efforts on their respective campuses. The overall goal is to support institutions in their efforts to enhance engagement and student success outcomes.

Today you will be participating in a individual interview which should take approximately one hour. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, you may stop at any time. Participation and subsequent responses will be confidential. Your name or any specific identifying information will not appear anywhere in the final write up. If I use a direct quote from you, I will use a vague description to describe you – for example, campus administrator A, or campus staff member B. There are minimal risks associated with this interview. If you agree to participate in this interview, please say "yes" into the audio recorder. (Wait for response).

With your permission, this interview will be audio taped. The tapes and data transcription will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my office and kept until my analysis of the data is completed in 2015. The files will then be destroyed. Except for staff at the transcription service, I will have sole access to this data. May I have your permission to audio tape this interview? (If yes, keep the recorder on, if no, turn it off after script is finished).

If you would like a copy of this letter for your records, please let me know and I will give you a copy now. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at 326 17th Avenue SE Unit 119, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55414. My phone number is 414.795.5259. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board at 612.626.5654. You help is greatly appreciated.

Appendix D

Institutional Approval –University of Minnesota

Leonard Taylor Jr <taylorl@umn.edu>

1502E63369 - PI Taylor - IRB - Exempt Study Notification
1 message

irb@umn.edu <irb@umn.edu>   Wed, Mar 25, 2015 at 1:22 PM
To: taylorl@umn.edu

TO : dweerts@umn.edu, taylorl@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1502E63369

Principal Investigator: Leonard Taylor

Title(s):
Exploring the Application of Student Engagement Knowledge in Higher Education

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota HRPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study?s expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654.

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at http://eresearch.umn.edu/ to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

We value your feedback. We have created a short survey that will only take a couple of minutes to complete. The questions are basic, but your responses will provide us with insight regarding what we do well and areas

Appendix E

Midwest State University CDA Excerpts

LEONARD: Is there one thing that you would reiterate as the most important to
              understanding this work, or how you support this work?
SHANNON: So its' ok… If we're gonna do the hodgepodge thing that's OK because
              the institution is BIG. But *how do those puzzle pieces fit together in a
              meaningful way..* is a piece that I think can happen, and it would
              benefit us. If that's a limitation then- WELL.. let's try to figure out how
              do we translate that limitation to something more MEANINGFUL. If
              we can't get everything to work together in a way that seems
              apparent, I think there could be ways to better coordinate these
              individual work-pieces to get a OVERARCHING institutional sense of
              what it means. I mean.. for ME, we can all work at it in different ways.
              But let's at least ACKNOWLEDGE that we are working with different
              definitions… because then we can figure out.. if there are different
              definitions – okay, then what. But it kinda stops at – *let's just say
              "student success"* and everyone just kinda fills in the blank with what
              that means.

LEONARD: What do you think are the most important considerations necessary
              when people are making decisions about student success efforts?
AVERY: You know – so we kind of – we DON'T really know where we are
              going. We are doing WELL but we don't know where we are going to
              do BETTER. I consider myself PART of that, even though I haven't
              been here long – you know – I need to drive that agenda. So, yeah… to
              me.. THAT is the key. People need to have vision of where we are
              going and they need a plan of how we are going to get there. EVEN if
              we are so decentralized… then maybe that is a combination of plan
              and what is the linkage between all of those different plans? WE
              DON'T HAVE THAT… We talk.. We communicate well. We collaborate
              well. We're supportive of innovation and entrepreneurship – and all
              those good things – but there isn't a DIRECTION. There is no strategic
              direction.

LEONARD: What are the most important considerations necessary when making decisions about student success support for the campus, or maybe even individually in departments or functional areas?

JAIME: There HAS to be alignment. Alignment of the STUDENTS' needs, the faculty needs, the departmental needs, the whole UNIVERSITY needs. You don't get there quickly – you have to gather the DATA that way too.

LEONARD: How would you describe the role that faculty at [Midwest] State play in supporting student success efforts?

JAIME: It's KIND of a mixed message sometimes... If you're at a RESEARCH university its made PREtty clear to faculty that they're gonna LIVE and die by their research and writing. And so.. it plays – often, AGAINST what they do in the classroom. IN FACT.. a LOT of people are advised – not by US – but others in their department.. *Just BARELY scrape by, in your classroom. GET your TENure.. and THEN you can do well.* [...] So.. I am ALL about student success. But I don't want to KILL my faculty in the process.

LEONARD: What do you see as areas of growth or things that still need to be addressed or attended to?

KENDALL: A WHOLE LONG LAUNDRY list of student populations – or things – that we haven't had TIME to get to.

LEONARD: Or, are there some that stand out at the top of your list?

KENDALL: YEAH.. well – we HAVEN'T narrowed the gap of majority-versus-minority student success rate. We pay LIP-service attention to it sometimes.. and we look at the data – we've got PROGRAMS in place – that's ANOTHER one where – we've got LOTS of programs in place.. but the programs maybe aren't doing EXACTLY what we need them to do.. because we STILL have a significant gap there.

Appendix F

Southern State University CDA Excerpts

LEONARD: So kind of circling back to one of the things that you mentioned, how
             does the University of Southern, from your perspective, define student
             success?

DORIAN: Well.. uhm – we have a number of indicators of success – *Uhm* and I
             guess ONE of the things we DO at a large institution like this – even
             though we have an institution strategic plan and there are
             BENCHMARKS for student success in that plan – we operate in a very
             DECENTRALIZED manner.

LEONARD: How would you describe the role that faculty play?

JESSE: Faculty – it varies. Because we ALSO have an honors college… Some of
             our REALLY GREAT faculty – who are world renowned, and winning
             national awards, and always on the website and the paper – often
             THOSE are the folks who are teaching honors students.. So for THEM
             it's sort of like.. a UTOPIA of smart kids.

LEONARD: What would you identify as some shared frustrations for those who
             work to support student success at UGA.

JESSE: It is THAT type of climate – there is NO ROOM for students NOT to be
             smart, or NOT to do well… SO I think the frustration can come from
             people who are ACTUALLY WORKING with the students – let's say.. an
             ADVISOR – or HOUSING in some capacity. Where.. they [are] seeing
             STUDENTS who SAY – *I SEE what the universe is saying about how
             smart we are. But I am not feeling too smart right now.. I'm FAILING.*

LEONARD: So shifting gears a little bit, within the Office for Service Learning or
             maybe other units you've worked with, how do you see people
             working to reject complacency around practices that support
             students?

DORIAN: We OBVIOUSLY want the most qualified students we can GET.. But
             sometimes, that works against some of our DIVERSITY efforts – and
             MAINLY because of some standardized TESTS that's happening –
             which is REALLY not an indicator that we should be putting much

faith in. Some of those conversations are very contentious.. there is a lot of pressure. EVERY YEAR our PRESIDENT wants to be able to say – *this is our most HIGHLY qualified class...* I think what we ALSO want him to say is that [University of Southern] is also more diversified.

LEONARD: So I'm wondering how would you describe the climate for new ideas in your area or across the university?

DORIAN: Just from MY perspective working with faculty in assessment – to SOME that is a new idea. It's been around for a LONG time – the PUSH to assess student learning, is something they've HEARD for a LONG long time – but it's sort of LOOMED out there – like this THING that EVENTUALLY they have to do it... *When and where and why?* – That's ONE that I think there is a little more foot-dragging.. But its gone from – the CLIMATE has shifted from – *no way no how, that's just big brother, I don't want to do tha*t – to – *ALRIGHT this things not going away.. I need to learn how to do that.*

LEONARD: How would you...So it sounds like there has been some change like creating a freshman college program, this new banner system, and even the shift that you mentioned before with the office from being more instruction to student services, how would you describe the climate for new ideas in this area? If there are new things that come up, how are they received?

TAYLOR: At [UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN] they are received pretty well. Like ANY place, there are DEFINITELY some road blocks.. Sometimes people think SO narrowly – and I won't mention any OFFICES – but some people are.. what's the word.. TERRITORIAL – about their data. Whether that is.. NOT sharing data. Whether that's HANDING data off and saying they have NOTHING to do with it – or you cannot access it because that is not THEIR office, so HANDS off.

Appendix G

Southern State University CDA Excerpts

LEONARD: So of all the things that you've shared today, what would you identify
            or reiterate as the most important to understanding how [Southern]
            State works to support students at the institution?

MORGAN: I think the fact that we're DATA driven in our decision-making – that
            we're not afraid of ASSESSMENT. […] The one REALLY great thing
            about having a STRONG institutional research unit at a university.. is
            that we become – as an anthropologist I HATE the word –
            OBJECTIVE… We REALLY don't spin data.. and people TRUST us
            because we DON'T spin it, and THAT.. I think is critically important for
            institutional researchers.

LEONARD: Mm. Ok. And at your level, what would you articulate as the most
            important considerations necessary for making decisions around
            supporting student success efforts?

KENDALL: So there are things that are NICE to do, and there are things that we
            kind of HAVE to do with the FUNDS that we have. So something that I
            look at A LOT is – *are we leveraging our FUNDS, our resources, and our
            TIME efficiently?* When you've got SEVEN people in FOUR offices
            running a DOZEN programs you can't have a DUD. We just DON'T have
            the time in the day to do that. If we HAVE a dud, we fix the dud, or we
            scrap the dud, and that's it.

LEONARD: Ok. So how do you or staff – and it could be you, staff within your area,
            or partners that you see across campus – reject complacency in
            supporting student success?

DEVIN: I think OTHER offices who may not have as much RESOURCES.. may
            not HAVE – I want to say this how – LUXURY… or maybe even the
            ABILITY to make the change, if it requires more MAN-hours – or
            something like that. But it – I think in SOME cases some stakeholders –
            and AGAIN that's not just at [Southern] State – I think it's a lot of other
            schools – our priority is student success. We are.. because we're a
            SMALL office – we depend on a lot of OTHER offices to contribute or
            collaborate, and there are PRIORITIES. Well THEIR priority is NOT
            necessarily student success.

LEONARD: Ok. Hm. What would you articulate as some shared frustrations for those who work to support student success at [Southern] State?

KENDALL: (Sighs) And this is.. this is MY.. kind of VIEW of the landscape. It's a VERY fine line – or it CAN be a very fine line – between ACADEMIC support and hand-holding.. and WHERE do you cross the line?

LEONARD: So I'd be interested to hear a little bit about the, what your opinion on the role that faculty play in this work around supporting student success.

DEVIN: You know – OR.. or.. the PLEASURE of weeding out students as fast as possible… you know that CULTURE is not here – you know. I don't see it. I'm not saying it doesn't EXIST, but if it DOES it's an EXTREMELY small minority. What I see MORE.. are FACULTY members who want students to understand that the success depends on THEM.. on the STUDENT side – not SO much on the faculty side. So that – you know that I was sharing the stage with a colleague – and she's in economics – and ONE thing she SAID.. that was – and I've stolen it MANY times since then – is that.. it's like.. *I've NEVER failed a student in my class. Students have FAILED my class, but I have NEVER failed a student.* And that DISTINCTION – to me – is critical.. that *I'm NOT here to fail you.*

Appendix H

Du Bois: Representing Discourse

Transcription Symbols by Delicacy:
Levels 1–4

MEANING	SYMBOL	COMMENTS
Level 1: Preliminary		
words	word word	space before & after marks boundary (standard orthography)
word sequence	word1 word2	words written in conventional order, e.g. left-right (standard)
speaker change		start new line when new speaker begins speaking
turn sequence		speaker change sequence marks approximate turn sequence
intonation unit		each intonation unit is written on its own line
speaker attribution	JILL;	semicolon follows name in CAPS
Level 2: Basic		
pause, untimed	...	pause lasting 0.2 seconds or more
marginal words		*uh, um, mm, unh-unh*, etc. (quasi-standard orthography)
laugh	@	one per pulse or particle of laughter
overlap (first set)	[ ]	align left square brackets vertically
overlap (2nd set)	[₂]	align left brackets, co-indexed with subscript numeral
unit sequence		top-to-bottom page sequence marks intonation unit sequence
unintelligible	###	one symbol per syllable
uncertain	#you're #kidding	transcribed words are uncertain
comment	((WORDS))	analyst comment on any topic
recording source		use comment notation to cite source of recording
conventions		use comment notation to cite transcription conventions used
Level 3: Boundary		
terminative intonation	.	intonational morpheme signaling finality (period)
continuative intonation	,	intonational morpheme signaling continuation (comma)
appeal intonation	?	combines with final/continuing: ?. ?,
truncated intonation unit	—	aborting projected IU (em dash; *or* two hyphens)
truncated/cut-off word	wor–	aborting projected word (en dash; *or* hyphen at end of word)
breath (in)	(H)	audible inhalation
exhale	(Hx)	audible exhalation
pause, timed	(1.2)	pause duration in seconds and tenths of seconds
lag/prosodic lengthening	:	colon marks slowing of local tempo, segment lengthening
hold/micropause	..	< 150 milliseconds; brief silence, break in phonation
linking (absence of break)	_	in rapid speech (underscore/low line)
suspended IU	&	use only when 2nd speaker intervenes

Du Bois: Representing Discourse

MEANING	SYMBOL	COMMENTS
sentence start	*Capital initial*	Capitalize for beginning of new discourse "sentence"
pseudograph	~Jill	name change to preserve anonymity (tilde)
index/line numbers	1	number each line for referencing
timestamp	<T=154.762>	time in seconds from start of recording

Level 4: Interaction

vocalism	(COUGH)	various notations: (SNIFF), (SOB), (YAWN), etc.
click	(TSK)	alveolar click
glottal stop, creak	(%)	separate vocalism = separate "word"
manner/quality	<MISC> </MISC>	various notations for manner of speaking
laughing words	@you're @kidding	laugh symbol marks laughter during each word
laughing words	<@> words </@>	marks laughter during words (for 7+ words)
vox	<VOX> </VOX>	voice of another
quotation quality	<QUOTE>	quote voice that is less than a true vox
gesture, gaze, body, co-action		see references on transcribing video
participation framework	JILL/TEL;	slash symbol precedes interactional context or frame
role voicing	JILL=JIM;	speaker speaks in role of another
recipient	JILL\DOG;	backslash symbol precedes addressee
non-interactive agent	±COMPUTER;	marks source or agent of sound or event
multiple speakers	JILL+JIM;	for simultaneous joint action of individuals
group of speakers	AUDIENCE++;	for simultaneous joint action of crowd
code-switch	<L2> words </L2>	switching between languages
code-switch (lg. specified)	<L2=SPANISH>	switching between languages

[rev. 23-Jun-2006]