"IT’S HARD TO BE AN ENEMY OF STUDENT SUCCESS": A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARDS STUDENT SUCCESS

Lisa R. Lawless
Northern Illinois University, z0122852@students.niu.edu

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ABSTRACT

"IT’S HARD TO BE AN ENEMY OF STUDENT SUCCESS": A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARDS STUDENT SUCCESS

Lisa Fant Lawless, Ed.D.
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2024
Gudrun Nyunt, Co-Director
Quortne Hutchings, Co-Director

Literature on how colleges change is limited and theoretical in nature. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how Retention University changed their culture and norms to increase student persistence and retention. Data was collected with semi-structured interviews with 16 participants at a large, public university in the southeast. Four primary themes emerged from data: (1) leaders play an important role in fostering organizational change; (2) leaders need to be strategic about how they foster change; (3) leaders need to consider how organizational contexts might hinder change; (4) and value the people and process. Implications for further research and practice are discussed.
"IT’S HARD TO BE AN ENEMY OF STUDENT SUCCESS”: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARDS STUDENT SUCCESS

BY

LISA FANT LAWLESS
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A DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Gudrun Nyunt
Quortne Hutchings
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My parents for instilling the belief in myself that I am capable of doing anything.

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To my dissertation committee: Dr. Quortne Hutchings and Dr. Xiaodan Hu – I learned a lot in your respective courses. The unspoken messages are the most important: humanity still exists in higher education, there is great responsibility to do something with the knowledge I gained in this program, and to continue learning beyond coursework. A special thank you to Dr. Gudrun Nyunt: Your encouragement, feedback, and concrete advice really helped an often-uncertain student. Thank you for your patience, care, and thoughtful feedback. I appreciate your collaboration and dedication to this project.

The many folks at Retention University who agreed to meet with someone they had no reason to out of their commitment to higher education and student success.
DEDICATION

To Brady and Eli: you can do anything you set your mind to. Love you lots.
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The dissertation of practice is a scholarly work grounded in professional practice and informed by research and theory to design innovative solutions (Perry, 2015). Uniquely positioned in the field of education, the purpose of the dissertation of practice is to prepare students to become scholar-practitioners who blend professional knowledge and research to improve their understanding of the problem of practice while contributing to literature and the field of higher education (Perry, 2015).

The dissertation of practice consists of three chapters: (1) The dissertation of practice research proposal (Chapter 1) to highlight the systematic approach that guided this inquiry. This study's purpose was to examine how postsecondary institutions can work across institutional silos to increase college student persistence and retention. Kezar’s (2018) processes that enhance ethical approaches to change framed this inquiry to better understand strategies to engage campus stakeholders to enhance student success outcomes. (2) A manuscript (Chapter 2) designed for publication. This chapter provided me with an opportunity to write a publishable paper. As I was analyzing data, the most interesting findings focused on institutional change and culture, and less about stakeholder engagement. As a result, I shifted the focus of the study to this new direction. The overarching research question changed slightly and is now: How can postsecondary institutions change their culture and norms to increase college student persistence and retention? (3) A scholarly reflection (Chapter 3). In this final chapter, I reflect on the dissertation process itself and future applications to research and practice.
CHAPTER 1
DISSERTATION OF PRACTICE RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Conversations about increasing student success and retention are omnipresent at colleges and universities today. However, this is not a new challenge for higher education. Research on student persistence and retention gained momentum in 1975 with Tinto’s interactionist theory followed by his revised theory of student departure which has served as a foundation for student success efforts and research (Tinto, 1975). Many have built upon Tinto’s early retention work to consider students’ backgrounds and pre-college attributes as well as social and external environmental factors that may contribute to the likelihood of an institution retaining a student. More recently, Museus’s (2014) culturally engaging campus environments model emphasizes the role the campus environment and culture have on students of diverse backgrounds and their ability to persist.

Retention and persistence initiatives need to consider student diversity on today’s college campuses as the diversity of college students has drastically increased in the past ten years. In 2011 American Indian, Asian, Black, Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students comprised 14.9% of undergraduate students enrolled at four-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). Ten years later, the same student population constituted 25.2% of enrolled undergraduate students (NCES, 2021a). Yet, those same populations still fall behind their white peers in graduation rates. In 2021, white students earned 52.7% of degrees conferred at four-year undergraduate institutions compared to 34.6% of degrees earned by
students of diverse backgrounds during the same period (NCES, 2021b). These changing demographics should have academic administrators pause and consider whether current structures and services are built to support the retention and persistence of a diverse student body.

Students from minoritized backgrounds face multiple barriers to college persistence including economic, academic, and social/cultural barriers outside their control. Financial barriers negatively impact the academic success of first-generation students (Perna & Jones, 2013), Latino/a student persistence (Crisp et al., 2015), and men of color (Harris III & Wood, 2016). Additionally, racism, stereotypes, and cultural mismatches affect multiple student populations. Due to race-related assumptions Latino/a students may experience limited access to faculty members (Anaya & Cole, 2001) as well as language stigmas in the classroom (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003). Lack of culturally relevant pedagogies and seeing faculty and administrators with similar identities contribute to the attrition of African American men (Dancy II, 2010). Students with racial/ethnic backgrounds who feel more culturally aligned with the institution they attend are more likely to persist (Warzón & Ginsburg-Block, 2008). Said differently, a cultural mismatch for a student and their campus environment may affect their persistence (Warzón & Ginsburg-Block, 2008). Programs to support the persistence of students from diverse backgrounds need to consider the multiple barriers experienced by a variety of student populations in the planning and delivery to have an observable impact (Harris III & Wood, 2016).

To support students' academic, personal, and professional needs postsecondary institutions have created a variety of programs and services. Academic support programs include tutoring, study skills workshops, developmental math, and first year seminars. Counseling and
recreation centers intend to provide personal wellness opportunities outside the classroom while career centers help students prepare for life after college. The overall goal of these services is to support student persistence. However, these ad hoc programs and services only address short-term student needs but do not provide long-term solutions to improve student retention (Connolly & Lukas, 2002; Toma, 2010). Separate and isolated student services as mentioned above continue to exist with student barriers. To unlock support, students must be knowledgeable of services, be able to self-identify needs, and be available during office hours. Institutional barriers that make key resources difficult to access will reduce the likelihood that men of color will seek them (Harris III & Wood, 2016). For example, services that are only offered in person or during convenient times for staff may affect how widely used services are, regardless of how helpful resources like academic advising may be (Harris III & Wood, 2016). Crisp et al. (2015) also note that Latino/a students who worked many hours to afford school found it difficult to connect with campus support services.

Without a holistic approach that addresses institutional barriers to student success stand-alone initiatives will fail (Hitch et al., 2012). Sustainable improvements typically cross traditional organization boundaries, such as collaborations between academic and student affairs (Kuh et al., 2005). Unfortunately, many institutions operate in “silos” (Kuh 1996, p. 145) making communication, collaboration, partnerships challenging. Organizational charts may contribute to this divide as they identify structures, appropriate relationships, and communication channels. The historical divide between academic affairs and student affairs is concerning as staff and faculty in those divisions interact most with students. Stakeholder support at many different levels within an institution is necessary to breakdown silos and create transformative change. While there are many studies on stakeholder management in the business sector, there is very
little research on stakeholder management strategies within the higher education sector (Chan, 2021). More research is needed to understand how postsecondary institutions can break down institutional silos and engage stakeholders across campus to improve student retention and persistence. This study will attempt to better understand strategies to engage campus stakeholders that may lead to increased student success outcomes.

**Case Study**

Retention University (RU), a pseudonym, is a four-year public research institution in the southeastern United States. RU is comprised of 13 colleges with over 200 undergraduate majors and collectively serves more than 50,000 students pursuing undergraduate, graduate, specialist, and professional degree programs across multiple campuses. To support student retention and persistence RU worked to improve communication across departments, reimagine professional roles and create new departments (McMurtrie, 2022). Specifically, they created the Student Outreach and Support (SOS) office, a pseudonym. SOS utilizes a holistic approach to student support and proactively contacts students to connect them with appropriate support services. By doing so, SOS promotes a more collaborative approach to supporting students. Since implementing these changes, RU has seen an increase in first-year retention rates. Using RU as the research site, the purpose of this case study is to examine how postsecondary institutions can create change. The research study is guided by the following research question and sub-questions:

- How can postsecondary institutions change their culture and norms to increase college student persistence and retention?
  - How does SOS work across institutional silos?
- How do SOS and internal stakeholders engage with each other?
- How do organizational structures at RU support campus partnerships?

**Key terms:**

RU: Retention University (RU) is a large, public institution in the southeast. It is classified as a R1, Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.

SOS: Student Outreach and Support office. SOS works individually with undergraduate students who may be facing barriers impacting their academic success.

Retention: An institutionally-focused measure as it focuses on students’ continued enrollment from one specified point to the next within a specific college or university (Higher Learning Commission, 2019)

Persistence: A student-centric metric focused on behaviors that indicate continued enrollment (Higher Learning Commission, 2019)

Stakeholder: “Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46)

**Literature Review**

To show how this study builds on existing literature, I will first provide an overview of retention as it relates to how postsecondary institutions are responding to calls for improving student retention. Next, I will review higher education organizations and structures followed by stakeholder management. This foundation will lead to a discussion on Student Affairs and Academic Affairs partnerships and the unique aspects of change at postsecondary institutions.
Finally, a review of Kezar’s (2018) processes that enhance ethical approaches to change will provide a framework to explore organizational change and cross-campus collaborations to increase college student persistence and retention.

Retention

Postsecondary institutions have clear incentives to focus on student retention, as every student retained is one less student to be recruited in successive classes (Hossler et al., 2013). In addition, with the rise of college rankings publications, student retention and graduation rates have become important indicators of institutional quality (Hossler et al., 2013). Unfortunately, increasing enrollments in the last few decades have not been met by similar increases in student retention and completion (Bound et al., 2010; Reason, 2009). High attrition rates result in a loss of fees, tuition, and future alumni contributors (DeBerrad et al., 2004).

To improve student retention, institutions have implemented a wide range of support services and intervention programs (Braxton et al., 2007; Siedman, 2005). Strategies include advising, mentoring, tutoring, and counseling that span the academic, personal, and career development that students may need (Braxton et al., 2007). In addition to student services, policies and practices that focus on student retention such as required academic advisement appointments each semester or mandatory new student orientation exist on many college campuses (Hossler et al., 2013). Research has also indicated that early identification of specific student behaviors can be utilized to develop and connect students to programs and services to help them be successful in college (Raju & Schumacker, 2015).

Regardless of efforts to improve student retention, attrition rates are still high across the United States (Yu et al., 2010). As a field, we still know relatively little about what policies and
efforts make a difference in student retention (Hossler et al., 2013). Patton-Davis et al. (2006) conducted a systematic review of campus-based retention initiatives and found weak evidence to support mentoring and counseling programs to improve student retention. Additionally, prevalence of a formal written retention plan, availability of academic support, and flagging courses with high percentages of Ds, Fs, or withdrawals are not associated with a higher-than predicted retention rate (Dadashova et al., 2010). Through their review of campus-based retention efforts, Patton-Davis et al. (2006) noted that many efforts do not have the evidence to support their effectiveness.

As mentioned earlier, many of these student services continue to operate with student barriers. The structures of higher education institutions may contribute to barriers experienced by students. Students are expected to navigate and communicate across multiple divisions with differing values, communication methods, and services to persist. To better understand how to improve the student experience and retention, we need to explore the variety of structures within postsecondary institutions.

**Higher Education Organization Structures**

As an organization, higher education institutions differ in several important ways unique from other organizations. As a result, more research is needed to better understand how institutions organize themselves to enhance student retention (Hossler et al., 2013). Drawing on the sociological use of the term, Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) share defining characteristics of institutions that include: serve long-standing missions, tied closely to ongoing societal needs, have set norms and socialization processes based on the mission and needs of society, and have norms that are tied closely to individuals’ identities.
Many describe institutions of higher education as loosely connected or coupled organizations (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2018; Lindahl, 2014; Weick, 1976) with vertical structures (Keeling et al., 2007). Gallos and Bolman (2021) see loose coupling as “vital to supporting ambiguous mission statements” while at the same time indicating that higher education has evolved into an architecture of disconnection (p. 60). This description demonstrates how institutions maintain their ability to think creatively while respecting autonomy of many disciplines (Keeling et al., 2007). One benefit of the loosely coupled organization is its ability to respond to change: the entire organization does not need to respond, an individual unit could react (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). A drawback to any loosely coupled organization is its ability to be efficient (Kezar & Eckel, 2004), predict any future actions (Kezar, 2018), and changes tend to be localized (Birnbaum, 1988). Kezar (2018) indicates that loose coupling can feel like organized anarchy because formal authority structures do not accurately represent where power and influence resides.

Much of the infrastructure in higher education institutions represents its day-to-day functioning and core operations such as finance, human resources, and policies (Kezar, 2019). The organizational structure establishes lines of communication and designates authority (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). This provides individuals across campus to learn how information is distributed, where decisions are likely made, and if shared governance exists. Many of these core functions operate vertically, or in parallel, to other parts of the organization such as separate colleges, individual schools, or athletics where they are more focused on their internal goals and objectives than the broader institutional purpose (Kuh, 1996). The vertical nature of these stand-alone offices represents individual silos in a field. These inherent silos can cause tension between each other as they compete for resources (Keeling et al., 2007). Consequently, these structures
make innovations to impact the entire university community and truly fulfill lofty mission statements much more challenging (Kezar et al., 2022). There may be many reasons why departments operate independently. As such, it is important to consider the institution’s political landscape, history, staffing, and culture as to why the present structures exist.

To better understand what happens within an institution from an organizational perspective, institutions can be analyzed through four lenses: structural, human resources, political, and symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Each of these lenses provides insights into different aspects of an organization, how an organization is structured, and how it operates.

In the structural view of higher education institutions, the central tenet is an effective and efficient structure working in the same direction with identified strategies towards established goals and can be depicted as a factory (Bolman & Deal, 2021). More specifically, institutions are described as a professional bureaucracy with dual power and authority systems (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Kezar, 2018). In this context, the factory is comprised of highly specialized individuals, such as faculty, who operate autonomously from the larger organization which differs from the administrative arm charged with overall organizational functioning. The human resource frame emphasizes the exact opposite of the structural frame. The human resource frame centers on the mutually beneficial relationship between people and organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Additionally, the congruency/fit between individuals and organizations is important for both parties to be successful otherwise one party may suffer (Bolman & Deal, 2021). The symbolic frame plays an important role in shaping organizational culture and how individuals identify with the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Through this lens symbols, organizational myths, and iconic campus buildings are part of the fabric that bring individuals together and work towards a common goal (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Finally, the political frame emphasizes that politics in
organizations is the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests (Bolman & Deal, 2021). In this view, colleges and universities are comprised of competing stakeholders like faculty, administration, staff, students, and boards of trustees.

**Stakeholder Management**

Fulfilling the lofty research and teaching agendas of higher education institutions cannot be accomplished by a sole individual; it must be a collective effort. University administration must secure stakeholder support to ensure successful implementation of most initiatives, especially of large-scale projects that may alter how an organization’s activities are conducted (Chan, 2021). On a local level, each institution works towards written values through established policies and practices to advance the institution. The concept of shared governance processes emerged out of an understanding that by having multiple stakeholders in the process and support across the institution groups can build and implement changes easier (Kezar, 2018).

**Freeman’s Stakeholder Theory**

Freeman’s (1984) stakeholder theory proposes that organizational success includes attending to the needs and expectations of various stakeholders. He defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984 p. 46). As a collective, higher education is accountable to a wide variety of external stakeholders including the federal government, accreditation agencies, professional organizations, foundations, intermediaries, and the public. Internal stakeholders include administration, faculty, staff, students.
Freeman’s definition of a stakeholder implies a two-way relationship between stakeholders and their respective organization (Preeble, 2005). The quality of the relationship, or tie, is important in determining how actors, or stakeholders, interact (Rowley, 2017). Strong ties are based on trust and foster repeated, mutually beneficial interactions (Rowley, 2017). The strength of the tie also creates norms of exchange such that individuals feel obligated to treat their strong tie partners better than their week tie partners (Rowley, 2017). Organizations with a positive history of interactions with another organization see future exchanges that produce mutual benefit, and each party works towards the outcome (Rowley, 2017).

**Preeble’s Model of Stakeholder Management**

Preeble (2005) identified a six-step model of stakeholder management. The comprehensive process model is as follows: stakeholder identification, general nature of stakeholder claims, determine performance gaps, prioritize stakeholder demands, develop organizational responses, followed by monitoring and control (Preeble, 2005). The initial goal is to identify all stakeholders in which the organization has an interest and those who may have an interest in the organization via a stakeholder map (Preeble, 2005). A stakeholder map represents a bicycle wheel with the organization at the center and the spokes indicate the direction of the relationship followed by each stakeholder on the edge of the wheel. Step two is to make an initial assessment about the general nature of stakeholder expectations on the organization (Preeble, 2005). Next is to evaluate stakeholder needs and expectations against what the organization is already providing to determine any performance gaps (Preeble, 2005). Once service gaps are identified, the organization must prioritize where efforts will be focused amongst all stakeholder expectations. Step 5 is to develop an organization response that may include policies and
strategies to minimize the gaps and attend to the priorities. At this stage in the process, it is important to reflect on an organization’s mission statement or goals and assess how well stakeholder relations are included in it (Preeble, 2005). Finally, ongoing monitoring is necessary to confirm strategies are working and programs are on track (Preeble, 2005).

Stakeholders can fall into one of four categories: supportive, marginal, non-supportive, and mixed blessing. Savage et al. (1991) recommends specific management strategies based on the type of stakeholder and their potential level of threat or cooperation. For example, a mixed blessing stakeholder could play a major role in the organization and transition between a non-supportive or supportive stance. For this group leaders need to balance and be aware of their high potential for collaboration or threat. As a result, a collaborative approach should be taken (Savage et al., 1991). There are few studies that specifically explore stakeholder management in higher education. One such study found that university leaders used strategies involving open communication, shared goals, working by consensus, and partnership building (Chan, 2021).

To address campus-wide concerns, like retention, campus leadership must engage stakeholders across many divisions and departments. One important relationship to consider is between Student and Academic Affairs. The level of communication, collaboration, and shared interests between the divisions are shaped by higher education organizational structures. As such, a better understanding of the historical nature of this relationship is needed to build a campus environment that strives to improve student success outcomes for today’s diverse student body.

**Student Affairs & Academic Affairs Partnerships**

Historically there has been a divide between student and academic affairs at postsecondary institutions. When these divisions exist, students’ experiences suffer. A unified
community centered on student support brings together the expertise of academic and student affairs to develop the most appropriate interventions for students as they encounter challenges (Kezar & Holcomb, 2018). When these partnerships occur, students receive a holistic learning environment with opportunities for personal and professional development. Schroeder (1999) found that many campus-wide issues lend themselves to a collaborative response from both Student and Academic Affairs including: diversity and multicultural education, learning communities, service learning, academic advising, and early intervention to enhance student success in challenging courses for first-year students. Each of these initiatives can enhance students’ sense of belonging and may affect their retention and graduation. Lack of collaboration between Student and Academic Affairs leads to a fragmented student experience with separate support services and exacerbates the student retention challenge. It is these schisms between academic and student affairs that prevent students from succeeding, developing, and learning (Kezar & Lester, 2009; Kezar, 2019).

The call to bridge the divide between Student and Academic Affairs is well documented in the literature (Berson et al., 1998; Williamson et al., 1949; Kezar, 2001; Schroeder, 1999). As noted previously in this literature review, higher education institutions tend to operate in silos based on specialization. It is these same vertical structures that may add to difficulty collaborating across divisions in the same institution (Kezar, & Holcomb, 2018) and sharing information (Kezar, 2018). In 1998, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), College Student Educators international (ACPA), and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) created a joint report calling on colleges and universities to utilize their collective energy to support student learning (Berson et al., 1998). This publication
calls on university personnel to work collaboratively across divisions and disciplines to positively impact student learning in and out of the classroom.

Despite the call for collaboration institutions still struggle to foster cross-functional dialogue that leads to collaboration (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001; Guarasci, 2001; Kuh, 1996). One significant obstacle impacting academic and student affairs collaborations can be viewed as cultural differences and respective priorities of each division. Bourassa and Kruger (2001) note the historical separation between the formal curriculum and the informal curriculum as well as the perception that student affairs is an ancillary function to the academic mission.

Kuh (1996) presented a framework for collaboration geared towards higher education institutions based on six principles to foster a holistic campus environment: generate enthusiasm, create a common vision of learning, develop a common language, foster collaboration and cross-functional dialogue, examine the influence of student cultures on learning, and focus on systematic change. Kezar examined the relationship between Kuh’s model and the number of successful collaborations and found that campuses who utilized Kuh’s strategies had greater numbers of very successful collaborations (Kezar, 2001). Specifically, 92% of campuses who utilized more than three Kuh strategies reported six or more very successful or successful collaborations. Utilizing these strategies across campus may facilitate a seamless learning environment for students.

To develop these partnerships campuses must work across divisional lines to create institutional change. Holistic student support, like that provided at Retention University, requires academic and student affairs to seamlessly collaborate and possibly change their structures, processes, and goals to meet the needs of today’s college students. RU demonstrates that a shift in priorities, systems, and culture is possible.
Change in Higher Education Institutions

A recent Chronicle of Higher Education article said it best, “to help students succeed, sometimes you need to change the university itself” (McMurtrie, 2022). As previously discussed, higher education institutions are a unique subset of organizations due to their professional bureaucracy, shared governance, and decentralized nature. Additionally, higher education must navigate change while being both market-savvy and mission-centered (Kezar, 2018). Doing so requires leaders to carefully consider campus history, culture, mission, and strategic opportunities (Kezar, 2018). Institutions must consider changes to underlying structures and policies to better meet student needs and improve retention.

First and Second Order Change

There are two types of change, first order and second order change (Kezar, 2018). First order changes tend to be on an individual level with changes to attitudes or behaviors but do not dive below the surface (Kezar, 2018). Second order changes, also known as deep, transformational, or punctuated changes where organizations challenge existing assumptions and beliefs such that it alters the operating systems, underlying values, and overall culture of the organization (Kezar, 2018). Kezar (2009) indicates that deep change typically takes 10-15 years to cement into institutional culture and norms. That length of time typically transcends the terms that upper-level administrators hold their positions. As such, studies of transformative change in higher education indicate the importance of shared leadership across faculty, staff, students, and administrators (Eckel & Kezar, 2003).
Social cognition theories provide an advantageous frame to guide second order change (Kezar, 2018). In particular, it helps those driving change to tap into norms and beliefs held by individuals to resolve resistance to change (Kezar, 2018). Culture change means having every member of the campus community see their role in creating and shaping the campus environment (Kuh et al., 2010). It is important to help all organization members make sense of the change with respect to individual roles, values, and beliefs. Indicators of second order changes include both cultural evidence and structural elements including changes to curriculum, assessment practices, new policies, reallocation of funds, and new departments (Kezar, 2018). Kezar (2018) cautions that merely changes to structures and reporting lines do not result in deep, long lasting cultural change.

Research on culture change indicates that campus infrastructure – financial priorities, incentives and rewards, human resources and policy – reflect its values (Kezar 2019). Without addressing the underlying systems and structures and rethinking core functions we cannot address systemic change. Individual programs and services on the side to address changing demographics (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 1997) serve as band aids and isolated solutions (Connolly & Lukas, 2002; Toma, 2010) do not lead to sustained change. Additional topics that can prevent long lasting changes on college campuses include, but are not limited to lack of vision, too many competing initiatives, ineffective communication, inability to prioritize, institutional isomorphism, and bureaucratic structures (Kezar, 2009). Building structures that connect units, such as cross-functional teams, facilitate knowledge and communication across an organization (Goh, 2002) regardless of staffing changes.

Distributive leadership and buy-in from key administration can support second-order changes. Tenets of distributive leadership such as empowerment, accountability, and decision-
making partnerships (Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane et al., 2004) within organizational structures provide vehicles for staff, faculty, and students to engage in the change process. Commitment in top key-leadership roles such as the president and provost are essential (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015) and cannot be ignored to catalyze organizational change.

Leaders need to be mindful when adopting innovations from aspirational peer institutions. No two organizations are alike, and each possess unique internal processes, cultures, and external pressures. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) define isomorphism as “organizational characteristics are modified in the direction of increasing capability with environmental characteristics” as well as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p. 149). Leaders at all levels need to be aware of blindly adapting a “student success toolbox” from another institution as it may not be aligned with the institution’s mission, goals, priorities, and culture.

Campus-wide change involves the creation or connection of programs and services to work in concert with each other across departments and divisions to support student success. “Scaling-up” or “bringing it to scale” are now common phrases in higher education today. Healy and DeStefano (1997) indicate that scaling-up typically involves adapting a successful innovation in one setting to usage in a wide range of contexts. This definition assumes that the innovation can be applied to any context without modification or alteration (Kezar, 2011). This should cause higher education leaders to pause and consider how and why a boutique of interventions facilitate increased retention on one campus may not completely translate to another institution’s culture, student needs, or existing resources.

Said differently, scale is typically defined as a reform or change affecting more than just a small group of students and often involves multiple departments and units (Kezar, Holcombe,
Scaling practices require programs and processes to potentially change. As a result, principles of change management should be considered. Kezar, Holcombe, and Kitchen (2018) recommend spending time setting the context, incorporating scaling practices, and refining the practices through feedback loops. Setting the context begins with an asset assessment, ensuring distributed leadership, and having a common language (Kezar, Holcombe, & Kitchen, 2018). Once the foundation is established, strategies from multiple change theories such as agenda building, communication of values, and bargaining provide vehicles to build a case for change and allows change agents to leverage influence and build networks (Kezar, Holcombe, & Kitchen, 2018). Once strategy has been executed ongoing feedback loops should be used to monitor, tweak, and evaluate the change (Kezar, Holcombe, & Kitchen, 2018).

Because change affects multiple departments, it is important for the department implementing it to know how they are working with their campus partners.

To increase student retention and persistence postsecondary institutions need to work across silos to foster organizational change. Much like the limited data to know whether a retention initiative had the desired outcome, there is limited information on organizations that have successfully navigated a culture shift to build a deep institutional commitment to student success. This study will explore how Retention University was able to create organizational change and work across silos which may have contributed to increased student persistence and retention rates. Thus, RU may serve as an example of how to implement strategies within other institutions. More research is needed to understand how higher education institutions can work across silos to create organizational change that may lead to increased student success outcomes.
Theoretical Framework

Institutions can create processes to support long-lasting cultural change, and this begins with a transparent and ethical approach. This study will be guided by Kezar (2018) eight processes that enhance ethical approaches to change. Kezar’s (2018) framework builds on social science studies on ethics and intentionally includes Habermas’s calls for democratic discussion of principles and Rawls’s theory of justice. Additionally, the inclusion of Kidder’s (1995) universal set of ethical principles which includes truth, appreciation for diversity, and cooperation highlight that as a large institution we have many individual values in common. The following eight processes that enhance ethical approaches to change from the beginning are: stakeholder participation and input, broad information sharing, full disclosure of direction and vision, trust and open communication, acknowledgement of differing values and interests, co-creation through ongoing dialogue, transformational not charismatic leadership, and organizational justice.

I have witnessed how change initiatives can lead to anxiety, frustration, and turbulence within multiple levels of an institution. Kezar’s (2018) approach underscores the ethical obligation of change agents to analyze and plan for change and ensure the outcome is worth the discomfort and disturbance that often occur on campus. Applying these principles to change initiatives reduces sources of cynicism and resistance among stakeholders (Kezar, 2018) and builds capacity for deep change. I selected this approach because increasing student retention and persistence is too important to approach haphazardly and needs a broad range of engaged stakeholders to transform the student experience. While all eight are equally important I will
expand on stakeholder participation, information sharing, trust and open communication and ongoing dialogue, as these are central to the purpose of this study.

Stakeholder engagement needs to be intentional, purposeful, and planned. This begins by examining what broad participation means and looks like. Said differently committee membership is often handpicked and may not be a true representation of diverse interests (Kezar, 2018). Changes that only focus on managerial interests tend to have negative impacts on other individuals in the organization (Kezar, 2018). Therefore, change agents should seek out a variety of stakeholders to hear many different perspectives. Additionally, those leading efforts need to include stakeholder feedback in plans moving forward and explain why some feedback may have been omitted (Kezar, 2018). Nielsen et al. (1991) asserts that information must be distributed broadly among stakeholders to fully engage in discussion and participate in the change process. This involves providing all knowledge or data informing choices and not withholding information, as that may lead to cynicism and harm future change efforts (Kezar, 2018). Kezar’s (2018) fourth strategy for ethical change is trust and open communication. This requires information to be shared through communication vehicles, such as forums and presentations, to inform people about the change and clarify misunderstandings (Kezar, 2018). Open communication can build trust and reduce anxiety among staff who sense change and uncertainty exist (Kezar, 2018). Lastly, ongoing dialog among stakeholders to discuss campus operations and improvements would increase buy-in and potentially allow ideas for change to naturally emerge (Kezar, 2018).
Research Design

I will utilize a qualitative case study design to examine how the Student Outreach and Support Office (SOS) at Retention University worked across institutional silos to increase first-time in college retention and persistence. Qualitative research seeks to understand meaning in context (Merriam, 1988). Additionally, the qualitative design provides an opportunity to utilize a wide range of interconnected and interpretive practices to better understand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) the cultural shift to positively impact student persistence. A case study design was selected because of its ability to intensively analyze and describe a single unit bounded by space and time (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Merriam (1988) states that a qualitative case study is an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (pg. xiii). The goal of this research is to holistically analyze and describe how SOS works across institutional silos to increase college student persistence and retention.

More specifically, a descriptive approach to case study research will provide an opportunity for me to better understand the experiences of the stakeholders as they support the mission of SOS. Descriptive case studies focus on illustrating key features (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) of the bounded system with detailed and rich descriptions to illustrate the complexities of the situation (Merriam, 1988). Additionally, Merriam (1988) writes that innovative programs and practices are also the focus of case studies in education. SOS is one example of an innovative approach to scaling student success. A qualitative case study is appropriate because this study will examine the stakeholder perspective at a particular institution with the goal of reporting all contributing factors.
Merriam (1988) notes that in qualitative research “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 7). As such, it is important to indicate this study will be examined through a constructivist lens. This epistemology ascribes that meaning is created – or constructed – by individuals in many ways by engaging in the world (Crotty, 1998). The goal of this study is to examine the experiences of multiple stakeholders on how SOS works across institutional silos to increase student retention. Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicate that constructivist researchers often address the process of interaction among individuals. It is the how or process SOS engaged in to impact student persistence and retention that interests me.

Description of the Case

Retention University (RU) is a public research university in the southeastern United States with two satellite campuses. Founded in the 1950s, the institution is relatively young yet enrolls approximately 37,000 undergraduate and 9,500 graduate students. The incoming first-time in college fall 2021 class enrolled 4,100 students and the institution celebrates that 40% of the student body identifies as African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or multiracial.

In 2009, Retention University launched a Student Success Task Force to develop a 10-year plan to transform the institution. The initial focus of the task force was to improve the 6-year graduation rate. The first Academic Advocate was hired in 2013 and the office has since grown, including a full-time data manager. In 2014-2015 the retention rate of students with a 2.0 GPA or higher was 87% with an initial retention goal of 90%. In 2016 RU integrated Student Affairs, Undergraduate Studies, and the Office of Student Success to bolster academic success and the student experience. The full team of first-year advocates were hired in 2016 and it was at
this time that the retention rate improved to 91% and 92%. These units combined are now known as Student Success.

Under the Vice President for Student Success, the Student Outreach and Support office houses 8 full-time academic advocates, a data manager, and a director. Academic Advocates are full-time professional staff members that “collaborate with other offices on campus to help students overcome challenges that may impact their path to degree and identify resources for student's overall success.” The office employs a case management approach supported by data analytics to identify students in need and connect them with campus resources. A hallmark of their approach is coordinated care through collaborations with academic departments, colleges, and key university personnel to improve student outcomes.

I selected this site because of its impressive first to second-year retention rate and ability to work together to impact student success. Additionally, I have an established professional relationship with the Director of SOS which will provide an avenue to connect with internal and external stakeholders at the institution. It is my hope this study will provide strategies for other colleges and universities to address institution-wide problems like student success. Specifically, this study intends to provide recommendations on working with campus stakeholders to breakdown institutional silos to increase first-time in college student retention and persistence. The findings will be shared with the Director and staff within SOS.

Participants and Recruitment

Consistent with descriptive case study methodology, I will utilize purposeful sampling to identify interview participants. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover and understand a phenomenon and therefore must select a sample
where the most insight can be gained (Merriam, 1988). More specifically, I will utilize network sampling where the sample is collected on the basis of participant referrals (Merriam, 1988). In this case I will seek referrals from the Director of the SOS to select staff members who work in identified campus care partners.

Study participants will be full-time staff members at the RU who are employed in other student support service offices that collaborate regularly with SOS, with the majority housed under Student Success. Participants will come from the following umbrella categories: academic resources, health and wellness, campus life and support, and safety resources. Example office titles are New Student Connections, Office of Financial Aid, Academic Advising, and Center for Victim Advocacy. The participants from the campus care partner offices will also be known as internal stakeholders. In addition to internal stakeholders, staff from SOS will be invited to participate, including the First-Year Advocates and the Director. Adding SOS staff will provide a more in-depth understanding of the case by adding additional perspectives.

Before inviting participants to join this study I will obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board at Northern Illinois University. The email invitation (Appendix A) will be jointly sent by me and the Director of SOS explaining the study's purpose and the approximate time commitment. Each participant who agrees to participate will receive a brief Qualtrics survey via email that includes demographic information, years employed at Retention University, race, age, highest degree earned, and contact information. Informed consent will be embedded as a survey question and will be used in place of an electronic signature. Additionally, at the start of each interview I will review the informed consent (Appendix B) and answer any questions participants may have. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym throughout the research process and can stop engaging in the research at any point.
Data Collection

I will collect data via semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Internal stakeholder participant interviews will help me understand the stakeholder perspective. I will also interview SOS staff to learn more about the steps they took to build relationships with internal stakeholders. I will use existing reports from Retention University to contribute to my understanding of the larger phenomena. Multiple data collection methods are common in qualitative case studies to gain an in-depth understanding of the case (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Merriam, 1988).

Semi-structured interviews will provide an avenue to ask predetermined but flexibly worded questions based on each participant. In addition to preset questions, follow-up questions can be included to probe deeper into topics of interest to the participant (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicate, the purpose is to maximize information and utilize sampling until a point of redundancy is reached and no new information is gathered. Given the purpose of the study, I will interview 15-20 participants. I will create interview protocol (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) that will include open-ended questions to be asked of participants that can be found in Appendices C and D. Interviews will be conducted over Zoom and will last approximately one hour.

Documents will serve as another source of data collection to enhance the current study. Documents that will be gathered include departmental, division, and university-wide strategic plans; assessment data; reports; and organizational charts. I will ask the Director of SOS to provide their annual reports and assessment data. I will find organizational charts and strategic planning documents on university websites. Reports and strategic plans may indicate intentional
efforts to collaborate with specific offices as well as which offices SOS partners with more frequently. Organizational charts may describe how the organizational structure at RU has changed over time and indicate what relationships are more formally structured.

Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method is concerned with generating and suggesting many categories until there is a saturation of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method can be utilized for any qualitative information such as observations, interviews, and documents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Consistent with qualitative case study methodology and constant comparative method, data will be analyzed both inductively and deductively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Inductively, words will be grouped into patterns followed by categories and themes to more abstract concepts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In later phases of data analysis, I will go back to raw data to deduce if more evidence is available to support created themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Documents will be analyzed with the constant comparative method first to gain context and historical knowledge about the larger efforts and goals of Retention University. By doing so, I will be able to ask more specific follow-up questions during interviews based on my understanding of history and context. Interview data will be analyzed with the constant comparative method after completion of document analysis.

I will first group data into categories, otherwise known as codes. Codes are derived from notations next to specific data that may be relevant to answer research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The central tenet of the constant comparative method is that “while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups
coded in the same category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 p. 106). The following criteria will be used
in the construction of categories to discover answers to the research questions: categories must
be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitive to the data, and conceptually congruent (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2016).

Initially, I will begin with a round of open coding to see what data might be useful in
answering my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). After analyzing initial codes from
each semi-structured interview, I will conduct a round of axial coding to group similar codes into
more broad categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout this process I will keep a running
memo to help me reflect on the data and revise codes as needed. Next, codes will be grouped into
larger themes that “capture recurring patterns that cuts across the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016
p. 207). Finally, I will compare identified themes with interview transcripts and initial codes for
congruency.

Trustworthiness

I will utilize multiple strategies to improve the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell
& Creswell, 2018). The first strategy will involve member checks. Member checking provides
the research an opportunity to share findings and themes with participants to confirm their
accuracy and provides an opportunity for them to comment on the findings (Creswell &
Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1988). Maxwell (2013) states that member checks “are the single most
important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants
say” (pp. 126–127). I will email participants themes that emerged from my data analysis and ask
for feedback. The second approach will include detailed descriptions of participant responses.
These rich, thick descriptions bring the study to life for readers as well as insight to the
participant’s experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The final approach will involve a peer review with the Director of SOS. Peer reviews can be conducted with someone familiar with the topic to assess whether the findings are plausible, based on the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, the Director of SOS can provide an insider’s perspective on my findings. Finally, I will corroborate information learned from document analysis with data discovered through participant interviews to create a thorough understanding of the phenomena and the case.

Positionality Statement

My desire to become a better practitioner led me to this doctoral pursuit, however, it is my practitioner identity that brought me to my research study. These two identities are deeply intertwined yet separately impact me in positive and challenging ways. As a practitioner I value relationships and consider myself to be compassionate and empathetic. Professionally I strive to be present, attentively listen, and provide individualized support for each student I encounter. As a researcher, I embrace constructivist epistemology, focusing on how participants make meaning of their experiences. Furthermore, I align with the assertion that each participant has an experience worth examining.

I am excited to connect with participants and ask about their experiences as an internal stakeholder at Retention University. During interviews I will draw on my active listening skills while paying attention to non-verbal cues to better understand each stakeholder’s perspective. As a RU outsider I will have no preconceived notions of campus politics, structures, or campus culture. I will be able to accept each participant’s story and experiences with SOS without bias and build trusting relationships. To that, I may also be naïve to longstanding campus issues that bring up strong reactions from participants that reignite frustrations and concerns. While I am an
outsider to RU, I have a professional relationship with the Director of SOS that began before this study that I want to continue and maintain. Through this relationship I have had an opportunity to learn about the functions and approach of SOS as well as a timeline when they first noticed their increase in student retention. While I hope this study provides positive information to the Director of SOS, we have had conversations about how the office wants to be more intentional about relationships with care partners and how they could improve or enhance how they work with internal stakeholders. It is my desire that this study provides useful information to SOS moving forward. While I hope that it is easy to recruit internal stakeholders to serve as participants there may be some offices not willing to participate based on their relationship with the Director of SOS. Hopefully this can be curbed by providing information about the goals of the study and how results may be used. I will also want to be mindful of the existing relationships between participants and the Director of SOS and treat those with the same level of care that I desire to maintain with the Director of SOS.

Retention University is a diverse institution with 45% of students and 35% of faculty from historically underrepresented groups. While I could not find information on staff diversity, I will likely interview staff who hold different identities from my own. I am a white woman with an invisible disability who also identifies as American, cisgendered, heterosexual, and middle-class. Holding identities with privilege as well as the position of interviewer, I will need to be reflexive and mindful of perceived and explicit differences with participants. At the same time, I will validate others’ experiences with empathy to build trust cultivate an open space for each to describe their perceptions and experiences to help inform my research questions.
Delimitations and Limitations

This study includes an important delimitation on who is identified as an internal stakeholder. I have selected full-time staff members at RU who are employed in campus offices that regularly collaborate with SOS. This is an important distinction as higher education institutions have many stakeholders including students, alumni, and faculty. As a current staff member in a student success role, I am particularly interested in better understanding how internal stakeholders might contribute to a broader, university-centered approach to increasing student retention. As such, students, while they benefit from a seamless experience at RU, are not a stakeholder population that will be included.

This study has two noticeable limitations: staff turnover and original intent of documents reviewed. First, as higher education institutions have seen staffing challenges there may not be a meaningful number of participants at Retention University that were part of the organizational change. However, I will still be able to glean valuable insights from staff with limited experience as they will know how things currently function. To minimize this potential impact, more than one participant from stakeholder offices will be invited to participate in the study to enhance the descriptive nature of the case. The second limitation concerns the original purpose of the documents that I will review. Strategic plans, organizational charts, and assessment reports were not created for this research study. As such they may not contain information useful for this study.
Significance

Broadly speaking, this study seeks to fill a gap in higher education research regarding stakeholder management and collaborating across silos. Much of the literature on stakeholder management comes from the business or nonprofit sectors (Chan, 2021). This study seeks to contribute to higher education literature by connecting principles of stakeholder management and relationships to organizational change that may help address institution-wide concerns. Student persistence and retention is not just an academic affairs or student affairs problem, it affects the overall health of a university. As such it is important for postsecondary institutions to examine their culture and norms to address student persistence and retention.

This study will arm practitioners with strategies to begin or enhance relationships with campus partners across campus silos to affect organizational change. Whether in formal or informal leadership roles, practitioners must be knowledgeable about working with other departments and divisions to achieve goals and objectives. While formal leadership roles such as the president or provost have positional power and authority to create an agenda they cannot be involved in all important decisions or know the intricacies of all functional areas on campus. For organizational functioning and success everyone needs to see their role in creating and shaping institutional culture (Kuh et al., 2010). It is my hope that this study helps practitioners to address student concerns in a systematic, holistic manner across silos to tackle institution-wide issues like student retention and persistence.

Finally, I look forward to building capacity to manage a variety of stakeholders across university structures in my own professional praxis. I hope to better understand relationships on a macro level and learn more about how functional areas see their contributions to student
retention. I firmly believe in a holistic approach to student persistence and retention and desire to be a leader on my campus to affect organizational change.
CHAPTER 2

"IT’S HARD TO BE AN ENEMY OF STUDENT SUCCESS”:
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

Change is constantly occurring on college campuses. New academic programs, increasing student diversity, staff turnover, or renovating older buildings are examples of changes happening across the country. At the same time, higher education leaders are increasingly understanding that our current systems (silod bureaucracies, academic requirements, and budgeting) are not adequate for delivering quality education, creating equitable outcomes for students, or meeting campuses’ mission (Kezar, 2022). Public institutions are called to increase graduation rates and close outcome gaps among diverse learners. Leaders and change agents must consider how to meet student needs while being accountable to the public and governmental agencies regarding the value of higher education. While not a simple answer, the lesson one institution learned over time is this: To help students succeed, sometimes you need to change the university itself (McMurtrie, 2022).

Change on college campuses is often multifaceted in nature which makes change itself a challenge. Additionally, attempting to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders (Burrows, 1999; Jongbloed et al., 2008; Kerr, 2001) and an inability to prioritize (Kezar, 2009; Kezar, 2018) combined with ineffective communication (Kezar, 2009) and ignoring external and organizational contexts (Kezar, 2018) cause many initiatives to fail. Much of the literature surrounding change on college campuses is theoretical in nature and lacks practical examples
(Kezar, 2018). This study focused on how one institution, Retention University (RU), shifted towards a culture of student success. The following research question guided this study: how can postsecondary institutions change their culture and norms to increase college student persistence and retention? The study strove to gain insights from university staff who, in some way, were involved in supporting the change process or impacted by it. By doing so, this study provides insights into the ways institutions can navigate change processes.

Unique Nature of Higher Education

As an organization, higher education institutions differ in several important ways unique from other organizations. Drawing on the sociological use of the term, Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) share defining characteristics of institutions that include: serve long-standing missions, tied closely to ongoing societal needs, have set norms and socialization processes based on the mission and needs of society, and have norms that are tied closely to individuals’ identities. Furthermore, their professional bureaucracy, shared governance, and decentralized nature place higher education institutions into special subset of organizations.

Many describe institutions of higher education as loosely connected or coupled organizations (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2018; Lindahl, 2014; Weick, 1976) with vertical structures (Keeling et al., 2007). Gallos and Bolman (2021) see loose coupling as “vital to supporting ambiguous mission statements” while at the same time indicating that higher education has evolved into an architecture of disconnection (p. 60). This description demonstrates how institutions maintain their ability to think creatively while respecting autonomy of many disciplines (Keeling et al., 2007). One benefit of the loosely coupled organization is its ability to respond to change: the entire organization does not need to respond,
an individual unit could react (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). A drawback to any loosely coupled organization is its ability to be efficient (Kezar & Eckel, 2004), predict any future actions (Kezar, 2018), and changes tend to be localized (Birnbaum, 1988). Kezar (2018) indicates that loose coupling can feel like organized anarchy because formal authority structures do not accurately represent where power and influence resides.

Much of the infrastructure in higher education institutions represents its day-to-day functioning and core operations such as finance, human resources, and policies (Kezar, 2019). The organizational structure establishes lines of communication and designates authority (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). This provides individuals across campus an opportunity to learn how information is distributed, where decisions are likely made, and if shared governance exists. Many of these core functions operate vertically, or in parallel, to other parts of the organization such as separate colleges, individual schools, or athletics which are more focused on their internal goals and objectives than the broader institutional purpose (Kuh, 1996). The vertical nature of these stand-alone offices represents individual silos at the institution. These inherent silos can cause tension between each other as they compete for resources (Keeling et al., 2007). Consequently, these structures make innovations to impact the entire university community and truly fulfill lofty mission statements much more challenging (Kezar et al., 2022).

**Change in Higher Education**

Leaders at higher education institutions must navigate change while being both market-savvy and mission-centered (Kezar, 2018). Doing so requires leaders to carefully consider campus history, culture, mission, and strategic opportunities (Kezar, 2018). University administration must secure stakeholder support to ensure successful implementation of most
initiatives, especially of large-scale projects that may alter how an organization’s activities are conducted (Chan, 2021). On a local level, each institution works towards written values through established policies and practices to advance the institution. The concept of shared governance processes emerged out of an understanding that by having multiple stakeholders in the process and support across the institution groups can build and implement changes easier (Kezar, 2018).

First and Second Order Change

There are two types of change, first order and second order change (Kezar, 2018). First order changes tend to be on an individual level with changes to attitudes or behaviors but do not dive below the surface (Kezar, 2018). Second order changes, also known as deep, transformational, or punctuated changes where organizations challenge existing assumptions and beliefs such that it alters the operating systems, underlying values, and overall culture of the organization (Kezar, 2018). Kezar (2009) indicates that deep change typically takes 10-15 years to cement into institutional culture and norms. That length of time typically transcends the terms that upper-level administrators hold their positions. As such, studies of transformative change in higher education indicate the importance of shared leadership across faculty, staff, students, and administrators (Eckel & Kezar, 2003).

Social cognition theories provide an advantageous frame to guide second order change (Kezar, 2018). In particular, it helps those driving change to tap into norms and beliefs held by individuals to resolve resistance to change (Kezar, 2018). Culture change means having every member of the campus community see their role in creating and shaping the campus environment (Kuh et al., 2010). It is important to help all organization members make sense of the change with respect to individual roles, values, and beliefs. Indicators of second order changes include
both cultural evidence and structural elements including changes to curriculum, assessment practices, new policies, reallocation of funds, and new departments (Kezar, 2018). Kezar (2018) cautions that merely changes to structures and reporting lines do not result in deep, long lasting cultural change.

Research on culture change indicates that campus infrastructure – financial priorities, incentives and rewards, human resources and policy – reflect its values (Kezar, 2019). Without addressing the underlying systems and structures and rethinking core functions we cannot address systemic change. Individual programs and services on the side to address changing demographics (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 1997) serve as band aids and isolated solutions (Connolly & Lukas, 2002; Toma, 2010) do not lead to sustained change. Additional topics that can prevent long lasting changes on college campuses include, but are not limited to lack of vision, too many competing initiatives, ineffective communication, inability to prioritize, institutional isomorphism, and bureaucratic structures (Kezar, 2009). Building structures that connect units, such as cross-functional teams, facilitate knowledge and communication across an organization (Goh, 2002) regardless of staffing changes.

Distributive leadership and buy-in from key administration can support second-order changes. Tenets of distributive leadership such as empowerment, accountability, and decision-making partnerships (Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane et al., 2004) within organizational structures provide vehicles for staff, faculty, and students to engage in the change process. Commitment in top key-leadership roles such as the president and provost are essential (Kurzweil & Wu, 2015) and cannot be ignored to catalyze organizational change.

Leaders need to be mindful when adopting innovations from aspirational peer institutions. No two organizations are alike, and each possess unique internal processes, cultures,
and external pressures. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) define isomorphism as “organizational characteristics are modified in the direction of increasing capability with environmental characteristics” as well as “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p. 149).

“Scaling-up” or “bringing it to scale” are now common phrases in higher education today. Healy and DeStefano (1997) indicate that scaling-up typically involves adapting a successful innovation in one setting to usage in a wide range of contexts. This definition assumes that the innovation can be applied to any context without modification or alteration (Kezar, 2011). Said differently, scale is typically defined as a reform or change affecting more than just a small group of students and often involves multiple departments and units (Kezar, Holcombe, & Kitchen, 2018). Scaling practices require programs and processes to potentially change. As a result, principles of change management should be considered. Kezar, Holcombe, and Kitchen (2018) recommend spending time setting the context, incorporating scaling practices, and refining the practices through feedback loops. Setting the context begins with an asset assessment, ensuring distributed leadership, and having a common language (Kezar, Holcombe, & Kitchen, 2018). Once the foundation is established, strategies from multiple change theories such as agenda building, communication of values, and bargaining provide vehicles to build a case for change and allows change agents to leverage influence and build networks (Kezar, Holcombe, & Kitchen, 2018). Once strategy has been executed ongoing feedback loops should be used to monitor, tweak, and evaluate the change (Kezar, Holcombe, & Kitchen, 2018).

There is limited information on organizations that have successfully navigated a culture shift to build a deep institutional commitment to student success. This study will explore how Retention University (RU) shifted towards a culture of student success to increase student
persistence and graduation. Thus, RU may serve as an example of how to implement strategies within other institutions.

**Theoretical Framework**

Institutions can create processes to support long-lasting cultural change, and this begins with a transparent and ethical approach. This study is guided by Kezar (2018) eight processes that enhance ethical approaches to change. Kezar’s (2018) framework builds on social science studies on ethics and intentionally includes Habermas’s calls for democratic discussion of principles and Rawls’s theory of justice. Additionally, the inclusion of Kidder’s (1995) universal set of ethical principles which includes truth, appreciation for diversity, and cooperation highlight that as a large institution we have many individual values in common. The following eight processes that enhance ethical approaches to change from the beginning are: stakeholder participation and input, broad information sharing, full disclosure of direction and vision, trust and open communication, acknowledgement of differing values and interests, co-creation through ongoing dialogue, transformational not charismatic leadership, and organizational justice.

While each process is individually helpful, there is a strong synergy between the concepts (Kezar, 2018). Broad stakeholder participation, not just those in leadership positions, from the beginning is more likely to represent shared interests across the institution. This combined with change agents widely sharing all information, including negative material, for the goal of informed participation allows others to contribute to discussions. In addition, by fostering ongoing dialogue and providing multiple communication strategies, including those to gather concerns and feedback, increases trust in the process and multiple viewpoints to be
acknowledged. When combined, these strategies enhance the perception of fair processes and procedures and reduces sources of cynicism and resistance (Kezar, 2018).

Kezar’s (2018) approach underscores the ethical obligation of change agents to analyze and plan for change and ensure the outcome is worth the discomfort and disturbance that often occur on campus. Along with these approaches change agents need to consider who may benefit or be harmed by a potential change, as students should be the primary beneficiaries. As will be discussed further in the research design, Kezar’s (2018) framework shaped all aspects of this study. Interview questions were developed in connection with the eight processes that enhance ethical approaches to change (Kezar, 2018). Data was analyzed through this lens to better understand strategies to build an institutional culture centered on student success from participants inside the organization.

Research Design

To better understand how higher education institutions change a descriptive, qualitative case study design was selected. A qualitative case study is an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). More specifically, a descriptive approach to case study research will provide an opportunity for me to better understand the experiences and perceptions of staff at Retention University (RU). Descriptive case studies focus on illustrating key features (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) of the bounded system with detailed and rich descriptions to illustrate the complexities of the situation (Merriam, 1988). The goal of this research is to holistically analyze and describe how RU changed their cultures and norms to increase student persistence and retention.
Description of the Case

Retention University (RU) is a public research university in the southeastern United States with two satellite campuses. Founded in the 1950s, the institution is relatively young yet enrolls approximately 37,000 undergraduate and 9,500 graduate students. The incoming first-time in college fall 2021 class enrolled 4,100 students and the institution celebrates that 40% of the student body identifies as African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or multiracial.

In 2009, Retention University launched a Student Success Task Force to develop a 10-year plan to transform the institution. The initial focus of the task force was to improve the 6-year graduation rate. In 2014-2015 the retention rate of students with a 2.0 GPA or higher was 87% with an initial retention goal of 90%. In 2016 RU integrated Student Affairs, Undergraduate Studies, and the Office of Student Success to bolster academic success and the student experience. A Student Outreach and Support (SOS) office was created with a full team of first-year advocates were hired in 2016. It was at this time that the retention rate improved to 91% and 92%. These units combined are now known as Student Success.

Participants

Consistent with descriptive case study methodology, I utilized purposeful sampling to identify interview participants. Purposeful sampling assumes that the researcher wants to discover and understand a phenomenon and must select a sample where the most insight can be gained (Merriam, 1988). More specifically, I used network sampling where the sample is collected based on participant referrals (Merriam, 1988). In this case I sought referrals from the
Director of the SOS to select full-time staff members who work in student support service offices, with the majority housed under Student Success. Thus, full-time staff internal and external to SOS served as participants. This provided an opportunity to better understand change from the staff perspective. Participant descriptions are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Preferred Pronouns</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Position at RU</th>
<th>Years at RU</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Naveah</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Student Outreach</td>
<td>5-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayah</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>Data Specialist</td>
<td>15+</td>
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<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>Asst. Director</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>Asst. Director</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>He, Him, His</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Hispanic/Latina</td>
<td>AVP</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>Assoc. Director</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>He/him/his</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>Chief Research Officer</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>She/her/hers</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camara</td>
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<td>Latina</td>
<td>AVP</td>
<td>15+</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jana</td>
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<td>Bi-racial/White</td>
<td>Ombudsperson</td>
<td>7-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>15+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N/A indicates data not reported by participants.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I collected data via semi-structured interviews to ask predetermined but flexibly worded questions based on each participant. In addition to preset questions, follow-up questions were included to probe deeper into topics of interest to the participant (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).
Questions focused on organizational structures, leadership practices, and campus partnerships. Additional questions centered on staff impressions and what they wished were different. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length and conducted over Zoom. Otter.ai was used for voice recording and transcription.

Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method is concerned with generating and suggesting many categories until there is a saturation of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Consistent with qualitative case study methodology and constant comparative method, data was analyzed both inductively and deductively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Inductively, words were grouped into patterns followed by categories and themes to more abstract concepts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data initially was grouped into categories, otherwise known as codes. Codes are derived from notations next to specific data that may be relevant to answer research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The central tenet of the constant comparative method is that “while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 p. 106). The following criteria was used in the construction of categories to discover answers to the research questions: categories must be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitive to the data, and conceptually congruent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I began with a round of open coding to see what data might be useful in answering my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After analyzing initial codes from each semi-structured interview, I conducted a round of axial coding to group similar codes into more broad categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Next, codes were grouped into larger themes that “capture
recurring patterns that cuts across the data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 207). Finally, I compared identified themes with interview transcripts and initial codes for congruency.

Trustworthiness

I utilized multiple strategies to improve the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The first strategy involved member checks. Member checking provides the researcher an opportunity to share findings and themes with participants to confirm their accuracy and provides an opportunity for them to comment on the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 1988). Maxwell (2013) states that member checks “are the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say” (p. 126-127). Member checks were conducted via email to allow participants time to consider and provide feedback on research themes. Respondents confirmed study findings and shared additional perceptions to further support themes. The second approach included detailed descriptions of participant responses. These rich, thick descriptions bring the study to life for readers as well as insight to the participant’s experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The final approach involved a peer review with the Director of SOS. Peer reviews can be conducted with someone familiar with the topic to assess whether the findings are plausible, based on the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, the Director of SOS provided an insider’s perspective on my findings. Based on the participants I interviewed, their impressions of my findings were highly representative of what they expected and focused on staff experiences navigating a new student success culture.
Positionality

My desire to become a better practitioner led me to this doctoral pursuit, however, it is my practitioner identity that brought me to my research study. These two identities are deeply intertwined yet separately impact me in positive and challenging ways. As a practitioner I value relationships and consider myself to be compassionate and empathetic. Professionally I strive to be present, attentively listen, and provide individualized support for each student I encounter. As a researcher, I embrace constructivist epistemology, focusing on how participants make meaning of their experiences. Furthermore, I align with the assertion that each participant has an experience worth examining.

During interviews I drew on my active listening skills while paying attention to non-verbal cues to better understand each stakeholder’s perspective. As a RU outsider I had no preconceived notions of campus politics, structures, or campus culture. I was able to accept each participant’s story and experiences with SOS without bias and build trusting relationships. To that, I may also have been naïve to longstanding campus issues that bring up strong reactions from participants that reignite frustrations and concerns. While I was an outsider to RU, I have a professional relationship with the Director of SOS that began before this study. Through this relationship, I learned about the functions and approach of SOS and a timeline when they first noticed their increase in student retention.

Retention University is a diverse institution with 45% of students and 35% of faculty from historically underrepresented groups. This diversity was also represented among my participants. I thus interviewed staff who hold different identities from my own. I am a white woman with an invisible disability who also identifies as American, cisgendered, heterosexual,
and middle-class. Holding identities with privilege as well as the position of interviewer, I needed to be reflexive and mindful of perceived and explicit differences with participants. At the same time, I validated others’ experiences with empathy to build trust and cultivate an open space for each to describe their perceptions and experiences to help inform my research questions.

Findings

This study sought to explore how higher education institutions create change. The following four themes will be explored in the next section: leaders play an important role in fostering organizational change, leaders need to be strategic about how they foster change, leaders need to consider how organizational contexts might hinder change, and leaders need to value the people and process.

Leaders Play an Important Role in Fostering Organizational Change

Participants discussed the important role leaders play in fostering organizational change. More specifically, they discussed how upper-level administrators can use their positions to lay the foundation for culture change. This section will highlight strategies high-level administrators at RU used to foster a culture of student success.

Camara shared that the first wave of change began when administrators demonstrated a “commitment to individual students and Vice Presidents were talking about individual students.” By focusing on unique student persistence issues leaders demonstrated how important each student was to the institution. This served as an example of the individualized attention needed to create a culture of student success. Tia explained:
It comes from the president down. Every time you hear the President speak, every time you hear the Provost speak every time you hear a Dean speak, they always, always, always have the students at the heart of everything they do. So, it’s it’s just everywhere. It’s not something that you read on a website because it looks good. People are living it every single day and it's it's discussed constantly and it's everywhere.

Tia’s quote illustrates how three high-level administrators utilized their positional power to move a variety of stakeholders toward a student's first culture. Upper-level administrators demonstrated that students were central to their role and role-modeled what that meant. This created a culture where faculty and staff began to adapt this value and approach to work.

Taleisha discussed the importance of leaders as champions for a variety of initiatives. Sometimes SOS (Student Outreach and Support) staff felt reminders to other offices about how they can support students were not taken seriously. She expressed “ideally upper-level administration would be champions of ‘make sure you refer’.” Taleisha observed receiving more referrals when upper administration reminded other campus offices. She also perceived that upper-level administrative support is necessary for larger campus-wide initiatives. She stated, “when there’s like a big thing, I feel like upper-administration really kind of is behind that push.” Taleisha’s experience shows how leaders can influence other campus areas to participate in change initiatives.

Finally, participants noted that consistent leadership is important for seeing through changes on campus. Gabriela shared:

We've been fortunate to have very stable leadership until the past four years or so. And so, there's that's a huge just benefit and really actually underpins a lot of the reasons why we were able to help our trajectory moving forward issue because we had stability in our leadership and our focus. Not that we don't have that now, but you have to adjust to the leadership.

Having little turnover in upper-level administrative positions allowed for the successful implementation of changes at the institution. Gabriela highlighted how turnover in upper-level
administration can disrupt change trajectories due to staff and faculty needing to adjust to the new leadership.

**Leaders Need to be Strategic About How They Foster Change**

Participants described the importance of leaders being strategic about how they foster change. This consists of explaining the rationale for change and strategically incorporating staff into the change. The rationale for change needs to include evidenced-based practices and integrate institutional values.

Melissa believed that basing calls for change in evidence and research allowed individuals across campus to see the validity of proposed changes. She shared, “it was presented in a way that made sense. It was couched in research and literature. So, I think that's always good.” Participants like Melissa seemed to appreciate being shown how the intended change is supported by existing research and literature. Knowing that this change was connected to evidence-based practices helped get participants like Melissa on board with the change.

Connecting a change to an institutional value seemed to help others buy-in to change at Retention University. Jana shared a positive outcome of the institution moving to a metrics-based approach:

I will say one of the really good things that came out of all of this all this whole metrics movement, was that student success, it's sort of the currency at the university, right? So when I'm trying to when I'm trying to get buy in from the leadership, and even from faculty right when I'm trying to get them to buy into a fair that we need to review this process and make it fair that we you know, but when I'm trying to raise issues, if I talk about it, if I frame it around student success, they're more likely to listen than if I frame it around this thing we're not doing right, right?...It's, it's a language we all understand and it's a common goal across the university. Whether you're faculty, staff, student wherever you sit within the university. So, I do like that, that there's always a way to frame problems around student success.
At Retention University (RU), student success is an institutional value. Jana described how she found helping others understand issues in relation to institutional values has been helpful in getting their support. Leaders can utilize institutional values as rationale for multiple stakeholders to buy-in to the initiative. This is particularly true when an institutional value is widely accepted across an institution. As one former vice president stated, “it’s hard to be an enemy of student success.”

Participants stressed that leaders must also consider what parts of their desired change need to occur at varying levels of the institution and how to involve stakeholders to build buy-in. Change can be managed in three different ways: top-down, bottom-up, or a combination of top-down and bottom-up. The following examples will describe outcomes of change based on buy-in at different levels of the institution.

Lesly described a large cultural shift that occurred top-down that happened in name only. RUOne is a slogan to indicate that while the institution has multiple campuses, they are one entity with resources available for students across the larger university. She stated that “everything with RUOne has come from the top and we still have yet embraced it all.” This example of a top-down change, while necessitated by outside factors, did not result in a cultural shift. She goes on to say:

And I think with RU, like I said, initially being a commuter school and never having that feeling. It's not how, you know, I wonder if they even really understood when you're saying RUOne, are you just saying that because you work here because sometimes I've said that was like I really feel like this, it's more that staff and employees are really saying when its students are like, what?

Lesly perceived that administrators, faculty, and staff only talked about the institution as RUOne but did not believe that the institution was really RUOne. This effort lacked buy-in from staff
and students and has not been embraced across campus. Camara described another example of top-down change related to embracing new initiatives:

I think it comes top down from leadership, but incorporation of the campus community to an extent where they are involved in some aspect of the process, so that they understand it better and that there would be greater buy in….Some people we won't be able to pull on board, but for those who have not had an opportunity to really sit back and understand it because they've been too engaged and involved in their own work, how do we engage and involve them in the work of student outreach because it could actually impact what they're doing if they're working directly with students.

She describes the leader using their position to build buy-in and understanding among stakeholders. In this primarily top-down example the leader strategically connected with individuals who may be impacted by the change.

The next example describes how a group of mid-level professionals came together as a response to changes made by upper-level administration. Jana shared:

Let's just stay together and keep doing what we do. And that was the message. Retention committee,…that was sort of that was that was for us. For those of us in administration, at this sort of mid-level, right AVP associate vice presidents and directors kinda, but to be able to say we're just gonna keep going like so even the AVPs like our Dean of Students, she stuck around, but I think it really was up to those AVP leaders and director and directors of smaller departments to just kind of say, work, we don't know, we can't promise anything. We have no idea what's coming, but we're gonna just keep doing what we know is good for students.

In this case, Jana describes a response to a change initiative still going strong. This committee was not formed at the request of upper-level administration or encouraged by the administration. This group of individuals, while not responsible for rolling out the change, were tasked to figure out a way to make the desired changes happen. The bottom-up response provided a support network for those in the trenches and an opportunity to coordinate resources and care for students.
Leaders Need to Consider How Organizational Contexts Might Hinder Change

Participants discussed how internal organizational contexts and external factors may hinder or prevent change. Internal contexts include how silos may impede change as well as organizational structure considerations. Environmental concerns outside of the institution may also affect campus culture. This section will focus on how/why leaders need to focus on the people and how they are impacted by internal and external factors.

Institutional silos was a topic discussed by multiple participants as an issue that negatively affected communication between departments and caused staff unnecessary time and energy on tasks. Melissa explained that:

People still operate in their organizational hierarchies in their own spaces, doing their own things. Again, without consulting other people that it might impact right, you know, people making policies that impact other offices and nobody talked to the people actually do the work about how that's gonna work out. That it's still troublesome.

Participants like Melissa expressed frustration at the lack of consideration and consultation with staff in other areas that may be impacted by changes before moving forward with decisions.

A handful of participants felt that leadership contributed to feelings of silos across campus. One of these examples comes from Henry who shared:

I think leadership is the ones that help establish those silos. So, a leader of a department who doesn't want to collaborate, doesn't want to go outside doesn't want to work with others, then they don't just silo themselves. They begin siloing their department or their unit, and then it has a greater impact.

Participants like Henry seemed to feel that campus leadership created or contributed to areas across campus being siloed, or separated, from other campus areas. This may lead to some departments not being willing to collaborate or partner on initiatives based on how their leader responds to their peers in other departments. Kayah described the difficulty that arises with
siloed operations “you know, like the registrar can't look at the admissions screens and they can’t look at the registrar’s screens. So, they have to rely on communicating back and forth, which is not always so good.” The impact of silos prevents communication and collaboration on a greater scale to the detriment of change.

Participants at RU discussed how they work in and with existing organizational structures. While organizational structures can create silos, Tia felt that altering organizational structures was not imperative for collaboration and change. She shared:

Yeah, I don't think the org structure really has much to do with it. I think again that it has to do with the people. I don't think if they change the structure, you can change the reporting structure, the hierarchical structure, but it's really all about the people in those units.

From her perspective it did not matter who individuals report to or what the organizational chart looks like for individuals across units to work together towards change. Along those lines, Camara described how the work of SOS and the strategies employed to increase student persistence and retention, while they may not have affected the organizational culture, was still positive. “I don't know that their (SOS) work changed the silos. I do believe their work changed the culture and how we do our work now.”

Finally, leaders need to consider how factors external to the institution may become obstacles to culture change. The political environment is one of these external factors for leaders to consider as decisions at the state-level have ripples on campus. Navaeh describes what a handful of other participants feel on campus:

The climate is one of some insecurity, some unsureness, some frustration, as we try to determine how our own institution is going to respond to some of these changes and adjustments that have to be made. Understanding that money is tied to it.
These feelings of insecurity have also led to staff attrition. Stacey shared what other participants echoed:

We're treated like we're very replaceable. That's why there's this just revolving door of new employees like people leaving new employees coming in not really staying very long. So, a lot of historical information and knowledge has just been lost through that as well.

Regular staff turnover continues to feed feelings of frustration among staff on campus and their workload. She also indicates the importance of staff with historical knowledge to campus culture. Staff, while further removed from the decisions at the state level, are still impacted. Leaders need to consider how to respond to staff turnover and feelings of insecurity to endure outside factors affecting the culture of the institution.

**Value the People and Process**

Finally, participants shared experiences that are common barriers to change. Despite RU’s ability to create a culture shift towards student success, the need for leaders to develop a blueprint for the desired change and consider staff needs and well-being in the change process emerged as important issues. This next section will focus on staff needs during change.

Participants described their need for a transparent and strategic process. In this study one participant, Jana, described how they learned about impending changes during an “emergency five o'clock meeting”:

I have a vivid memory of the provost calling us all to a meeting at five o'clock on a Friday in the administrative building . . . We were really close to some metrics. And that's when we learned the first time about what has become finished in four, where we essentially paid students off to be able to finish in four years. And so, in some ways, it was all that was right when it got real fast paced, and we became very metrics driven. And in some ways, it was fun because it was a challenge.

At the same time Jana also shared:
It was not something we rolled out gracefully, like, hey, here's what we're gonna do. Look how close we are to the metrics. It was like, and it's because it was like March, and we had to hit the metrics by the end of summer.

Jana acknowledged the timing of the meeting and lack of communication regarding the meeting topic led to a sense of urgency among other feelings. She perceived:

For people who had been at RU for a long time, it was it was they sort of resented that quick jerk, like, let's try to, you know, lipstick on a pig sort of, I think it felt like, like, maybe we should just slow down and do what we do well and be what we are.

This highlights how some long-time staff responded to how the changes started. The out of the blue nature of the shift did not seem necessary from their perspective. They did not have context for the change or information as to how the changes would be implemented.

Additionally, participants indicated that the process to achieve change was just important as the change itself. This includes the strategic steps leading up to the change and engaging stakeholders in the process. Gabriela shared:

I think people shortchange [the legwork] that part because a lot of work and it's not an overnight thing, really important thing so that it can be institutionalized. Now, we're fortunate that we do still have a lot of people who have been a part of that work still here. So, you have that institutional knowledge, but intent you intentionally need to work on being making sure they're a part of just the work and not the person right so that's really important to focus on.

She indicates that an intentional process is necessary for the change to become institutionalized and part of university culture. Skirting the process may prevent buy-in for widespread changes. Participants like Gabriela felt that leaders need to spend time on the process of change and ensure stakeholders can see themselves as an integral part.

Melissa summarizes the need for change management to be strategic and transparent. In member checking she stated “sharing the rationale behind decisions (transparency) goes a long way in getting the necessary buy-in. And taking the time to strategically orchestrate change
allows for an intentional and smooth transition.” She highlights how vital transparency is to staff buy-in and the benefits of sound plan to enact change on a college campus.

All participants discussed the need to feel valued within the organization, especially in times of change. Navaeh shared she wished “the strategic plan was more connected and engaged with the boots on the ground folks to ensure value is recognized sufficiently and resources provided, and support is given.” To participants like Navaeh the strategic plan was “above their level” and did not see their work in the plan. This led to the notion of leadership not recognizing the importance of specific campus roles and considering their needs.

Along those lines, some participants felt that the workload of some positions was heavier than other areas. This led to feelings of burnout and lack of care for staff well-being. Melissa described:

So, it's like outwardly, the culture is fine. It's a culture of success. And we want students to do well, but internally, I know people who are really struggling because they’ve had the lion's share of the work, and it’s not evenly distributed.

This quote indicates there may be a disconnect between the outward culture of RU and internal culture experienced by staff.

Participants expressed the importance of leaders demonstrating care for staff during the change process. Stacey acknowledged feelings of “we’re treated like numbers. We’re treated like we’re very replaceable. That’s why there’s just this revolving door of new employees like people leaving new employees coming in and not really staying very long.” This sentiment was not described between staff and mid-level leaders, mostly felt from upper-level administration. Stacey’s feelings of replaceability were expressed by other participants. Jana hared that the lack of care seemed to be missing from administration:
I think it's just at the highest levels. Provost vice president, Vice President Provost President where it felt like there was this ceiling where these big decisions were being made that were affecting the way everybody functioned. And they didn’t care. They just were worried about they were so metrics driven that, you know, it was if if your well-being and livelihood was the cost of that so be it you know, that I think that was the perception.

The perception that the administration did not care about staff well-being was felt by a handful of participants. Combined with heavy workloads, participants like Melissa, Stacey, and Jana indicated that staff were really struggling during this period of change. The lack of attention to the needs of staff members resulted in feelings of disregard by the administration.

**Discussion and Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study provide important considerations for higher education leaders and change agents to consider when striving to foster organizational change. Specifically, this study offers perspectives and experiences from staff at an institution that experienced a change in cultural norms on what worked and did not work in fostering change at their institution. Kezar’s (2018) eight processes that enhance ethical approaches to change framed this inquiry. It is important to note that theoretical frameworks or processes related to change describe what change should or could be like. Kezar’s (2018) eight processes – stakeholder participation and input, broad information sharing, full disclosure of direction and vision, trust and open communication, acknowledgement of differing values and interests, co-creation through ongoing dialogue, transformational not charismatic leadership, and organizational justice – highlight an idealized way to engage in change that may not always be feasible at an institution. Higher education institutions are a unique subset of organizations with characteristics that make change challenging (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2018; Lindahl, 2014; Weick, 1976). For many higher
education institutions, change is not a comfortable concept as institutions have many traditions that it staunchly works to protect and preserve (Taylor & de Lourdes Machado-Taylor, 2010). The hierarchical nature and silos that exist at many higher education institutions do not inherently provide grassroots leaders or staff without positions of power and authority the ability to lead a culture change. These contexts shaped the findings of this study, which highlight the role positional leadership plays in the change process, factors necessary to build buy-in for change, and the needed focus on organizational justice.

In this section, I will examine my findings in relation to Kezar’s (2018) framework and existing literature. I discuss how each of the four major themes – (1) leaders play an important role in fostering organizational change, (2) leaders need to be strategic about how they foster change, (3) leaders need to consider how organization contexts might hinder change, and (4) value the people and processes – align with or challenge our understanding of Kezar’s (2018) framework. By doing so, this section showcases how my study adds to the literature and deepens our understanding of organizational change processes. Each paragraph also incorporates implications for practice to highlight what practitioners may take away from these findings.

First, this study demonstrates the important role leaders play in fostering organizational change. This finding is consistent with prior research that asserts that leaders play a significant role in building and sustaining the culture on campus (Bensimon et al., 1989; Kezar et al., 2006; Schein, 2010). Participants in this study focused on leaders leveraging their position to gather support and buy-in for initiatives. As an example, Taleisha noticed an increase in referrals for services when administrative leaders reminded others to take advantage of resources. Tia also shared how those in leadership positions discussed student success in every speaking engagement, which seemed to create a trickle-down effect. This supports Kezar’s
recommendation of ongoing dialogue (Kezar, 2018) and adds how ongoing communication from leaders can influence others toward their perspective and point of view.

Efforts and changes lacking senior leadership support seemed to be a barrier to change at RU. Leaders often define the values, direction, and priorities on a campus (Holcombe et al., 2023). Participants in this study looked to positional leaders to foster organizational change. This differs from Kezar’s (2018) framework encouraging transformational and shared leadership approaches where individuals can lead from any part of an organization. Participants felt that bottom-up change efforts were unsuccessful at RU. Kezar et al. (2015) cautions that bottom-up views of change may ignore the broader campus infrastructure, which may lead to problems, however, bottom-up changes can create opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators to connect over shared interests. These types of change efforts also align with philosophies in student affairs and higher education, in general, which stresses shared governance and values-driven work (Sternberg et al., 2015). In addition, bottom-up changes can create networks of allies across campus, increase synergy, and develop greater connectivity across the institution (Kezar, 2009).

This finding leads to the first implication for practice: At institutions with similar cultures, change agents lacking formal authority will need to consider how to manage hierarchical structures at their institutions. This may involve seeking buy-in and support from positional leaders before initiating change processes, thus using an approach that leverages both bottom-up and top-down change management. Change agents lacking positional leadership should assess the timing of desired changes, capitalize on opportunities with shared interests, and help upper administration understand the importance of desired changes through information sharing (Kezar, 2012). Even if change agents without formal authority are the driving force
behind a change, having a positional leader to support and champion the change may go a long way in getting institution-wide buy-in.

Second, participants in this study reflected on various ways leaders were strategic about fostering change. One strategy that participants found particularly useful was connecting the change to institutional values. While Kezar (2018) incorporates values into the conversation on ethical change, she does not specifically connect the change to a widely held institutional value. Instead, Kezar (2018) notes that acknowledgement of different values and interests are important to ethical change. While, according to Kezar (2018), value congruence is not necessarily a goal of ethical change, organizations with higher value congruence will move more quickly and deeply into change processes. The findings of this study build on Kezar’s (2018) understanding of the importance of values in change processes by indicating that connecting a change process to widely held institutional values can foster buy-in. As Jennifer mentioned, helping others understand issues in relation to institutional values has proven helpful in getting support. Thus, change agents should consider how their change may connect to institutional values and how they can leverage widely recognized beliefs or goals of the institution to get buy-in from stakeholders across campus.

A second strategy that participants noted as important was connecting the change to evidence-based practices, which allowed staff to better understand the rationale for change. Kezar (2018) indicates that change agents should provide all knowledge and data informing the change, including negative information, and an explanation for needed changes. This study adds that the desired change should be connected to existing research in the field to showcase the validity for the change, not just institutional data and knowledge. This strategy seemed to help Melissa support proposed changes at RU, a large research institution. In addition to student
success, RU values research and evidence-based decisions, which may influence how staff use and value prior research. This may differ by institutional type and values. At institutions with a culture that values research and evidence-based decision making, change agents would likely benefit from providing a roadmap of the desired outcome supported by existing literature with a clear connection to how institutional values may be enhanced by desired outcomes. Change agents can use existing literature to build an argument for change, recommend how change is approached, and share examples of similar change efforts at other institutions. At institutions where the culture does not value research, change agents may first need work towards a culture that values existing literature, assessment, and evaluation. Integrating scholarship into practice is a core value of student affairs (Hirschy & Wilson, 2017) and student affairs practitioners are expected to be data-conscious in their praxis (McCloud, 2024). One way to build toward a research informed culture is to use professional association resources and materials to assist in the development, implementation, and analysis of research projects (McCloud, 2024). By demonstrating the value-added component of existing literature to support program changes future change initiatives may be more easily accepted from a research informed culture. Such a culture can then support change efforts, as such efforts will be more successful when grounded in research and evidence. The third and fourth findings relate to Kezar’s (2018) principle of organizational justice which centers on employees’ perceptions of the fairness of processes, actions, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment. It is important to note that organizational justice does not mean that employees receive the outcome they desire but feel that they were listened to, that procedures are fair, and that leaders are honest, suppress bias, and are consistent (Kezar, 2018). Both findings connect to different pieces of organizational justice, yet still focus on employee perceptions of each theme. When participants felt like they were not acknowledged or
listened to or did not receive the needed support to implement changes, they were less likely to support a change. Thus, ensuring fairness of change processes, actions, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment was essential in successfully managing changes at RU.

The third finding honed in on how organizational context may hinder change. In this study, participants experienced frustrations with administrative leaders’ lack of response to silos and organizational structures. Being asked to make changes without considering the barriers due to these contextual pieces felt unfair to participants. Specifically, participants recollected feelings of frustration with administrative leaders’ lack of acknowledgment on how silos impacted their ability to do work which resulted in extra time on task and caused challenges while navigating different technology platforms. Silos and other organizational structures such as reporting lines may impact the ability to change. Organizational silos are deeply hierarchical and political in nature with staff often marginalized in their role (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). Greenberg and Baron (2003) acknowledge that silos may lead to a disconnect from leaders to subordinates which is indicative of poor communication and lack of trust. Leaders need to listen to concerns and challenges staff face to be successful in their position. As such, leaders may need to use their positional power to disrupt silos for some changes to happen.

The fourth and final finding indicates that people and processes need to remain at the forefront of leaders’ minds. Participants identified a connection between poor communication and perceptions of not being supported significantly impacting morale, confidence, and trust. Participants seemed to desire attention and support from their leaders and seemed less likely to support change when they felt ignored, not listened to, or did not receive explanations for decisions. Unfortunately, staff tend to experience an emotional toll in situations where there are not enough resources or when change is not managed effectively (Devecchi et al., 2018). As a
result, the findings illuminated the leader’s responsibility to gather experiences and impressions of change from those impacted while being attuned to external factors. Leaders may consider opportunities for staff to provide feedback before potential changes to learn about concerns and processes that need to be in place before the desired change can occur. Feedback on potential changes could be collected through an anonymous survey yearly with an additional opportunity for interested staff to schedule a follow-up meeting. Leaders may also consider semester listening sessions as an opportunity for staff to share ideas and concerns.

Beyond the connection to organizational justice, the third finding also highlighted the role of external environmental factors on change in higher education. Taylor and Machado-Taylor (2010) believe that higher education leaders must constantly monitor the sociological, technological, economic, and political environments for potential threats and opportunities. Participants described challenges on campus due to the state’s political climate including staff attrition and uncertainty with potential institutional response to mandates. This climate made it more difficult to focus on and support change initiatives. These challenges are not unique to Retention University (RU). As state oversight increases, staff attrition may follow which results in loss of institutional commitment and knowledge. Ongoing staff attrition may prevent any transformative change in higher education as deep change typically takes 10-15 years to occur (Kezar, 2009). Considering these contexts is essential in navigating change processes.

**Implications for Research**

Findings from this study hold important implications for research. Kezar’s (2018) eight processes that enhance ethical approaches to change serve as strategies for those desiring to implement change. This study examined ways in which various approaches (i.e., ongoing
dialogue, broad information sharing, and organizational justice) supported or were a barrier to change. Institutional context likely played an important role in these findings. For example, participants expressed an interest in change being supported by existing literature, which may be connected to participants being staff at a research university. Staff at a liberal arts institution or a community college may feel differently as organizational cultures at these institution types may not emphasize the value of research as much. These strategies should be examined within other institutional types including small and large private and minority-serving institutions.

More research is needed on the experiences and perceptions of higher education staff during change to contribute to existing change management frameworks and future change outcomes at higher education institutions. Participants in this study discussed ways that would support their buy-in to change. Yet, they shared feelings of frustration and disregard around how change was initiated and managed. Further research should examine organizational justice and employee perceptions of change processes at different institutions.

Finally, the findings of this study pointed to the importance of understanding how political contexts at the state and national levels affect higher education’s ability to meet the needs of a diverse student population. In conjunction with the American Council on Education, Kezar, Fries-Britt, et al. (2018) examined how the University of Missouri (MU) navigated their racial crisis in 2015. This groundbreaking case study explored events leading to this crisis, how multiple external factors impacted local priorities, and how the institution is being rebuilt. As politics continues to creep into higher education additional research is needed to learn how institutions can maintain campus values, create change while also balancing the financial power of politics.
Conclusion

The findings of this study reinforce the multifaceted nature of change at higher education institutions and the important role that leaders play in the change process. This study provides steps leaders can take to garner support for change: connecting it to widely held institutional values and using research and literature to see the validity of proposed changes. Knowing that cultural change takes 10-15 years to become rooted into institutional culture, change agents and higher education leaders must continually serve as champions and catalysts for change.
CHAPTER 3

SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

About every five years I get antsy and need a challenge. I had considered going back to school multiple times, either for another master’s degree or a doctorate. I had read the course requirements for the higher education doctorate at Illinois State a handful of times. No lightbulb moment. Course descriptions sounded horrible. I became more serious about returning to school in 2019 during my latest professional rut. My goal was to be a better, more well-rounded practitioner. Outside of my goal and knowing I know “how to college” I decided there was no time like the present. Here we are!

This chapter is a scholarly reflection of my doctoral journey. I will begin with a reflection on the dissertation process, including what went well, challenges along the way, and how I might do differently if I repeated the study. Next, I will focus on how this dissertation and journey has influenced my own professional practice. Finally, I will share my experiences as a scholarly practitioner conducting research, writing a journal article, and the role of research in my future endeavors.

Reflection the Dissertation Process

Next to parenting, this is the hardest thing I have done, although there are some similarities. There is no manual about being a parent. There is not a clear path to completing a dissertation. Confidence is a roller coaster. Constantly juggling priorities and managing my own
expectations was a challenge. Explaining that mommy needed to be by herself or couldn’t attend a soccer game was heart wrenching. Thank goodness the dissertation is a time definite event! I have had to practice grace and compassion and learn that my self-imposed deadlines can change.

While I would not recommend beginning a doctoral program during a pandemic, I began coursework in August 2020. It was a welcome distraction and gave me something else to think about instead of all the things I couldn’t do due to the pandemic. In the years leading up to my application I noticed that I was reading more journal articles and found myself seeking out additional information or learning about innovative practices occurring on other campuses. I enjoyed learning more about what was happening outside of Illinois State.

As anxious and excited as I was to begin learning, I felt like the only person in my cohort without a specific topic or interest area. I just wanted to learn and be a better practitioner. I hadn’t considered what I would do for my dissertation. I assumed through coursework that topics would rise to the surface. That did not happen to me. I remember very clearly when the form went out from the program to identify our interest areas and methodology I blanked. While I know I put something, the anxiety around not knowing was very stressful.

Finally, I had a lightbulb moment. I have been curious about organizational structures, cultures, student retention, and change for quite some time. Illinois State is a very relational campus and individual student issues are resolved between individuals in offices who have an established working relationship or social connection on campus. My goal initially with this study was to better understand stakeholder engagement and management from the perspective of the stakeholders in the context of to enhance my ability to work with departments, not just individuals in departments, across divisional lines at Illinois State. From the professional relationships I formed as I researched best practices, it dawned on me that I could channel that
into a qualitative study with appropriate buy-in and support. I am VERY fortunate to have Leslie Tod as a co-conspirator, supportive colleague, and professional extraordinaire in my life. Leslie is a colleague at the research site and was able to connect me with colleagues at her institution. I could not have done this project without her, her support, and her willingness to help me complete my degree.

I assumed I would conduct a qualitative study as I learn with and through others. Merriam’s (1988) description of a qualitative case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or social unit” (pg. xiii) really resonated with me. I am and have been fascinated with RU as an institution and how they have been able to make great strides with student retention and graduation rates with their innovative approaches. I was excited to learn more about how the Student Outreach & Support office at RU collaborated with their campus partners that resulted in an increase in student retention.

Overall, I was able to follow my research design and things went as planned. Participant recruitment was easier than I expected, likely because Leslie sent an email on my behalf describing my study and encouraging folks to consider participating. Many of my participants noted they signed up at the encouragement of Leslie and that Leslie’s initial outreach made a difference. A few participants asked if I had difficulty connecting with anyone and sent a friendly nudge on my behalf. Two participants even ‘replied all’ to Leslie’s message after my interview with them saying how much they enjoyed our conversation and to consider participating. I, too, really enjoyed the participant interviews and the conversational nature versus a ping pong ball interview. My goal with each interview was to form a connection with participants, demonstrate my genuine interest in their responses, and welcome their questions.
during our time together. It seemed that participants were honest, excited to connect with a
colleague at a different institution, and curious about my personal interests. I left each meeting
feeling like I made a new professional connection.

Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain organizational charts for document review.
Despite asking during participant interviews and scouring websites, neither myself nor my
participants could locate any. I was initially disappointed as I thought there would be a
connection between organizational structures and SOS’s ability to collaborate with their campus
partners. During data analysis I was surprised that this did not impact my study and was not
necessary to better understand collaboration at RU. The lack of organizational charts publicly
available could be due to semi-recent changes in administrative leadership as Leslie, my peer
debriefee shared. One big surprise during data analysis was that my study shifted from
stakeholder management to how higher education institutions change. I initially thought I made a
mistake or inadvertently caused this to happen. However, after listening to interview recordings I
did not ask leading questions or questions unrelated to my framework. Interestingly, Leslie
shared that she was not surprised about this shift based on the participants I spoke with. Most of
the participants were in similar leadership roles and positions during the initial changes at RU
and may have had similar perceptions and experiences with the changes. I was also not expecting
participants to discuss the outside factors in the state of the research site contributing to feelings
of uncertainty and how they might communicate with each other. This came as a surprise as I did
not ask any questions about the state of the research site, anything related to performance-based
funding, or the climate of higher education in the state.

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at RU and may have had similar perceptions and experiences with the changes. I was also not
expecting participants to discuss the outside factors in the state of the research site contributing to feelings of uncertainty and how they might communicate with each other. This came as a surprise as I did not ask any questions about the state of the research site, anything related to performance-based funding, or the climate of higher education in the state.

Should I replicate my study I would conduct a few things differently. First, I would have been more specific about the campus location my participants worked at. While I knew that the institution consolidated three campuses under one umbrella, I wrongly assumed, when Leslie was identifying colleagues, that all would be from her campus. I do not think that this skewed my data in any way, however, for consistency purposes I would have preferred one campus. Additionally, I would have preferred to meet with participants in person to get a sense of their office environments and the campus culture from the staff perspective. However, due to distance I was unable to travel.

Overall, I feel positive about my study and contributions to the field. I strived to be an ethical researcher in all aspects of the dissertation process. I am most proud of the rapport and trust built between myself and my participants. Their affirmation and support during member checks provided motivation and confidence that I was on the right track.

Applications to Professional Practice

Post-research, I think of myself as a scholarly practitioner versus a student affairs professional. This shift in thinking reflects the intentionality in my work. I use literature and best practices to guide the planning and assessment of my programs and activities. While this is not new to my practice I choose to acknowledge and own my methods of practice. As a result of my findings, I view collaboration and processes differently and intentionally try to frame concerns in
light of student success. This section will discuss how my praxis has changed based on my findings.

**Collaboration**

As a result of my research, I will consider my role as a campus partner and someone who desires to change how students are supported throughout their academic journey. On the surface it is easy to say, “I am a good campus partner” or “I collaborate regularly with other areas.” It is another to truly consider what collaboration looks like and how collaboration is defined amongst campus partners. In an ideal world a project begins with collaboration in mind and not as an afterthought. Collaboration is a joint effort and process to create something or solve a mutual problem. In my view collaboration requires a discussion of what groups need/want from each other, how they will work and communicate with each other, and how progress will be measured. Up until this point, I would have said I was a good collaborator; however, I likely am known as someone who is easy to work with. I have also seen folks who are easy to work become difficult during partnerships, as they have not likely thought about their own expectations of collaboration and partnership.

**Value the Process**

My first and only detention in middle school was interrupting my teacher to ask for the assignment instead of hearing the explanation again. I share this as deep down I know higher education does not move fast. I know larger initiatives, under shared governance, take extra time. During my interviews I was reminded that the process of change is just as important as the outcomes....and that even if something appears to be a simple fix from my perspective, I need to
let the process play out. Processes allow for many different voices and perspectives which can lead to buy-in and additional influence. Processes allow transparency and for individuals to feel valued. Time is an important factor for change to occur. Processes take time. I now have much more respect for a clearly defined process and will strive to outline processes for initiatives I might lead moving forward.

**Frame the Issue**

During one of my favorite interviews a participant said, “it’s hard to be an enemy of student success.” Truly – who works in higher education because you hate students. Yes, there are folks, but most faculty and staff believe in education and want to help students thrive. As a result, using student success as a frame for any issue of concern. If a policy is a barrier, looking at it in terms of how it is impacting a student’s ability to be successful...not that it’s a bad policy, it just may be doing more harm than good in the present day. #FrametheIssue

Due to my dissertation research and work interests, I was given a chance to write a proposal for a Student Outreach and Support office at Illinois State to improve student persistence and retention. I took excerpts from my literature review to show a need for an office focusing on proactive outreach. I was also able to draw on my professional relationship with Leslie to provide valuable feedback on the similarities and differences between the work of academic advisors and academic advocates.

I thoroughly enjoyed speaking with each of my participants. It was a friendly reminder to me that there are a lot of great people in higher education trying to help students. Speaking with them gave me a renewed confidence to outreach to others at different institutions to learn more about other programs and initiatives.
Applications to Research

Writing a journal article was more challenging than I anticipated. To begin, I needed to move through my negative narrative of “who am I to write an article, I don’t have the appropriate credentials.” To compartmentalize my thoughts, I initially focused on the article as an assignment, something I had to complete. While I did not enjoy removing previously written content that is still valuable, it was part of the process. This strategy worked until the discussion section. That negative narrative crept back in as I began the discussion section. My findings did not completely align with my framework or my literature review. I had put Adrianna Kezar on a pedestal in my mind as the “end all be all” expert on how higher education institutional change. Thankfully, Dr. Nyunt helped me understand my doubt and provided much-needed guidance with a vote of confidence.

I struggled with the iterative nature of the research process. I prefer to have all puzzle pieces in the right spot on the first attempt. I quickly learned that research is not a linear process. While this challenged my preferred mode of operation, I learned to be more flexible with myself and this study. Now on the other side of a completed research project I have much more respect for those who regularly conduct and disseminate research. It is a labor of love. As a scholarly practitioner, I value the systematic and intentional approach of research. Research has taught me to evaluate and consider others’ positionality, design choices, and discussion before blindly accepting recommendations. Moving forward, prior research will continue to serve as a foundation and guide for my practice.
Conclusion

I was and still am sad that coursework has ended. I loved being in class and learning with others with similar interests, my cohortmates and faculty alike. At the present moment, I am thankful to have completed this dissertation. Yet, there’s a chance I will miss working on this manuscript. In the meantime, I will savor this accomplishment and appreciate all those who supported me on my journey.
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APPENDIX A

EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS
Hi <insert participant name>,

I’m reaching out on behalf of a colleague who is completing their Ed.D. at Northern Illinois University to participate in her dissertation study on stakeholder engagement. Please consider learning more about the study in the attached informed consent document followed by completing the Qualtrics survey.

Please see the message below from Lisa Lawless about her study.

Thank you for considering!

Leslie

Hello!

I am interested in learning about organizational change through the stakeholder perspective….and that’s where you come in! I would love an opportunity to schedule an interview about your experiences at USF and working with the Office of Academic Advocacy.

Please feel free to contact me directly at lrlawle@ilstu.edu or 309-830-8137 with any questions or concerns about participation. Completion of the Qualtrics survey will provide consent to participate and you may opt out at any point in time. I will reach out via email to schedule an interview should you consent to participating.

Thank you and take care!

Lisa Lawless
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
**Title of Study:** Engaging Campus Stakeholders for Student Success Outcomes: A Qualitative Case Study from the Stakeholder Perspective

Investigator: Lisa Fant Lawless, [contact information] (NIU CAHE graduate student)

**Key Information:**

This is a voluntary research study examining how postsecondary institutions can work across institutional silos to increase college student persistence and retention. This study will occur during the summer and fall 2023 semesters.

Participation in this study involves one 60-minute interview and providing feedback via email on accuracy of findings in the fall 2023 semester.

There are no direct benefits for participants. The benefits include providing valuable insight into stakeholder management from the stakeholder perspective at postsecondary institutions.

**Description of the Study:**

The purpose of the study is to examine how colleges and universities can work across divisions to increase college student persistence and retention. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: participate in one 60-minute interview and provide feedback via email on accuracy study findings.

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are no known or expected risks to participating in this study. There are no direct benefits to participants. The benefits of participation include providing strategies for higher education practitioners to enhance relationship management across divisions, contributing to organizational change literature, and improving holistic student success and retention at other postsecondary institutions.
Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permissible by law. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. The researcher will be the only person with access to any audio/video recordings. Electronic data collected will be destroyed after completion of the study. The research will not include any identifiable information in any report that may be published to protect your confidentiality. Pseudonyms will be used for all publications or presentations on the study. You will also be given the opportunity to review and approve any direct quotes that appear in any publications.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Your Rights:

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process. You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Lisa Fant Lawless, at lrlawle@ilstu.edu or by telephone at [redacted]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at (815)753-8588.
Additionally, you may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Gudrun Nyunt via 
gnyunt@niu.edu or [redacted].

**Future Use of the Research Data:**

Your information collected as a part of this research will not be used or distributed for
future research, even if all identifiers are removed.

By checking "I agree" below, you indicate that you have decided to volunteer as a research
participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above.
Please take a picture or screenshot of this form for your records.
- I agree
- I disagree

I give my consent to be audio recorded during the interviews.
- I agree
- I disagree

Please share your contact information so I can reach out to you to set up an interview.

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Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. Please complete the following
questions to share some basic information about your identity and background. If you are
uncomfortable answering a question, feel free to leave it blank.

**Gender identity**

When asked about your race/ethnicity, how do you self-identify?
Are there any other identities that are salient to your experiences and that you would like to
share? If so, please list them below.

**Position title**

What office at USF do you work in?

**How long have you been employed at USF?**
- Less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-7 years
- 7-10 years
- 10-15 years
- 15+ years
Highest degree earned

- High School Diploma or equivalent
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Terminal Degree in field

Thank you for taking the time to complete my consent form and initial survey.

I appreciate your interest in my study and will reach out to you shortly to schedule an interview.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at lrlawle@ilstu.edu or 309-830-8137.
APPENDIX C

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WITH STAKEHOLDERS
Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to an interview with me today. This study focuses on understanding stakeholder management in higher education from the stakeholder perspective. I am particularly interested in your experiences and interactions with the Student Outreach & Support Office.

Thank you for responding to the Qualtrics survey ahead of time and agreeing to participate in this interview. What questions might you have before we begin about anything related to this study?

**Introduction questions:**

1. Tell me about the various positions you have held at RU.
   a. Confirm length of employment at RU.
2. What do you enjoy about working at RU?
   a. What drew you to pursue employment at RU?
3. What do you wish were different?

**RQ 1: How can postsecondary institutions change their culture and norms to increase college student persistence and retention?**

- Please describe campus culture from the staff perspective.
  - How has it changed during your time at RU?
- In 2016, the university formed the Persistence Committee, Care Team, and the case management approach in the Student Outreach & Support office. What was your impression of these changes?
  - How did you feel about this process?
  - What aspects of the process made you feel that way?
  - How were thoughts, concerns, and feedback collected and shared?
  - What could the institution have done to make this a more effective change process?
  - OR: Since you weren’t at RU during this time, how were you introduced to SOS and the case management model? What, if any, information or training did you receive?
- How did leadership practices influence how university members contribute and respond to the implementation of the SOS model?
- How, if at all, were you involved in discussions about how to increase student retention? How would you have liked to be involved?
- How does RU approach change based on what was learned in 2016 when implementing the case management approach?

**RQ 2: How does SOS work across institutional silos?**

- How, if at all, do silos exist within RU?
  - How do these silos impact your ability to do your work?
  - How, if at all, have you been able to collaborate across silos?
  - If you were at RU before 2016, how if at all, did silos exist within RU? How might that differ to today?
- How would you characterize your relationship with SOS staff?
  - What do SOS staff do to create these types of relationships?
o What do you wish were different about your relationship with SOS? How, if at all, does SOS foster trust among stakeholders?
  o How has your relationship with SOS changed over time?
  • How, if at all, does the SOS office provide information to campus care partners? Frequency?
    o What do you wish were different about the information you receive?

**RQ 3: How do OAA and internal stakeholders engage with each other?**
  • How does your work intersect with other offices across campus?
  • How would you describe the relationships between stakeholders?
    o How does the SOS model affect this? OR How do university members work with one another through, and outside of, SOS’s processes?
    o What could SOS do to facilitate relationships between stakeholders?

**RQ 4: How do organizational structures at RU support campus partnerships?**
  • How effective is the organizational structure at the university? What makes it effective or not effective?
  • How does the organizational structure within RU allow for campus partnerships?
  • Before 2016, how effective was the organizational structure at the university? How did it allow for campus partnerships?

**Participant questions:**
  • Are there questions you wish I had asked about your experience as an internal stakeholder?
  • What questions do you have for me?

**Interview wrap-up:**
  • Thank participant for involvement
  • Remind that will send an email to share findings and would appreciate feedback they might have.
APPENDIX D

SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WITH SOS STAFF
Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to an interview with me today. This study focuses on understanding stakeholder management in higher education from the stakeholder perspective. I am particularly interested in your experiences as a staff member in the Office Student Outreach & Support.

Thank you for responding to the Qualtrics survey ahead of time and agreeing to participate in this interview. What questions might you have before we begin about anything related to this study?

**Introduction questions:**
1. Tell me about the various positions you have held at RU.
   a. Confirm length of employment at RU.
2. What do you enjoy about working at RU?
   a. What drew you to pursue employment at RU?
3. What do you wish were different?

**RQ 1: How can postsecondary institutions change their culture and norms to increase college student persistence and retention?**
- Please describe campus culture from the staff perspective.
  - How has it changed during your time at RU?
- In 2016, the university formed the Persistence Committee, Care Team, and the case management approach in the Student Outreach & Support office. What was your impression of these changes?
  - How did you feel about this process?
    - What aspects of the process made you feel that way?
  - How were thoughts, concerns, and feedback collected and shared?
  - What could the institution have done to make this a more effective change process?
  - OR: Since you weren’t at RU during this time, what do you think is unique about the SOS and case management model? How does this compare to your previous work experiences?
- How did leadership practices influence how university members contribute and respond to the implementation of the SOS model?
- How, if at all, were you involved in discussions about how to increase student retention? How would you have liked to be involved?
- How does RU approach change based on what was learned in 2016 when implementing the case management approach?

**RQ 2: How does SOS work across institutional silos?**
- How, if at all, do silos exist within RU?
o How do these silos impact your ability to do your work?
 o How, if at all, have you been able to collaborate across silos?
 o If you were at RU before 2016, how if at all, did silos exist within RU? How might that differ to today?
• How would you characterize your relationship with care partner offices?
  o What do you wish were different about these relationships?
  o How do you attempt to foster or maintain these relationships?

RQ 3: How do SOS staff and internal stakeholders engage with each other?
• How does your work intersect with other offices across campus?
• How would you describe the relationships between stakeholders?
  o How does the SOS model affect this?
  o What could be done to enhance these relationships?

RQ 4: How do organizational structures at RU support campus partnerships?
• How effective is the organizational structure at the university? What makes it effective or not effective?
• How does the organizational structure within RU allow for campus partnerships?
• Before 2016, how effective was the organizational structure at the university? How did it allow for campus partnerships?

Participant questions:
• Are there questions you wish I had asked about your experience as an internal stakeholder?
• What questions do you have for me?

Interview wrap-up:
• Thank participant for involvement
• Remind that will send an email to share findings and would appreciate feedback they might have.