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“My Job Is Not to Retain You”:

The Role of Student Retention Professionals at Four-Year Colleges and Universities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by

Joseph John Ramirez

2018

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“My Job Is Not to Retain You”:

The Role of Student Retention Professionals at Four-Year Colleges and Universities

By

Joseph John Ramirez

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Sylvia Hurtado, Chair

As college completion rates have remained stubbornly flat over time, four-year colleges and universities have been called upon to improve the percentage of students who earn a baccalaureate degree. In response, many campuses have introduced a new professional, non-teaching role that seeks to promote, coordinate, and advance student success. While not much is known about these roles or the individuals who occupy them, understanding retention professionals’ experiences and contributions to change can illuminate who they are, what they do, and how their work reflects institutional approaches to student retention. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the emerging role of student retention professionals and how such individuals conceptualize and enact such roles within their respective organizational contexts.

Drawing upon theories of role-making and structuration while utilizing a phenomenological approach, this study extended the concept of structuration to consider not just

how a retention professional creates change but also how this newly created role is part of a larger process to changing and reinforcing institutional structures in response to the changing demands placed upon colleges and universities. In addition, structuration theory helped shed light on the challenges retention professionals encountered in advancing change at their respective institutions. Twenty-one retention professionals from across the country participated in the study. One-on-one interviews and participant-developed concept maps provided data for analysis.

Findings from the study contributed to a new understanding of an emerging professional group's work in higher education, including the changes they make to campus policies and environments, student support systems, and academic pathways and experiences. The study extends student retention theories by illuminating how staff professionals—often missing from retention literature—contribute to student degree attainment and to processes of institutional change. The study explored how retention professionals, while committed to a common goal, enacted their roles in different ways. The findings suggest that retention professionals assume significant responsibility for improving rates of baccalaureate attainment, yet their success depends upon effective collaboration and buy-in from colleagues across the institution. Implications speak to ensuring retention professionals are not limited by traditional academic structures but emboldened to disrupt them.

The dissertation of Joseph John Ramirez is approved.

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2018

*To Aimee, Joseph Anthony, and Baby Bear*  
*For your incredible strength and unconditional love*

In Memory

*My abuelo*  
*Joseph Ramirez, Sr.*

*1926 – 2016*

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- Eagan, K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Ramirez, J. J., Aragon, M. C., Suchard, M. R., & Hurtado, S. (2014). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2014*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Hurtado, S., Ramirez, J., & Cho, K. (2018). The current Latinx/a/o landscape of enrollment and success in higher education. In A. E. Batista, S. M. Collado, & D. Pérez II. (Eds.), *Latinx/a/o in higher education: Exploring identities, pathways, and success* (pp. 3-21). Washington, D.C.: NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.
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- \_\_\_\_\_. (2017). Summer bridge propensity score weighting methods. Paper presentation at annual meeting of Association of Institutional Research: Washington, DC.
- Hurtado, S., Bates, A. K., Ramirez, J. J., & Stewart, T. J., & Ruiz Alvarado, A. (2014, May). Closing the gap for first generation, underrepresented minority students. Paper presented at the Association for Institutional Research Annual Forum, Orlando, FL.
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- Ramirez, J. J., Bates, A. K. (2016, April). Latina/o student participation in a study abroad program. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C.
- Ramirez, J., & Hurtado, S. (2015). La selección latina: Latina/o students at selective four-year colleges and universities. In P. A. Pérez & M. Ceja (Eds.), *Higher Education Access and Choice for Latino Students: Critical Findings and Theoretical Perspectives* (pp. 130-150). New York: Routledge.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

When discussing a controversial plan to boost student retention, the former president of Mount St. Mary's University told a faculty member: "This is hard for you because you think of the students as cuddly bunnies, but you can't. You just have to drown the bunnies ... put a Glock to their heads" (Schisler & Golden, 2016; Svrluga, 2016a). Ultimately, the crass language, the "cuddly bunny" description, and the ensuing drama regarding the president's resignation grabbed national headlines, overshadowing the unorthodox elements that comprised the proposed retention strategy. In an email outlining his plan, the former president stated: "My short-term goal is to have 20-25 people leave by the 25th [of September]. This one thing will boost our retention 4-5 percent. A larger committee or group needs to work on the details but I think you get the objective" (Schisler & Golden, 2016; Svrluga, 2016a). Upending traditional notions of retention, the proposed plan faced strong opposition because it sought to admit students and then encourage immediate drop out, thereby *decreasing* the number of students officially enrolled in the first-year cohort rather than promote continuous enrollment and *increase* the number of students who returned to the institution for their second year.

What was at stake at Mount St. Mary's, just as it is at many other campuses across the country, was not just whether students should be treated as "cuddly bunnies," but the institution's role and responsibility in advancing student success. Though the plan was never enacted, it did spur questions and conversations within major news media outlets about how institutions shape students' expectations and decisions regarding their college enrollment (Jaschik, 2016; McPhate, 2016; Svrluga, 2016b; Threefoot, 2016; Wells, 2016). The discourse brought into focus how student retention is not simply a product of individual students' talent, motivation, mindsets

(Dweck, 2006) and “grit” (Duckworth, 2016), rather, students are influenced—consciously and unconsciously—by the institution’s policies, structures, and people.

*Student retention professionals*, in some cases more informally referred to as “retention czars” (Cross, 2016; Reilly, 2013), are a group of people who seek to understand, address, and improve retention and graduation rates at their respective institutions. In recent years, a number of colleges and universities have designed and implemented these roles, resulting in a new cadre of professional staff and administrators explicitly tasked with advancing student retention. Such professionals and the roles they occupy comprise an important component of an institution’s overall retention philosophy, approach, and strategy. As a result, understanding who these individuals are and what it is they do can shed light on whether there is any hope for retention professionals to save the “drowning bunnies” and transform the institutions that educate them.

### **Problem Statement**

Though many colleges and universities are classified as “four-year” institutions, fewer than half of first-time, full-time students complete their degrees within that timeframe. Among students who began college in 2008, less than four in ten (39.8%) earned their bachelor’s degree within four years. Students who enrolled in the nation’s public colleges and universities were even less likely to graduate (34.4%) by the spring of 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). When examining the more liberal six-year graduation rate, a majority of first-time students ultimately earned their degree (59.6%), though the rate has remained relatively flat over the past decade. When looking back to the entering class of 2000, 57.5% of students in that cohort graduated within six years (NCES, 2016). In addition, continued disparities in graduation rates between students of differing racial/ethnic identities or socioeconomic backgrounds suggest that higher education institutions have been contributing to,

not decreasing, social and economic inequities (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; NCES, 2016; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Recent national data revealed that less than 50% of students who identify as African American (39.5%), Pacific Islander (48.5%) and American Indian / Alaska Native (41.2%) earned a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to the overall rate of 59.4% (NCES, 2016). These stagnant trends serve as a stark reminder that four-year institutions have much work to do in order to improve the rate and speed at which all students earn a baccalaureate degree.

While a stagnating graduation rate and persistent inequalities are cause for concern in their own right, the United States' relative decline in educational attainment at the international level has intensified critiques and scrutiny of the nation's colleges and universities. What was once the nation with the largest percentage of college-educated individuals was recently ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the world for adults aged 25 to 34 who have completed at least an associate's degree (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). In the wake of this decline, former-President Obama called for a renewed commitment to college degree completion, setting a goal for the United States to once again possess the greatest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Obama, 2009). Such ambitions have attempted to direct national efforts and state priorities and have placed pressures on colleges and universities to meet such goals.

College participation and completion are critical because of their relationship to a host of individual and social benefits. In recent years, the public discourse has emphasized that college graduates, over the course of their lifetime, will earn a million dollars more than their peers who earn a high school diploma (Abel & Deitz, 2014; Carnevale, Cheah, & Hanson, 2015). While the specific numbers have been debated (Baum, 2014), the difference in yearly wages between college and high school graduates, described as a "wage premium," has been well documented.

Since the 1970s, the gap in full-time salary earnings steadily increased, reaching an all-time high in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2014). Beyond strict measures of income, college graduates have fared much better in other aspects of the labor market, particularly since the Great Recession of 2008 when job losses disproportionately affected those who had earned no higher than a high school diploma (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Cheah, 2012).

Beyond popular narratives regarding the economic value for an individual person to earn a baccalaureate degree, a college diploma has been linked to several other important outcomes. For example, recent studies have emphasized how college participation and degree attainment are connected to lower rates of smoking, increased levels of voting and participation in civic organizations, and greater levels of interactions and trust with neighbors (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Trostel, 2015). Over time, an increasing amount of evidence has consistently demonstrated that individuals gain much from persisting in college and earning a baccalaureate degree.

The benefits of a college degree do not only accrue at the individual level, societies and nations also benefit from higher education participation. Building upon Bowen's seminal piece on the benefits of college (1977), scholars have repeatedly affirmed the many benefits to society gained from college participation (McMahon, 2009). In outlining the value of a university education, Gutmann (2014) argued that universities ultimately help strengthen economies, build international cooperation, safeguard collective health and well-being, and build good public policy, among many other things. In addition, colleges and universities extend the boundaries of knowledge, innovation, and technology, yielding new possibilities for current and future societies.

In light of these articulated benefits, it is not surprising that former-President Obama, along with several education foundations and organizations, including the Gates Foundation,

Lumina Foundation and USA Funds, have collectively focused higher education policies on advancing degree completion. In so doing, former-President Obama challenged institutions to boost their retention and graduation rates and suggested that those who fail to do so must be held accountable (Duncan, 2015; Obama, 2013). Though the former-President placed pressure on campuses to meet his aspirational goals and directives, his administration's College Completion Goals were but one source of pressure, among many, spurring four-year colleges and universities to boost their rates of student retention and degree attainment.

### **Pressures to Boost Baccalaureate Attainment**

Amidst a changing national and international landscape, campuses face heightened pressures to increase the rates at which they retain and graduate students. Forces both internal and external to the academy are converging to heighten the importance and attention placed on these student success metrics.

Over the past few decades, college graduation rates have increasingly been used to rank institutions and identify the nation's "best" colleges. Through the annual *US News and World Report's College Rankings*, the Department of Education's College Scorecard, and a host of other rating lists and publications, college rankings have become linked to measures and perceptions of institutional quality and prestige (Hossler, 2000; McDonough, Lising, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). Such rankings are important because they confer with students' admission decisions (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; McDonough et al., 1998; Meredith, 2004), and they influence college administrators in key ways (Bastedo & Bowman, 2011). Recently, graduation rates were used as an admission criterion for the newly formed Coalition for Access and Affordability—a consortium of prestigious institutions intending to redefine college admissions (Pappano, 2015). In this instance, institutional graduation rates played an important role in

determining which colleges and universities had a voice in redesigning admission policies and practices at selective institutions. As rankings continue to gain in visibility and influence, campuses have a strategic interest in boosting the measures such as retention and graduation rates used to generate national rankings.

Completion metrics not only influence college rankings, but also an increasing amount of government funds are being allocated based upon institutional “performance,” often measured by retention and graduation rates. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2015), 32 states had approved performance-based funding formulas as of July 2015. While only a small fraction of funds have been distributed in this way (McLendon & Hearn, 2013), there have been growing calls within the government, including from former-President Obama, to consider graduation rates when allocating funds (Obama, 2013). Coupled with the decline in federal and state investments in higher education over time, particularly on a per-student basis, competition for government resources may become even more competitive and performance-based (Heller, 2006). As a result, retention and completion rates have become increasingly important for campuses to secure increasingly scarce government funding for their operations.

As public investments have declined, colleges have passed along costs to students and their families by way of higher tuition and fees. With inflation-adjusted tuition and fees reaching historic heights, the amount of debt students and families have assumed has increased substantially over time (Fry, 2012; NCES, 2016; The College Board, 2016). In this context, policy makers have criticized institutions for charging students such high rates of tuition and fees, particularly when less than half are expected to complete their baccalaureate degree within four years (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran 2011; NCES, 2016). Thus, the value of a

college education has come under fire as institutions ask students to borrow and assume debt but do not reciprocate with high rates of completion.

With the growing attention paid to college costs and college completion, a substantial portion of students at four-year institutions have expressed that graduation rates are important in their college choice process. In the fall of 2015, nearly one-third of first-time, full-time students (30.9%) indicated a “very important” reason they enrolled at their respective institution was the percentage of students who graduate (Eagan et al., 2015). Students themselves are carefully considering college costs and their expected time-to-degree when making enrollment decisions, and it has become a key data point for them as they weigh their post-secondary options.

Though graduation and retention rates are becoming attached to notions of quality, value, and prestige, it is important to recognize that such figures do not tell the whole story regarding student success, particularly when presented in terms of institutional or national averages. Often, as in the case of the federal government’s College Scorecard, institutions report their respective overall, aggregated retention and graduation rates. Such averages mask disparities in student success and achievement by race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status, keeping inequities in attainment out of the public’s eye or students’ minds. Even though the College Scorecard reports overall figures, disaggregated rates of student success are being tracked and highlighted by educational research organizations (Hurtado, Ruiz Alvarado, & Eagan, 2018; Keels, 2016). Despite changes in college enrollment and participation over time, substantial inequalities in degree attainment persist when considering college completion in relation to various social identities such as gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and first-generation college status (e.g., Arcidiacono & Koedel, 2014; Davidson, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike, Hansen, & Childress, 2014). Though educational institutions



have been critiqued for long-standing disparities in student access and success (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Scott, Bailey, & Kienzl, 2006; Swail, 2003; Velez, 1985), such critiques escalate pressure on colleges and universities to disrupt those trends and become places of opportunity and mobility. As a result, campuses are considering ways to address multiple issues simultaneously—that is, to increase overall rates of retention and graduation while narrowing disparities in such attainment for students of varying backgrounds.

While retention and graduation rates have been viewed as markers of institutional quality and effectiveness, a host of scholars have found that such rates are often a function of students' characteristics and past experiences rather than any specific retention strategy, program, or initiative (Astin, 1997; DeAngelo et al., 2011, Pike et al., 2014). Given these consistent findings, scholars have argued that graduation rates should be viewed as an attribute of the institution (something it is) rather than a function of its internal efforts and work (something it does) (Kalsbeek, 2013). Nevertheless, institutions do not always possess retention or graduation rates that are within a band of predicted values. That is, some institutions do better than what would be expected given their student body while others report rates that are lower than expected (DeAngelo et al., 2011). Such studies serve as reminders that organizational efforts are important to student degree attainment, and that even though the characteristics of incoming students often confer with an institution's graduation rate, it does not absolve the institution from leveraging its resources and people to improve the experience and outcomes of the students who enroll.

To address the multitude of pressures and to boost retention and graduation rates, institutions have implemented a number of strategies and initiatives (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017; Tinto, 2012). The breadth of initiatives and programs that campuses have implemented highlight how there is not a single approach or strategy that easily boosts rates of student success; rather, it

is a combination of several strategies, resources, and initiatives working in tandem that can create change on campus. Amongst the catalog of efforts, a number of institutions have sought to change their staffing and organizational structures that directly address student persistence and completion. More specifically, campuses have recently created a position or set of professional positions that directly engage in the work of retaining students. Over time, the creation of these positions at many different campuses has given rise to a new set of higher education employees who are responding to the calls for improved student retention and successful degree attainment.

### **Emergence of the Student Retention Professional**

Within the last decade, an increasing number of campuses have designated a staff or faculty member as the point person for retention programs and initiatives. Ziskin, Hossler, and Kim (2009) found that a majority of campuses had formed a retention committee or appointed a retention coordinator, although most were committed to the role less than full-time. A separate, national study from Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017) also found that a majority of campuses had introduced a position to lead and coordinate retention efforts. The data from these national surveys suggest that an increasing number of campuses have been identifying a specific person to not only coordinate efforts but also to boost the outcome measures at their respective institutions.

While prior studies and reports have highlighted the growing prevalence of retention coordinators, campuses are also in the process of creating entirely new, full-time positions that are titled and tasked with advancing retention efforts. Such efforts go beyond appointing a current staff member to lead an ad hoc retention committee or strategic plan. Examples abound with campuses announcing and promoting such positions. Tulane University announced the hiring of its first “retention czar,” whose official title was the “Newcomb-Tulane College

associate dean of retention and strategic initiatives” (Cross, 2016), Sacramento State University rolled out a “graduation czar” in January of 2016 (Lambert, 2016), and the University of Oregon’s ambitious plan to boost student success rates included the hiring of a “retention czar” (Schill, 2015). As these positions have become more prevalent at institutions across the country, it is important to consider how such roles are being designed and how the individuals hired for the jobs experience their roles and responsibilities.

Given the speed at which these new roles are being introduced across the country, they have yet to be firmly established within the academy’s traditional structures and hierarchies. For example, the Higher Education Publications’ Directory (2017), a source of information regarding administrative positions coded 109 types of positions that are found within the academy. Not a single code, nor code description, in their 2016 publication included the words “retention” or “graduation.” However, directory searches that use “retention” yield dozens of administrators whose job titles included the word “retention.” Similarly, professional networking and job-posting sites such HigherEdJobs contain numerous positions that colleges and universities have been looking to fill. At this point, retention jobs are quickly growing, but they have yet to be officially categorized within administrative hierarchies or directories, and they have yet to form a distinct professional organization that is specific to their positions and functions within the academy.

The emergence of these positions creates challenges and opportunities to learn more about these roles and the individuals who hold them. In addition, retention offices and staff positions call attention to a college’s organizational components and structures—institutional agents, committees, resource allocations, reporting relationships and organizational charts—that shape students’ experiences and influence their enrollment decisions. Although many scholars

have examined student retention over the last thirty years (Reason, 2009), researchers have not yet fully examined the emergence of administrative positions and staff who are tasked with coordinating and directing retention efforts. As institutions create and staff such positions, it is not yet clear who these retention coordinators and professionals are, what types of professional experiences they possess, what their responsibilities entail, or how they create change to advance their institutions' retention goals. While this study did not quantitatively measure the effectiveness of these administrators or of staff retention positions, it did seek to explore the roles and responsibilities of retention professionals, the organizational changes they facilitated, and how various structures and experiences shaped the development of such retention roles and efforts.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to further an understanding of the emerging role of student retention professionals and how such individuals conceptualize and enact such roles within their respective organizational contexts. The study not only sought to explore what student retention professionals do and what changes they have made at the institution, it also intended to understand how the professionals have shaped the role and how they continued to reshape it over time. Similarly, the study furthered an understanding as to how retention professionals' experiences differed across institutional contexts and settings, providing insights into how organizations and future retention professionals might be able to shape such roles to create much needed changes to students' college experiences and rates of baccalaureate attainment.

### **Research Questions**

The following three questions served as the basis of the study and informed the research methodology and design:

1. How do student retention professionals perceive and experience their roles and responsibilities?
2. What forces shape student retention professionals' ability to fulfill their roles and responsibilities?
3. In what ways do retention professionals facilitate and contribute to institutional change?

### **Scope of the Study**

While there are many faculty, staff, and administrators engaged in the daily work of retaining students, particularly those who coordinate retention efforts or lead retention committees (Ziskin et al., 2009), this study considered a particular staff position that addresses student retention. In focusing upon the role and experiences of student retention professionals, study participants included 21 staff members employed at 21 different four-year institutions whose official job title explicitly included the word “retention” or “student success.” In this way, the study identified participants not through their listed job description or work portfolio, but rather through their title. The job title was seen as an important signal regarding the purpose and function of the role.

As this study sought to understand these roles through the retention professionals' own perceptions and experiences, a phenomenological approach guided the research design, analysis, and participant selection (Merriam, 2009). The phenomenon—working as a student retention administrator at a four-year college or university—was explored through one-on-one interviews to understand key similarities and differences among all of those who serve in this capacity. While the semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, additional documents such as official job descriptions and participant-created concept maps were collected and analyzed. The purpose of these documents was to construct a more in-depth understanding

of the retention specialists' professional backgrounds, their roles as defined by the institutional job descriptions, and how their role was positioned within the organizational hierarchy. In this way, documents provided key contextual insights that were analyzed in connection to the transcripts from the one-on-one interviews. In addition, the 21 study participants were identified and selected for their potential to share in-depth and wide-ranging experiences regarding their work as retention professionals. While the participants do not constitute a nationally representative sample of retention professionals, they were employed at institutions across the country which differed in size, institutional control, and rates of baccalaureate attainment.

Given this study was concerned with both the individual (retention staff) and the organization (colleges that employ them), the conceptual framework drew upon Giddens' sociological theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984). This theoretical work holds in tandem individual agents (staff members) and organizational structures (retention positions in context), which provided an opportunity to simultaneously explore retention professionals' role along with the organizational elements that inhibited and/or facilitated their work (Giddens, 1984). In this way, the study considered both the person and the organization as key elements in understanding the role of retention professionals and how they were able to enact change at their respective institutions. Additional frameworks that focus on creating and enacting roles within organizations (e.g., Graen & Scandura, 1987) helped inform the design of the study and the approach to the analysis which will be discussed in chapter three.

### **Significance of the Study**

For decades, scholars of student retention have focused on individual students and their decisions to enroll or depart from higher education (Reason, 2009). Over time, additional scholarship has emphasized the role of college contexts and environments, including institutional

agents, who help shape students' enrollment trajectories (Berger & Milem, 2000; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Building upon this rich body of literature, this study focused on a newly minted group of professional administrators and explored how they experienced this role and how they enacted institutional change to advance student retention. In this way, this study created a more comprehensive picture of student retention efforts, taking into account administrative staff and structures that have been engaged in the daily work of promoting baccalaureate attainment at four-year colleges and universities. Research on non-teaching faculty is relatively scant, particularly as staff and administrators have grown in number and influence within the academy (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; Rosser, 2004). This study sought to build upon works that highlight non-faculty members within the academy and how such professionals advance student success and organizational change (Sagaria & Johnsrud, 1992; Rosser, 2004; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). While the student retention professional is a relatively new role, it is a particularly important role to understand given its connection to the pressures on colleges and universities to retain and graduate students and to boost the social and economic opportunity for their graduates.

While this study did not seek to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of this role or analyze its costs and benefits, it did attempt to provide an in-depth understanding of the staff members' roles and responsibilities and of the actions they take to enact change. In this way, continued research may help determine not just whether colleges and universities should employ retention professionals, but under what conditions, and in what ways, staff can positively influence the rate at which students succeed and earn baccalaureate degrees. At a time when institutions of higher education are under greater scrutiny, face increasing pressures yet

dwindling resources, the need for these administrators to succeed and for these roles to “work” may never be greater.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **FRAMING THE STUDY**

While numerous studies have addressed issues of student retention and graduation, relatively few have explored the role and experiences of staff members who are tasked with addressing or coordinating these issues at their respective institutions. The purpose of this study was not only to extend the literature by analyzing professional staff dedicated to retention, it was also meant to consider how the organization deploys resources and people to influence student progression and completion. To that end, I reviewed how colleges and universities, as well as the people within them, have been positioned in relation to issues of student retention.

Building upon the extensive body of retention literature (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Reason, 2003; 2009; Siedman, 2005), this chapter explores the specific components, studies, and traditions within the retention literature that informed the current study of student retention professionals. At the same time, this chapter outlines how this study addressed notable gaps in the work on student retention, articulating key contributions this study makes to understanding and conceptualizing student retention.

#### **Review of the Literature**

The following section presents previous studies and scholarship that relate to student retention professionals and their position within colleges and universities. After reviewing key aspects of the student retention literature, including the development and influence of statistical and conceptual models, the chapter describes the initial studies which introduced student retention coordinators into the academic literature. In addition, the chapter concludes with a set of key theories and conceptual frameworks, including role theory and structuration, that

informed this study's approach to colleges and universities as organizations, as well as the people within them.

### **Student Retention Models**

For decades, retention scholars and institutional administrators have been interested in developing statistical or conceptual models to explain students' decisions to persist in college (Bean, 1980; 1982; Berger & Milem, 2000; Billsen & Terry, 1987; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Eaton & Bean, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1975; Titus, 2004). Upon reviewing the tradition and trajectories of retention models, Aljohani (2016) argued that the 1970s and early 1980s were particularly noteworthy for their focus on theory development and the presentation of conceptual models. During that time, three scholars and their respective theories of student persistence—Tinto (1975), Bean (1980) and Pascarella (1980)—played an influential role in shaping the field as well as the overall thinking and approach to student retention (Woodard, Mallory, & De Luca, 2001). While each of the three scholars based their conceptual models on different traditions and philosophies, ideas such as academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975), environmental influences (Bean, 1980), and interactions with faculty and other institutional agents (Pascarella 1980; 1985) began to take hold. Ultimately these models and their core ideas became fundamental concepts that shaped the study of student retention for decades.

In response to the early theories of student attrition, scholars have spent decades testing, retesting, and expanding upon such conceptual models to more fully understand the extent to which they account for students' enrollment decisions (Bensimon, 2007; Museus, 2014; Reason, 2009). In an increasing way, individual institutions have become interested in developing and testing models of student retention in order to identify specific students who are “at-risk” of

stopping out or dropping out before successful completion (Pike et al., 2014). One of the primary goals of this research, whether at the level of individual campuses, systems, states, or the nation, has been to ascertain what influences relate to students' enrollment decisions and how strong those relationships are. In other words, scholars have sought to build a body of research evidence that connects various factors and influences with students' decisions to persist in college. Using an array of statistical procedures and methods, scholars have analyzed variables and factors that could be, or have been, linked to student persistence (Bowles & Jones, 2004; Cabrera et al., 1993; Chimka, Reed-Rhoads, & Barker, 2007; Ishitani, 2006; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Through these studies, retention theories have continued to be modified and altered as new sources of data have become available and advances in statistical techniques have offered new ways to explore and test the strength of relationships.

Part of the work for scholars, too, has been to understand the extent to which the retention models might apply differently to various student populations or organizational contexts. In other words, studies have sought to explore whom the model accurately represents and under what conditions models of student retention might be more or less reflective of individuals' persistence decisions. A primary critique of initial retention models was that they were not inclusive of underrepresented or underserved students and they were often devised to fit the experiences of students at residential, four-year institutions (e.g., Davidson & Wilson, 2013; Museus, 2014). In addition, scholars have expressed concerns that such models are based upon notions of acculturation and assimilation to the peril of students of color and others who have been marginalized within, and/or excluded from, institutions of higher education (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). In response to these criticisms, a number of studies have sought to address how retention models confer with underserved populations (Bean & Metzner, 1985;

Bennett & Bean, 1984; Torres, 2006) and have sought to build new models and theoretical concepts that better reflect the experiences and needs of students of color (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). Such research has attempted to further the understanding of how retention models might be refined to apply to an increasingly diverse population of students and institutions.

While quantitative research has played an important role in conceptualizing and developing retention models, qualitative research and methodologies have also been drawn upon, and contributed to, conceptual models of student retention. Though different in their approach, research design, and questions of interest, qualitative studies share a common goal in understanding the influences that shape students' decision to persist. As a result, conceptual models of student retention have influenced the design, focus, and direction of qualitative retention studies. For example, Guiffrida (2003) leveraged interviews of African American students to explore issues of social integration; Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) affirmed Tinto's revised model through a study of African American men; Meyer and Marx (2014) interviewed engineering dropouts to understand how experiences of integration led to their departure; and Hlinka (2017) sought to apply Tinto's (1975) integration theory to understand rural Appalachian community college students' progress towards transfer. These research studies demonstrate how conceptual models of student retention have been influential in shaping qualitative, as well as quantitative, studies of student retention.

For the current study, the tradition of model conceptualization, specification, and validation was important for two reasons. First, in reviewing retention research, a few key theories have clearly influenced the entire field of student retention literature (Aljohani, 2016; Museus, 2014; Reason, 2009). As a result, while retention studies are numerous, the influence of

Tinto (1975), Bean (1980), and Pascarella (1980) are notable in the extent to which they have shaped retention studies of all kinds. Museus (2014) argued that so much of retention scholarship has been to confirm or modify these early models, particularly Tinto's (1975), that retention scholarship has been limited in scope and has been unable to adequately capture the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Second, reviewing the specific dimensions of conceptual models provided insights into the perspectives, values, and assumptions that underlie the thinking and approaches to student retention. Retention models are powerful tools because they visually transform and represent connections between various influences (both proposed influences and ones that have been empirically tested) and student retention. They synthesize and visualize not only what scholars know about a phenomenon, but also present their hypotheses and hunches. Even empirically tested models, such as Bean's (1980) influential causal model, have explained only a fraction of the variance in student outcomes. As a result, conceptual models are not just the culmination of empirical works, they are also part of the process through which scholars propose new ideas and suggest ways to extend and improve previous understandings.

Reviewing the small set of influential models of student retention that have featured prominently in student retention literature, it is evident that scholars have viewed issues of student attrition and completion primarily through the lens of individual students making a decision about their enrollment status. Bensimon (2007) stated how Tinto's model has been disproportionately influential, arguing that "even though scholars may use different variables to measure the model's main constructs (academic and social integration), its core concept is widely accepted—that academic success is a process in which the individual takes on the identity of student and becomes integrated into the collegiate environment" (p. 449). In this way,

research questions have focused on what types of students are at risk of attrition or what student characteristics confer with attrition and/or degree attainment. While the goal of such projects is to devise or revise student success and retention strategies (e.g., Murtaugh, Burns, Schuster, 1999), the role of the institution and its utilization of people and resources often has remained at best limited, and largely missing and unquestioned in these models.

While Tinto's revised model (1993) theorized that students' institutional experiences contribute to their persistence, it continued to discount the structures and people within organizations and their contributions to student retention and graduation. This thinking has been part of retention research for decades—that individual students and the differences between them are responsible for the persistent differences in individual achievement and outcomes. The purpose of the present study was to shift the attention away from individual students' enrollment decisions and towards institutional agents and structures. In this way, the current study sought to build upon concepts and studies that highlight the role of the organization in moving students towards successful progression and degree attainment.

### **Organizational Role in Retention**

Initial retention models focused on students' individual characteristics, backgrounds, efforts, and college experiences that contributed to their decisions to persist (Reason, 2009; Woodard et al., 2001). Over time, scholars began to adjust and expand the influences relating to student persistence, taking into greater consideration the role of the institution and its ability to advance students towards successful completion (Reason, 2009). Berger and Braxton (1998) advocated for a more complex view of student retention than was presented in Tinto's initial model (1975), arguing that colleges and universities should be seen as active entities that play an active role in shaping students' enrollment trajectories. Thus, they sought to extend Tinto's

model to hone in on ways institutions influence students' social integration, and to suggest how the addition of organizational attributes can expand the prevailing theories and perceptions of college student retention (Berger & Braxton, 1998). As Berger and Braxton (1998) advocated for this repositioning of colleges and universities within the retention literature, they were building upon prior calls for focusing research, policies, and practices on the workings of the institutions instead of the individual students they educated (Richardson & Skinner, 1990).

Ultimately, Berger and Milem (2000) presented a conceptual model for student success which linked the behavior of colleges and universities as organizations with student outcomes. They argued that "While organizational studies in higher education largely ignore the student, research on college impact generally ignores the influence of organizational factors on student outcomes" (Berger & Milem, 2000, p. 268). Connecting these two ideas—organizational theory and student goal attainment—led Berger and Milem (2000) to propose a new, conceptual framework for understanding how organizations influenced students' enrollments and success in college.

Berger and Milem's (2000) work has been instrumental in modifying previous theories of student retention and in reframing the role and responsibility of colleges and organizations. In particular, Reason (2009) argued that "with the exception of Berger and Milem (2000), for example, few models explicitly incorporated an emphasis on the organization's effects on student outcomes, and no existing models specifically included internal organization features such as policies affecting course sizes, promotion and tenure, or budgetary and staffing arrangements" (Reason, 2009; pp. 661-662). Berger and Milem's (2000) model not only introduced new types of organization-level influences that related to student enrollment, it also clearly reframed student persistence as the responsibility of both individual students and their

respective colleges and universities. Reason (2009) highlighted how the language and specific words describing student enrollment also changed over time, as issues of “persistence” transformed into issues of “retention.” The change in language was not just semantic, but reflected that as “an organizational phenomenon—colleges and universities *retain* students...Persistence, on the other hand, is an individual phenomenon—students *persist* to a goal” (p. 660). In this way, Berger and Milem’s (2000) framework positioned colleges and universities as much more responsible and accountable for the rate at which students reenrolled. Their conceptual model did not assume persistence rates were just the summation of individual students’ decisions; rather, such rates were influenced by the interaction between students and the colleges they attended.

Once colleges and universities became active players within a conceptual framework for student retention, new approaches were needed at the organizational-level that would support student success. To that end, Berger (2001) translated the conceptual framework into practical recommendations that colleges and universities could implement to improve their rates of retention and student success. Berger and Milem’s (2000) framework not only gave institutions ideas about what they could do to influence student enrollment decisions, it also represented the changing landscape of institutional accountability and responsibility. There were increasing calls for colleges and universities to be held accountable to the public and to policy makers, particularly as questions about institutions’ stewardship of public funds emerged (Alexander, 2000). Similarly, other scholars were highlighting the role of the institution in student completion (Braxton, McKinney, & Reynolds, 2006), further reinforcing the idea that student retention is intricately linked to the institutions that educate them.



A key component to Berger and Milem's (2000) framework is their two-dimensional view of organizations. First, they identify colleges and universities as possessing "structural-demographic features," such as an institution's selectivity or its location. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, they describe the second-dimension to an organization, which includes the "organizational behavior dimension." For Berger and Milem (2000), organizational behavior is "a conceptual term [which] has been used to describe the daily patterns of functioning and decision-making within an organization" (p. 274). In this way, organizations are seen not just as static entities who possess certain properties or characteristics but dynamic and active institutions that act and behave in particular ways.

While Berger and Milem (2000) advanced this two-dimensional view of organizations, Reason (2009) argued that "historically, and unfortunately structural-demographic characteristics serve as the only institutional characteristics variables included in much of the higher education research on retention" (p. 666). Furthermore, the retention research has not provided clarity on exactly how institutions can improve or how they should approach student retention as an organization. To address these challenges, Kalsbeek (2013) presented a new, 4Ps framework that encourages campuses to consider the following issues: their student profile, students' academic progress, broad processes, and institutional promise (p. 6). Though scholars often recognize that institutions play an important role in fostering student retention, they simultaneously acknowledge that studying organizational-level influences can be challenging. For example, Ishitani's study of first-generation students' completion (2006) highlighted how colleges and universities contribute to first-generation student success, but the data limitations restricted analysis of the institution to a few, structural-demographic influences.

Even though retention studies have not included the organizational behavior dimension to the same extent, it is a key element to understanding how colleges and universities shape the students and their experiences. The behavior dimensions reinforce the idea that organizations are not aggregations of student or faculty characteristics; instead, they are entities that develop processes, structures, and environments in order to achieve particular outcomes. For Reason (2009), the retention literature suggests that “the institutional effects on college student outcomes (including student persistence) are less about what an institution is than about what an institution does” (Reason, 2009, p. 669). This study seeks to build upon the idea that understanding higher education organizations requires an in-depth analysis of the daily patterns taking place within them, including those patterns and functions shared across a group of professional staff members. In this way, the goal was to extend research on how particular organizational dimensions relate to student retention and completion.

As the organizational dimensions became more embedded within the retention literature, a number of scholars have focused on organizational-level influences to extend Berger and Milem’s (2000) conceptual model. For example, scholars have focused on how institutional expenditure patterns are significant predictors of student retention and graduation rates (Chan, 2012; Gansemer-Topf & Schuh 2003; 2006; Titus, 2004; 2006). In addition, research has explored the effect of organizational climates and cultures (Kuh, 2001) and the climate for diversity (Hurtado et al., 2012) on student outcomes and completion. Rhee (2008) found that a campus’ climate for diversity is associated with students’ decisions to drop out and/or transfer, while Museus et al., (2008) explored how racial climate influenced students’ six-year baccalaureate attainment. Aggregate measures of students’ intentions to transfer, drop out, or stop out were found to be significant predictors of individual students’ own measure of degree

attainment within six years (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). These studies have increasingly positioned issues of student retention within the context of organizational structures, processes, cultures, and resource allocation. However, the literature in this area remains underdeveloped, particularly regarding the people within the colleges and universities who are tasked with allocating resources, addressing campus climate, or coordinating retention efforts and strategies.

Though Berger and Milem (2000) emphasized the role of the organization in retaining students, they did not suggest that the organization acts as a single entity. Rather, they conceptualized and described organizational behavior as “the actions of organizational agents (faculty, administrators, and staff) at a college or university. Therefore, organizational behavior is not used to ascribe action to the institution itself as a social actor. It is important to remember that organizations do not behave; however, the people in those organizations do behave while acting in the service of collective organizational interests” (Berger, 2001, p. 3). In this way, as important as the organization is to understanding issues of student retention and persistence, it is simultaneously important to consider the role of individual people within the organization and their work in advancing student success.

As campuses hire retention professionals and develop offices of student retention to house them, new scholarship is needed to understand how these structural and administrative changes are influencing the way campuses address and support student retention.

### **People in Organizations**

Over time, organizational-level influences have been recognized as influential to student retention and graduation and have become integrated into student retention models. While a college can be viewed as a single entity that possesses certain characteristics, cultures, structures, and processes, it can also be viewed as an assemblage of people (students, faculty, staff,

administrators, etc.) who form and shape the institution. In writing about academic organizations, Burton Clark (1986) described a higher education institution, or an “enterprise,” not as a single, monolithic entity but as “a comprehensive grouping, in that it links together such disparate specialists as chemists, psychologists, and historians, specialists and nonspecialists, professors and students and administrators” (p. 28). For Clark, organizations of higher education were thought of as groupings of individuals, many of whom also maintained connections with academic disciplines that transcended individual institutions. Similarly, within organizational psychology, Schneider’s (1987) model of organizations argued that people not only make an organization, they also are attracted to certain organizations, and are selected into them, based upon a perceived fit between the individual and the institution. This study drew upon such theories to understand not only how organizations as entities influence students’ progression towards degree attainment, but how a particular group of people within the organization works towards this goal.

In reviewing scholarship that examined higher education institutions as organizations, Peterson (2007) described the many different layers, including smaller units such as departments and offices, which together comprise a college or university. Peterson (2007) argued “how colleges and universities are structured and behave *as organizations* [are] distinct from dynamics in suborganizational units (departments, offices, etc.), groups of participants within them (faculty, students, administration, etc.), and interinstitutional arrangements among them (associations, consortia, systems, etc.)” (p. 147). In this way, colleges and universities can be viewed as a single organization, but it is also important to recognize and consider the smaller units which together make up the institution. As Clark (1986) noted, colleges and universities had become increasingly complex and “increasingly fractured by expertise, rather than unified

by it. In short, colleges and universities are indeed professionalized organizations, and academic systems are professionalized systems, with control and coordination highly influenced by the presence of professionals, but the professionalism is heavily fragmented” (p. 36).

Conceptualizing colleges and universities in terms of the many people who comprise the organization provided an opportunity to explore a specific group within the institution and their contributions to the overall work and function of their respective colleges and universities.

When describing higher education institutions’ organization and structures, Bess and Dee (2012) outlined the many different roles, people, and suborganizational units typically found in colleges and universities. Their descriptions and visualizations of such roles reinforced the complexity of institutions of higher learning as well as the importance of individual people and roles within these institutions. Similarly, their descriptions highlighted the consistency found across many different individual and unique institutions of higher learning in terms of their administrative positions and organizational structures. While there are many roles and people within a college or university, this study was particularly interested in those individuals and roles who have been explicitly charged with issues of student success and retention.

**Faculty interaction.** Scholars have frequently considered the role of faculty and their relationship to student persistence and retention (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Gregerman, Lerner, von Hippel, Jonides, & Nagda, 1998; Hathaway, Nagda & Gregerman, 2002; Kinzie, 2005). This body of literature has made a consistent, compelling case that student interactions with faculty are a key ingredient for successful progression to the baccalaureate degree, with numerous studies reinforcing the positive benefits that accrue from many different students’ formal and informal interactions with faculty (e.g., Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Kim & Sax, 2009; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Sax, Bryant &

Harper, 2005). These types of studies connect to early models of student persistence, including Pascarella's (1980) model which identified informal contact with faculty as a key influence.

While the interactions between students and faculty, on an individual level, are fundamental elements to student retention and persistence, different institutions facilitate and structure such interactions in different ways (Hurtado et al., 2011). Thus, it is important not only to consider the types of interactions that occur between students and faculty, but the context for those interactions, the ways opportunities are structured within organizations, and how staff members such as retention professionals contribute to students' connection to faculty. In addition, faculty share information with non-teaching professionals regarding student behavior and classroom performance, ultimately involving staff professionals to address student concerns and challenges. As a result, it is not simply students' interaction with a faculty member that contributes to their progress to the degree. There are additional people, efforts, and contexts that together contribute to students' decisions to continue their enrollment at a particular institution.

Although research has underscored how faculty contribute to student retention and degree attainment, the role of non-instructional professionals within the academy has often been overlooked. While a revised version of Pascarella's causal model (1985) reframes interactions with faculty as "interactions with agents of socialization (e.g., faculty, peers)", it failed to explicitly acknowledge administrators and staff in their role as agents of socialization. While more recent models such as Nora, Barlow, and Crisp (2005) have extended prior conceptualizations of student retention to explicitly recognize staff members' roles in validating and mentoring students, it is important for scholars to consider how faculty as well as non-instructional staff, such as retention professionals, contribute to student success.

**Institutional agents and retention.** Though faculty play an important role in moving students toward successful completion, staff and administrative members are also key members who contribute to students' educational progress and goal attainment. Scholars have documented important contributions from administrators and staff, arguing that they help connect students with institutional resources and navigate the institution (Stanton Salazar, 1997), validate students' experiences (Rendón, 1994), organize to create change (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Kezar, Bertram Gallant & Lester, 2011), advance equity policies and practices (Bensimon, 2007; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013), and address campus conflict and student protest movements (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005; Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Though higher education staff are seen to affect student learning and development, relatively few studies focus exclusively on these individuals and their experiences within the academy. Scholars have called for further investigations that recognize and explore the particular knowledge and experiences that are distinct to higher education practitioners (Bensimon, 2007).

Although staff have not been featured prominently in higher education literature, scholars have periodically considered how specific individuals, roles, or groups of institutional agents contribute to students' academic progress and success. Whether focusing on the role of advisors (DeSousa, 2005; Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001), admission counselors (Edwards & Person, 1997), or department chairs (Schuh & Kuh, 2005), a subset of studies have explored how specific administrators support students' goal attainment and enhance student retention efforts. One particular study asked students to identify key faculty and staff who supported their success, after which the researchers interviewed the individuals whom students had identified. From these interviews, Schreiner, Noel, and Cantwell (2011) identified a set of shared characteristics and actions that captured how faculty and staff approached their work and support of students.

Other studies have examined not just what staff and administrators do, but who they are and what they believe, particularly as it relates to the university's responsibility in retaining students (Braunstein & McGrath, 1997; Landrum, 2001). Fincher and Katsinas (2006) and Fincher, Katsinas, and Bush (2010) explored how the social identities of college executive teams were associated with measures of student retention. Specifically, Fincher and Katsinas (2006) found that executive teams which are "diverse on a broad range of demographic characteristics are likely to produce improved strategic decisions that may lead to relatively better performance, measured by rises in student retention" (p. 361). These types of studies not only push back against earlier student retention models that focused heavily on students' individual decisions, they also link the work of staff, faculty, and administrators within the organization to a crucial outcome and metric for success in student retention.

A group of professionals also instrumental in supporting students includes those who work within student affairs. Scholars have consistently studied this group of professionals, as they are engaged with students' college experiences, learning, and development outside of the classroom (e.g., Strayhorn, 2008). Student affairs practitioners have long been a part of the academy, with scholars of higher education history highlighting how these staff roles have become increasingly professionalized over time (Nuss, 2003). Scholarship of these professionals has emphasized how student affairs practitioners play an important role in advancing justice and equity (Edwards, 2006), advancing a culture of care within the institution (Rhoads & Black, 1995), and supporting students' personal growth and development (Strayhorn, 2008). As a result, there is a growing body of work that explores how student affairs professionals contribute to student development and achievement.



Though student affairs practitioners play an important role in supporting students and creating supportive environments, scholars have also considered how such individuals collaborate and coordinate with colleagues across an institution. Klepper and Stodt (1987) discussed the type of cross-campus coordination that took place between academic affairs and student affairs teams, noting how mutual efforts created environments that were supportive of students' academic progress and success. More than 15 years later, Walters (2003) considered the success of a similar initiative, the Olivet Plan at Olivet College, and how it sought to merge academic and student affairs into a single, collaborative unit that together supported student learning. Hossler, Ziskin, and Gross (2009) similarly argued that coordination among members of different units appeared to be key in advancing student success. In this way, scholarship about groups of administrators and staff has shed light not only on what such individuals might do, but how they amplify their efforts through partnerships and collaborations with others across an institution. In this way, scholars have emphasized that student success is a function of both what staff and administrators do as well as how they work with others within the organization. This study sought to understand how retention professionals collaborated with others across campus as well as what factors, including relationships, collaborations, and structures, shaped their role or responsibilities.

In addition to student affairs practitioners, scholars have also turned their attention to understanding other specific staff and administrative roles within the academy. Studies have examined the role of college presidents (Birnbaum, 1992; Birnbaum & Umbach, 2001; McFarlin, Crittenden, & Ebbers, (1999), chief diversity officers (Leon, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Wilson, 2013), and academic deans (Bright & Richards, 2001; Montez, Wolverton & Gmelch, 2003; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). This line of research has explored how individuals

enact these roles and what it takes to be successful in them. However, these studies have often focused on administrators at the highest levels of higher education organizations and have yet to include professionals tasked with advancing student retention.

An additional set of studies focus on staff and administrators who occupy mid-level administrative roles within the academy. These studies focus on the differences between administrators who are employed within different organizational divisions as well as their level of satisfaction and turnover (Jo, 2008; Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser, 2000; Lorden, 1998; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Volkwein & Parmley, 2000; Volkwein & Zhou, 2003). These studies are important because they illuminate various issues and influences that contribute to non-teaching faculty's job enjoyment, satisfaction, and morale. While they may not directly relate to issues of student retention, they do shed light on a growing constituent group within higher education and their position, needs, and experiences within the academy.

### **The Retention Professional**

While previous studies have considered the role of professional staff and administrators and how they support student retention and success, a subset of studies have examined the role of the retention professional. To date, the few studies on retention professionals emerged from nationally administered surveys conducted by the Indiana Project on Academic Success together with the College Board (Hossler et al., 2009; Hossler, Ziskin, Lucido, Dadashova, & Schulz, 2011; Ziskin et al., 2009) and Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017), which produced a report on student retention practices at campuses across the country. Findings from these two suggest a majority of four-year institutions have identified or hired an administrator with retention responsibilities. However, their survey questions do not clarify whether the administrative position specifically includes "retention" or "student success" in their job title, whether the retention coordinator also

holds other responsibilities, or whether the administrator is situated within an office of student retention.

Similarly, these studies do not provide in-depth insights into how the tasks and work assigned to these coordinators may differ across institutions. Hossler et al. (2011) questioned whether retention coordinators have authority to implement or fund new programs, but the research did not extend into the daily experiences and workings of such retention coordinators. Although data suggested retention coordinators have minimal resources or authority to decide policy, it is not clear what resources full-time retention professionals possessed compared to their peers who helped coordinate retention but who did not possess a job title that included “retention” or “student success.” Similarly, the context of a retention office—an administrative unit—may alter the types of authority and resources available to retention professionals. Therefore, this study sought to further the understanding of retention professionals by exploring their articulated roles, daily responsibilities, and tasks.

Despite the extensive studies of student retention, few focus on the individual people within organizations who are engaged in, or responsible for, this type of work. This project seeks to further the understanding of a specific group of professionals within the academy—the retention professionals.

### **Theoretical Framework**

By focusing on student retention offices and staff, this study examined how people within organizations contribute to advancing student retention and completion. In this way, student success was not viewed simply as a summation of students’ individual attitudes, behaviors and decisions; rather, student success was also understood to be shaped by institutions and the people who comprise them. While this study did not quantitatively measure the effect of the retention

professionals on institutional retention and graduation rates, it did closely examine aspects of their work, their experiences in the role, and their contributions to campus and organizational change. In addition, exploring the essence of the retention coordinator experience and work illuminated how these individuals and organizations have designed and shaped such roles. By exploring the daily work of retention professionals, a greater understanding of this emerging role and its place within the academy has been advanced.

To understand the tasks, responsibilities, and structures that have constituted the retention professionals' experiences, this study drew upon both role and organizational theories. While organizational theory is a rich, wide-ranging field, this study specially drew upon the ideas of role-making (Graen & Scandura, 1987) and structuration (Giddens, 1984) to conceptualize what people do within organizations and how they simultaneously shape, and are shaped by, the organization itself. Together, these two theories help link the individual administrators and their daily work with the structures and efforts of the organization. The following sections describe in greater detail how these two theories provided a framework for understanding the role of the retention professionals and the institutions that employ them.

### **Roles and Higher Education**

A central tenant to the current study is that individual people play an important part in addressing student retention within colleges and universities. In order to understand the experiences and contributions of these individuals, it is important to understand the role they occupy within the organization and how that role provides challenges and opportunities to enact change at the institution. To conceptualize how individuals learn about their role and ultimately make it their own, the study drew upon tenants of role theory as described in the following section.

**Role theory.** Scholars have developed various role theories to understand the processes by which positions within organizations are created, formalized, and reshaped (Biddle, 1986). Bess and Dee (2012) reviewed role theories that have informed higher education research, noting that a primary difference between them involves the level of agency and autonomy ascribed to the individual inhabiting a role. These different views emerged from the different paradigms scholars have utilized to understand roles, organizations, and the people within them (Bess & Dee, 2012). Within the social constructionist paradigm, roles have been conceptualized as “emergent and enacted, thus highlighting the agency of individuals to construct their own roles in relation to others (Bess & Dee, p. 258). Furthermore, Bess and Dee (2012) argued the social constructionist tradition established that “organizational expectations for role performance are often fluid (at least to some degree), and organizational members can shape and reshape the roles they enact” (p. 259). In this paradigm, roles are seen as dynamic and adjustable, and they are constantly being negotiated, interpreted, and enacted alongside others within the organization. In addition, the individuals who occupy the positions do not simply carry out the tasks assigned by the superior or the organization; rather, they take an active part in defining what they do within the organization and how they go about doing it.

One of the of most influential, social construction role theories was developed by Graen and Scandura (1987), who presented a three-stage process through which roles are formed and enacted. The three stages include the process of role taking, role making, and role routinization. According to Graen and Scandura’s (1987) model, role taking involves the initial socialization process in which the superior assigns various tasks to learn about the member’s talents and abilities. During the initial role taking stage, the employee learns about their position, responsibilities, function, and establishes a relationship with their superior. It is in this process

that a retention professional would establish an initial understanding of what they are expected to do and how they might go about accomplishing their tasks.

Subsequently, role making is seen as a more dynamic process in which their relationship and roles are defined. In this phase, “two actors, a member and a superior, enter upon the scene...bringing to the dyad their respective genetic endowment, past histories, and current circumstances. At this point, the scene is laden with the trappings of the formal structural arrangements, past organizational history, and current circumstances (labeled *environment* and *structure*)” (Graen & Scandura, p. 179). Key to the role creation phase involves the negotiations that take place between the member and superior, with specific responsibilities and processes evolving with this relationship. While Graen and Scandura’s (1987) theory about role formation centers on a single relationship, their model also recognizes the many influences that ultimately influence this relationship.

The second phase of role formation is crucial because it is in this phase where individuals seek to influence how the role is defined and what is expected from them. These negotiations take place not just during specified points in time or through structured formats such as a performance review; rather, they occur frequently in daily interactions between the focal person and the superior (Bess & Dee, 2012). Given that individuals are constantly involved in negotiating their role, such negotiations often take place informally. Graen and Scandura argued that the “process [is] seldom explicitly discussed by the superior or the member.” (p. 181). Given that the negotiations take place informally and seldom discussed, it is quite common that individuals formulate different views as to what constitutes their responsibilities and work. A person’s own definition and understanding of what is included as part of their job influences their behavior and their likelihood for engaging in certain tasks and responsibilities (Morrison,

1994). Thus, learning about a person's experiences within a role requires an understanding of how they define the role as well as how they have engaged in negotiations to continually redefine and shape the role.

The third stage, the role routinization, occurs when the relationship has become more stabilized and many aspects of the job have been negotiated (Graen & Scandura, 1987). Through the negotiation and role-making process, the focal person and superior achieve greater consistency in understanding their role and how they can work together to accomplish their tasks. While the routinization stage is not a guaranteed milestone nor is it simply the culmination of the first two stages, it is where expectations are increasingly shared and commonly understood. Graen and Scandura (1987) argued that "after the role routinization, these mutual expectations may become incorporated into formal documents such as job descriptions and specifications. The relationship then becomes institutionalized, and the understandings are widely visible and understood" (p. 185). The job descriptions, therefore, are key institutional documents that can help illuminate the role development process and how it has been understood and institutionalized. However, as Graen's (1976) and Morrison's (1994) work suggest, routinization is simply one component of a constant process in which individuals are constantly engaged in the process of role taking, role making, and role routinization.

**Latent roles.** While job descriptions, particularly ones that have been updated or rewritten, provide important insight into an individual's role within an organization, they do not fully capture the work a person does or the extent to which it reflects their daily interactions and responsibilities. Some of those aspects may be more informal or more recent changes to a person's responsibilities and are not explicitly represented on a person's list of duties or official job description. Bess and Dee (2012) argued that these are two distinct concepts—a person's

manifest role (what is overt) and the latent role (what is covert or unspecified). Analyzing roles in the context of manifest and latent can help form a more comprehensive picture of retention professionals' responsibilities, work, and the changes they make within the organization.

While this study draws upon Graen and Scandura's (1987) three-stage process for role formation, the idea of latent and manifest roles provides additional context for understanding the negotiation processes. Latent and manifest work reinforce the idea that Graen and Scandura's (1987) three stages are not simply a unidirectional, linear progression. Instead, there may be aspects of a person's job that are negotiated and incorporated while not being recognized through routinization processes and in official college and university documents. The idea of latent roles provides a framework to complicate the notion of role formation, recognizing that latent work might not just be an incomplete role formation sequence, but that there may be additional reasons why a job function or work remains part of an individual's job portfolio.

Taking together, the idea of role formation and latent roles provides a framework for understanding that the work and responsibilities that a retention professional experiences does not come from an initial job description or duty statement. Rather, there is a dynamic process through which individuals engage with their managing supervisor to negotiate their work and responsibilities. However, the negotiation process does not necessarily or directly lead to updated job descriptions and/or organizational acceptance of a person's work and role. In this way, the theory of latent roles provides additional tools to understand those aspects of a person's job or their experiences that do not align with an official job description or that the person does not see as being accepted in a formal way by the institution where they are employed.



## **Linking Roles and Organizations**

Role theory provides a framework for understanding retention professionals' responsibilities and daily work, yet it offers little insight into ways such professionals and their roles relate to the organizations as a whole. In addition, role theory does not address larger questions regarding what organizations are and how they are constructed. Although Graen and Scandura's (1987) role theory acknowledges organizational influences on the creation and development of organizational roles, it centers on the one-to-one relationship between the focal person and the superior. While this study draws upon role theory to understand the individual retention professionals and their experiences, additional frameworks were needed to conceptualize colleges and universities as organizations and how people are positioned within them. In addition, a central question to the study involved how retention professionals go about enacting changes at their institution. To that end, the study drew upon additional scholarship to conceptualize how change occurs within an organization and the role individuals play in creating and sustaining those changes.

**Structuration.** Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration provides a key link between individual people and the organization as a whole. A foundational concept to structuration is that agents (people) and structures (sets of rules and resources) cannot be considered as two independent phenomena or as competing entities, but rather, two elements that are intrinsically linked (Giddens 1984). This linkage between people and structure became known as the duality of structure, which Bess and Dee (2012) summarized by stating that "people are active agents who create structure, but they are also constrained by the structures that have been enacted previously" (p. 226). While Bess and Dee's (2012) summary succinctly captures the relationship between agents and structures, it failed to recognize that structures are both constraining and

enabling (Giddens, 1984). In short, structuration views institutions as an outcome of human action as well a constraint and enabler of such actions (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Giddens, 1984).

Through structuration, it is impossible to think about the organization without considering the individuals who help shape it. Whittington (2010) described how the conceptual linkage between people and institutions has practical applications when focusing research on individuals within organizations:

A complete understanding of microinstances of practice requires, therefore, acknowledgement of the structural principles that enable and constrain that practice; equally, the full significance of such instances may stretch far beyond the micro-moment. In short, Giddens will not let us forget that activity is institutionally situated.

Structuration theory constantly asks: what made that possible; why did that not happen; and how does that reproduce or change what is possible in the future? (Whittington, 2010; p. 150).

Recognizing the link between the individual and the institution, the current study focused on the experience of retention professionals as well as the factors which constrain or enable their work. While the second research question explored the influences on retention professionals' work and role, including those that relate to the structure (rules and resources), it did not specifically restrict those influences a priori to structural or institutional factors. However, Giddens' (1984) theory provides a framework for understanding how various structures within an organization can constrain and enable the people within them. In a similar way, the study also considered how each retention professional is "institutionally situated" and how such positioning may constrain and enable their work and the types of changes they are able to make within the organization.

In addition to the conceptual link between individuals and institutions, a second key concept to Giddens' (1984) theory is that structure and people are not viewed as static entities but things which change over time. Whittington (2010) argued that understanding people's activity leads to greater insights into how structures might change:

[Giddens'] conception of human agency affirms that people's activity matters: practice needs studying because it makes a difference to outcomes. At the same time, [Giddens'] notion of social structure allows for both constraint and enablement: to understand activity, we must attend to institutional embeddedness. And the concept of structuration brings together structure and agency to give them flow – continuity, but also the possibility of structural change (Whittington, 2010, p. 145).

Building out from the duality of structure, Giddens' (1984) theory conceptualizes organizations as dynamic, changing entities that have flow. In this way, structures emerge from continual activities and practices of individuals within them rather than an initial, singular design or from a static, unchanging objective force. In addition, the framework posits that change and continuity to the organization can be brought about by individual people and their activities. Therefore, studying people's activities within the organization can provide insights into the ways that reflect their agency and uphold structures and change them.

Reflecting back on the theory and its initial development, Giddens (Giddens and Pierson, 1998) recalled the importance of "flow," stating that he "wanted to place an emphasis on the active flow of social life. We should see social life not just as 'society' out there or just the product of 'the individual' here, but as a series of ongoing activities and practices that people carry on, which at the same time reproduce larger institutions" (p. 76). On the one hand, Giddens' reflection touches upon the idea that there is a dynamic nature to people and

organizations. On the other hand, Giddens described how structure is not something external to individuals but something they experience and possess within themselves (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Aligning with this view of structure, the current study acknowledged that each individual retention officer carries and creates the structure of the institution. As a result, the research was not concerned with identifying an objective, external organizational structure that retention professionals experience. Rather, the study focused on how individuals experience, recreate, and change organizational structures through their daily responsibilities and work. Such a view of structure aligns with the study's research questions by focusing on how retention officers, in their own view and experience, create and enact change within the organization. Given that structure is something that each individual carries, the research design focused on how each person describes and understands the changes they make to organizational structures and how they go about doing so.

Giddens' theory informed both the conceptual as well as the practical components of the study. In discussing how structuration can inform research methods and practices, Whittington (2010) identified three particular and relevant elements: "attention to micro-sociological detail; a sensitivity to institutional context; and openness to change" (p. 150). In this way, a focus on individual retention officers' daily work (micro-sociological detail), the institutions where they work (institutional context), and the changes they enact (openness to change) aligns with, and is informed by, Giddens' theory of structuration. Ultimately, structuration is a framework which links people and organizations and allows for the simultaneous exploration of these concepts.

Taken together, role theory and structuration theory provided tools for understanding how retention professionals craft their own, individual positions, as well as experience and change the structures and processes of the institution itself. Both roles and institutions are not fixed, external

objects but rather dynamic and internal to the retention professionals. The next chapter details the research methodology and design that allowed for a deeper understanding of these internal and dynamic roles and how retention professionals experience them through their daily work.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

A methodology is not simply a process by which data are collected and analyzed; rather, it is an opportunity to discuss the purpose and scope of the project, to lay bare the researcher's assumptions about the nature of reality and the world, and to outline the methodical steps which were undertaken to answer the questions of interest. The purpose of this chapter is to promote transparency, rigor, and reproducibility that, even with imperfections, gains the participants' and readers' trust in the research (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015; van Manen, 1997). To that end, I review the study purpose and research questions before detailing the research design and highlighting how the selected methods most appropriately align with the study's research questions.

#### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the emerging role of student retention professionals and how such administrators conceptualize, understand, and enact their roles to advance student success. The following three questions guided the study of student retention professionals at four-year colleges and universities:

1. How do student retention professionals perceive and experience their roles and responsibilities?
2. What forces shape student retention professionals' ability to fulfill their roles and responsibilities?
3. In what ways do retention professionals facilitate and contribute to institutional change?

The first question sought to explore how retention professionals experience their work and understand their professional tasks. I attempted to understand what it is that defines the work

and role of a retention officer, and in a deeper way, learn what it means to occupy this position within the academy. The second question explored the elements influencing retention professionals' roles and experiences. From the perspective of the administrators, I am interested in learning about the pressures that push against their efforts as well as those forces that may elevate their roles and accelerate their work. Finally, the third question addressed how retention professionals understand their impact in addressing retention and graduation on their campus. I learned how the administrators make sense of their role and ability to exert influence and support changes at their respective institutions. Similarly, the third question allowed me to explore how retention professionals think about and articulate their successes, and failures, in executing their role and fulfilling their responsibilities.

In summary, this project was inspired by my interest in learning from retention professionals about what they do, what forces shape their work, and the impact they have in advancing students towards successful baccalaureate attainment. To best answer the specific research questions and to center the perspectives and views of the retention officers, this study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. The following sections will describe not only the specifics of a phenomenological study, it will also address how this method related to the study's research questions and aligned with other elements of this study.

### **Research Methodology: A Qualitative Approach**

Distinct from quantitative methodologies and studies, qualitative research seeks to understand "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Given this study's purpose and specific research questions, a qualitative approach provided a framework to explore the experiences and the perspectives of retention professionals. In a similar way, the purpose of this

project was not to measure or assess the efficacy of professionals in boosting a campus's retention rate; rather, it was an in-depth exploration of their role and the ways in which they experience that role. Patton (2015) argued that qualitative research is well suited for open-ended inquiries that extend beyond measures or indicators of performance, and summarized the purpose and process of qualitative research in the following way:

Stuff happens everywhere. Qualitative inquiry documents the stuff that happens among real people in the real world in their own words, from their own perspectives, and within their own contexts; it then makes sense of the stuff that happens by finding patterns and themes among the seeming chaos and idiosyncrasies of lots of stuff (p. 11).

Within qualitative research, there are a number of specific methodologies and traditions that can help extract meaning from the "seeming chaos" to inform the study design, research collection, data analysis and interpretation. Given the focus on the retention professionals and their respective perspectives and experiences, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was utilized to address the questions of interest (Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 1997). While Merriam (2009) suggested that all qualitative research possesses elements of phenomenology, this study's intense focus on the participants' lived experiences and the meaning they make from them provided an opportunity to implement specific research methods within the phenomenological tradition (van Manen, 1997; 2014). The following section outlines the key tenants of phenomenology and how they supported the exploration of retention professionals' roles and work.



## **Phenomenology**

In its simplest form, phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand peoples' lived experiences (Laverty, 2003; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015; Polkinghorne, 1989; van Manen, 1997; 2014). More specifically, the goal is to understand peoples' lived experiences as it relates to a phenomenon of interest such as an emotion, experience, or relationship (Patton, 2015). In defining a lived experience, van Manen (2014) emphasized that it is something "that we live through before taking a reflective view of it" (p. 42). Though phenomenology focuses on peoples' lived experiences, the goal is not simply to document them or provide a factual account as a journalist or documentary filmmaker might do. Rather, the goal is to understand more clearly the lived experiences and how structures and meanings underlie those experiences (Merriam, 2009; van Manen 2014). For example, van Manen (1997) wrote how "the phenomenological attitude towards the concerns of our daily occupation compels us to constantly raise the question; what is it like to be an educator? What is it like to be a teacher?" (p. 45). In a similar way, this study was particularly interested in learning about what it's like to be a student retention professional and how they experience that role.

While the stated purpose of phenomenological research is clear and concise, there is not a single approach or consensus as to how to approach, design, or execute a phenomenological study (Dowling, 2007; Giorgi, 2006). Highlighting the divergent traditions, Giorgi (2006) described inconsistencies between different forms of phenomenology and argued that different schools of thought within phenomenology are potentially incompatible. Given these tensions within the field, I will discuss how my particular orientation to this approach was inspired by, and drew heavily upon, van Manen's phenomenology of practice (1997; 2014).

Before detailing the strand of phenomenology chosen for this project, it is important to note that despite divergent traditions, scholars from varying schools of thought agree that phenomenology is unique given its dual role as both a philosophy and method (Polkinghorne, 1989; Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 1997). In other words, phenomenology is not just a way to conduct research; it is also a way to see the world and understand reality. Scholars such as Patton (2015) and Merriam (2009) broadly outlined the fundamental tenants of phenomenological research, including its philosophical dimension. Recounting the method's historical trajectory and the work of early scholars such as Edmund Husserl (1970), Patton (2015) reiterated how "most basic philosophical assumption was that we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness" (p. 116). In this tradition, phenomenology posits that reality is constructed via peoples' experiences that are stored within their consciousness and not within an impersonal, objective reality.

As a result, conducting phenomenological research focuses on the peoples' experiences with the phenomenon and not the empirical facts or 'objective truth' (van Manen, 1997). Giorgi (2006) emphasized that within phenomenology "no reality claims are being made because the phenomenological posture speaks only to how the phenomenon presented itself to the experiencer. It is granted beforehand that the event could be other than the way it is being reported" (p. 310). Aligning with the phenomenological philosophy, this study focused on the retention professionals' experiences, perceptions, and meaning making. The questions did not seek to corroborate their experiences or measure their effectiveness in improving retention via statistical analyses or alternate assessments. Worthy as those goals may be, they did not align with phenomenology's underlying philosophy of reality and would be best addressed via different questions, methodologies, and assumptions about reality. In utilizing phenomenology,

the current study sought to explore similarities and differences in the work retention professionals do, the challenges they face in occupying their roles, and the ways they enact change as individuals and as an emerging group of higher education professionals. This approach served to affirm the roles and experiences among the study participants and to illuminate how varying personal and organizational contexts contributed to different contributions and experiences relating to student retention.

For phenomenology, the interest in lived experiences is not simply an open-ended exploration of what individuals do. Rather, this methodology leverages first-hand accounts and experiences to understand the “essence” of the phenomenon. That is, “the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (Patton, 2015, p. 116). Therefore, the purpose of phenomenological research is to grasp the common elements which define a phenomenon, without which the phenomenon would be something else (Merriam, 2009). This process, a defining feature of phenomenological research, is referred to as the “reduction” (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). The goal is to reduce the lived experiences to their most fundamental and core elements. In line with these key components of phenomenological research, the focus of this study’s research questions, interviews, and analyses was on discerning the essence of the retention officer role and the professionals who occupy such roles rather than on each persons’ unique narrative or particular situation.

Within the phenomenological tradition, there are varying views as to how prescriptive, rigid, or flexible the specific procedures and techniques should be for conducting research and discerning the essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2006; van Manen, 2014). One of the critiques of van Manen’s phenomenology of practice is that specific methods are not outlined in sufficient detail (Giorgi, 2006). However, as van Manen emphasized and reiterated (1997; 2014),

phenomenology is not a human science which can be pursued through standardized, prescriptive practices. Upon reviewing phenomenological traditions and literature, van Manen (2014) argued that “the phenomenological method cannot be fitted to a rule book, an interpretive schema, a set of steps, or a systematic set of procedures” (p. 29). As a result, this study followed recommendations and guidelines of phenomenological tradition, but adapted and adjusted as the unique situations of this research project demanded. Subsequent sections will describe the specific research steps taken to complete the data collection and analyses.

Though van Manen (1997; 2014) argued that there is no simple recipe or formula for phenomenological research, he described in great detail key tenants that support the exploration of lived experiences and their essences. In building an understanding of a phenomenon’s essence, van Manen (1997) reiterated that researchers must confront what is already known, presumed, or taken for granted about the phenomenon. This process, referred to as “bracketing” or “epoché,” guides researchers away from their previously held beliefs as part of the process of grasping the phenomenon’s essence (Merriam, 2009). Given the importance of bracketing and reduction within the phenomenological tradition, these two key elements will be explored further in the following sections.

**Bracketing.** To understand the essence of lived experiences, phenomenological methods challenge researchers to suspend their judgments, conceptualizations and predispositions towards the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). Setting aside personal biases and beliefs does not simply mean forgetting our presuppositions and transforming into “blank slates”; instead, van Manen (1997) encouraged researchers “to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and

even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character” (p. 47). Thus, a key component of phenomenological research involves recognizing and confronting researchers’ biases rather than suppressing or ignoring them.

The purpose of recognizing and confronting biases, assumptions, and presumptions is that they can then be “bracketed,” thus suspending judgement before conducting interviews or reviewing data to better understand the essence of the experience (Merriam, 2009). Bracketing provides the means by which researchers can access the lived experiences of others and the meaning of those experiences. However, Giorgi (2006) warned that the process of making one’s assumptions and worldviews explicit via lists does not necessarily allow a researcher to distance themselves from those assumptions. According to Giorgi (2006), the concern is that in some way the bracketing process could reaffirm and further entrench a researcher into their own assumptions. Thus, rather than focus on whether biases exist, it may be a more effective strategy to become attuned to biases as they appear, identifying aspects of the phenomenon that overturn previous assumptions in both the literature and researcher’s own biases.

In light of Girogi’s (2006) warning about bracketing’s potential pitfalls, I drew upon van Manen’s guidance to inform the approach I took in this study. While van Manen (2014) does not focus on specifics strategies to conduct bracketing, or the “brushing away” of our previously held theories or concepts, he does offer guidance about how to approach bracketing within a phenomenological study. Above all, van Manen emphasized that bracketing is not a one-step procedure, but a ceaseless and challenging process in which the researcher must continually engage. In the end, for van Manen (2014) bracketing is a type of mindset and process that characterizes phenomenological research rather than simply a procedural step that is necessary for moving on to data analysis.

**Reduction.** While bracketing happens throughout the research process, the reduction takes place during the data collection and analysis processes. According to van Manen (1997), phenomenology is partly defined by this specific data reduction process, which can be described as a “systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (p. 10). To accomplish this task, he argued that “a universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience” (p. 10). For this reason, data collection processes included individual interviews and writing exercises that provided opportunities for the retention professionals to describe in detail their professional experiences and work.

When engaging in reduction, van Manen (2014) argues there is no single approach phenomenologists use to derive meaning from observations or descriptions of lived experiences. Instead, he argued that instead of being a strict technical procedure, “reduction is an attentive turning to the world when in an open state of mind, effectuated by the [bracketing]” (p. 218). Although van Manen (2014) did not offer a specific set of instructions on how to engage in reduction, he did outline five different approaches to the reduction-proper that phenomenologists might use. This study drew upon the eidetic reduction approach to identify and grasp the essence of the retention officer role and work. According to van Manen (2014), eidetic reduction “consists of grasping some essential insight(s) in testing the meaning of a phenomenon or event. This is done by varying its aspects in imagination *or through comparing empirical examples*” [emphasis mine] (van Manen, 2014; p. 228). While many reviews of phenomenological methods presented the variation in imagination as the means of phenomenological reduction (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015), van Manen (2014) argued that empirical examples can also serve as the

basis for engaging in this analytical process. This process will be outlined in greater detail in the section on the data analysis process.

While reduction plays a key role in conducting phenomenological research, it is important to note that the reduction process is informed by the academic traditions in which the researcher is positioned. As Giorgi (2006) argued, phenomenological research relates to the researcher's field of study, and there is a "disciplinary attitude" which informs the work. Giorgi wrote that "the purpose of the research is not to clarify the experience that the individuals have for their own sake, but for the sake of the discipline" (p. 358). While I would argue that the research can be clarified for both participants and the discipline, it is important to note that the reduction process for this study sought to discern the essence of the retention officers' experiences in the context of the field of higher education research, with the goal of informing researchers and practitioners about the efforts, work, perspectives, and experiences of a specific group of administrators in relatively new roles.

**Phenomenology of practice.** While bracketing and reduction are key components to most phenomenological research projects, it is important to clarify the strand of phenomenology that served as the methodological foundation for this project. Given the study's focus on professional administrators within institutions of higher education, this study drew upon van Manen's (1997; 2014) phenomenology of practice. Not only has van Manen's approach to phenomenology been adopted within educational research (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012), his work speaks directly to understanding the lived experiences of individuals occupying professional roles within organizations. At its core, the phenomenology of practice is meant to examine questions about "how to act in certain situations and relations" (van Manen, 2014; p. 69). Building out from what van Manen (2014) describes as a "pragmatic-ethical concern" about

professionals' actions and experiences, this study sought to leverage phenomenological methods to focus intently on the retention officers' daily work and efforts to enact change. While larger questions about higher education institutions and administrative positions intersect with this research, the phenomenology of practice oriented this project towards the retention professionals' specific, lived experiences and continually pushed the researcher to keep the participants and their professional lives at the center of the data collection and analysis.

Despite the focus on professionals and their work, the intended goal of this research was not to achieve greater efficiencies or effectiveness for current and future retention professionals. As van Manen (2014) argued, research within the phenomenology of practice tradition should aim “not to create technical intellectual tools or prescriptive models for telling us what to do or how to do something effectively. Rather, a phenomenology of practice aims to open up possibilities for creating formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act, between thoughtfulness and tact” (van Manen, 2014, pp. 69-70). Even though the phenomenology of practice centers professionals and their experiences, it maintains an emphasis on accessing the underlying structures and meanings rather than assessing effectiveness or performance. Thus, while the focus on practice is embedded within the methodological approach, this particular method provided an opportunity to explore the role of retention professionals in a way that elevates meaning and experiences while setting aside other organizational, political, or economic analyses that would speak to the utility or efficacy of such roles. This study drew upon tenants from phenomenology, generally, and from the phenomenology of practice specifically to guide both the overarching approach and specific techniques that were used to collect and analyze data as described in the following section.



## **Research Design**

### **Defining a Student Retention Officer**

Before outlining the processes I used to identify and recruit potential study participants, it is important to revisit who is considered a student retention professional. For the purposes of this study, three criteria were used to define and identify student retention professionals. Participants in the study were (a) employed at an accredited four-year college or university, (b) occupied a full-time, non-teaching position, and (c) had the words “retention” or “student success” in their official job title. While retention professionals were staffed in different areas or at different levels within their respective institutions, this study considered only those who met the criteria, focusing specifically on those individuals who shared similar job titles in which retention and student success were directly referenced.

Focusing on non-teaching, full-time administrators with “retention” or “student success” titles departed from previous studies. For example, the Project on Academic Success at Indiana University (Hossler et al., 2011) asked campuses to report whether they had an administrator “charged with improving student persistence and graduation rates” and whether that individual had “the focus, time, resources and organizational clout to address this issue” (p. 12). In this way, the designated administrators studied in the project were not identified by title, but by their work portfolio as it related to retention. While the titles of these “retention coordinators” were not listed in Hossler et al., (2011) study, many of the coordinators were not fully dedicated to their retention role, with less than one-in-five (17%) campuses dedicating more than 0.50 FTE to the coordinator position. Rather than identifying individuals by their work portfolio, this study sought to identify individuals who shared a similar job title—one that explicitly related to retention and student success—and then explored how such professionals experienced,

understood, and enacted their roles and responsibilities within their respective institutions. In this way, the study centered the roles and experiences of a growing group of professional staff rather than a varied group of administrators whose jobs incorporated retention in some way.

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Given this study's focus on the lived experience of retention professionals, scholars of qualitative research methods have argued that nonprobability sampling is an appropriate strategy to identify and recruit potential participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 2014). Along these lines, I sought to identify a group of retention professionals who, given their particular background, position, and institutional context, could provide rich insights into the role and work of retention professionals. Given the use of phenomenological methods and its emphasis on essence rather than generalizations, the recruitment process focused on retention professionals who were likely to provide experientially rich descriptions rather than attracting a varied sample who would represent the theoretical population of retention officers (van Manen, 2014).

Although this study utilized nonprobability sampling techniques, there were key criteria that informed the participant selection process (Merriam, 2009). As described in the previous section, the retention administrators who participated in this study all had the words "retention" or "student success" in their title and were full-time, non-teaching staff. In addition, while it is important to recognize that community colleges educate a significant population of college students and are crucial to the system of higher education (Dougherty, 2002; Dowd, 2003; Mellow & Heelan, 2015; Rouse, 1998), this study included only student retention professionals from four-year, non-profit institutions. Given substantial differences between the two- and four-year institutions in mission, purpose, and intended student outcomes, focusing on retention

professionals at four-year institutions limited the sample and the analysis to the lived experiences of those working to advance students to the baccalaureate degree at their respective institutions. Future research may extend to community college contexts to consider how the essence of the retention administrators' experiences converge or diverge across two- and four-year institutions; however, such work extended beyond the scope of this project.

While the retention professionals shared similarities in their job titles, they were positioned differently within their respective organizational structures both in terms of authority (vertical positioning) and reporting unit (horizontal positioning). Although there are commonalities in how colleges and universities are designed and the way roles are positioned within organizations (Bess & Dee, 2012), I utilized an initial questionnaire to understand where participants were placed at their respective institutions. When identifying potential study participants, I noted their specific title and whether they held a director, dean, vice president/chancellor, or other type of position. In addition, an initial questionnaire inquired as to the unit or units to which the retention professionals report (e.g., Dean of the Faculty, Director / Dean of Enrollment Management, Vice President of Student Affairs, etc.). Understanding these differences between retention professionals not only provided a framework for identifying and incorporating study participants who differ in authority and reporting unit, it also provided greater context for understanding how retention professionals experienced their roles.

Additionally, I was interested in identifying and incorporating retention administrators into the study who work in different institutional contexts. Prior research has shown that institutional control and an institution's size confer with the rate at which students are retained and graduate (DeAngelo et al., 2011; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Scott et al., 2006; Titus, 2004). In this way, I selected participants who worked at both public and private institutions as

well as those who work at both large and small institutions. In terms of size, the Carnegie Classification (n.d.), specifically the size and setting classification, was used to identify the size of institutions that are represented, ranging from very small to large, within the study to ensure participation from professionals at organizations of varying control and size. Through variation along these organizational dimensions, I was able to more fully understand the range of lived experiences, and as a result, understand more fully the essence of this role within four-year institutions (Merriam, 2009). However, the goal of the study was not to draw a sample that would lead to generalizations across all types of positions or institutions; rather, the goal was to identify participants who differed along the aforementioned individual and organizational characteristics, providing greater variation among the professionals and an opportunity to explore the range of experiences and roles among retention officers across different contexts.

To achieve a varied sample of retention professionals who provide rich information regarding their role and responsibilities, I identified 74 retention professionals and invited them via direct email to participate in the study. To identify individuals who fit the criteria, I leveraged four data sources to build a list of retention professionals who would meet the study's selection criterion. The first source was the Higher Education Publications' Higher Education Directory (HEP, 2017). Although it had yet to develop a "retention professional" category to code staff, it did allow for a dynamic, online search of individuals within the directory by job title. Using the keyword "Retention," search results yielded dozens of administrators who were eligible for the study and who were invited to participate. Second, the professional networking site LinkedIn provided an opportunity to search for individuals who were employed at colleges and universities as a retention administrator. Similarly, a third site, [higherjobs.com](http://higherjobs.com) also served as a key resource where current job openings were listed and accessible for searches. Even though

this resource did not yield names of individuals, it did reveal which institutions had implemented retention positions which may have employed individuals who were able and willing to participate. While individuals were not contacted directly through the sites mentioned, results directed me to the institutions who employ retention professionals, which provided publicly available information regarding how to connect with the individuals through their college or university.

When retention professionals were contacted and invited to participate in the study, they were asked to provide information about their current institution, current position, and prior work experience. The short questionnaire (see Appendix B) provided information regarding how each person related to the criterion of interest. This strategy helped ensure that all participants were current retention professionals at four-year institutions as well as provided an opportunity to assess the variability among the participants. In this way, the initial questionnaire provided further information as to how additional recruitment could be directed to achieve greater variation in the final sample.

Of the 74 retention professionals who were invited via email to participate in the study, 22 responded to the initial questionnaire. Ultimately, 21 retention professionals agreed to schedule an interview and move forward with their participation. Between January and April 2018, I conducted the interviews with the 21 retention professionals. Among the study participants, five participants were employed at private, not-for-profit institutions while sixteen were from public institutions. Participants worked at institutions of varying size, ranging from undergraduate populations of approximately 2,000 students to more than 30,000. In categorizing participants' campus size, I drew upon the Carnegie Classification "Size and Setting" classification (n.d.), which identifies four-year institutions as very small (less than 1,000 degree-

seeking, full-time equivalent students), small (1,000 – 2,999 degree-seeking, full-time equivalent students), medium (3,000 – 9,999 degree-seeking, full-time equivalent students), and large (greater than 10,000 degree-seeking, full-time equivalent students). One campus was not classified on the Carnegie Classification website, in which case, I utilized the institution's most recent, final enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (NCES, 2016). Among the sample, nine participants worked at large campuses, nine at medium-sized campuses, and three were employed at small-sized campuses. In addition, the 21 institutions varied in the rate of first-time, full-time students' first-to-second year retention, as reported through the federal government (NCES, 2016). While similar variations were also noted in the campus' four- and six-year graduation rates, I considered the campus first-to-second year retention rates as many retention professionals were new to their positions and spoke more directly about how their efforts influenced year-over-year retention as compared to longer-term outcomes such as graduation rates. Among retention professionals in this study, ten individuals worked at institutions that boasted retention rates above the national median rate of 76%, with another ten individuals working at campuses below the national rate (NCES, 2016). One participant's campus did not have the retention rate reported through IPEDS for the fall '16 cohort. A summary table with key information about the participants interviewed for this study is detailed in Table 3.1. The specific enrollment figures and retention rates are not reported in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 3.1

*List of Study Participants by Institutional Control and First-Year Retention Rate (n=21)*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Retention Rate</b>
<b><i>Institutional Control: Private, not-for-profit Institutions</i></b>				
Christopher	Director of Student Retention	Private	Medium	90+
Carrie	Senior Director of Student Success	Private	Medium	80 - 89
Gloria	Assistant Director of Retention	Private	Small	80 - 89
Brooke	Assistant Vice President for Student Success	Private	Medium	70 - 79
Kayla	Director, Student Success and Retention	Private	Small	<70
<b><i>Institutional Control: Public Institutions</i></b>				
Alexis	Interim Associate Director for Retention	Public	Large	90+
Erick	Assistant Vice Chancellor, Student Retention & Success	Public	Large	90+
Esther	Assistant Vice President for Student Success and Director of Academic Advisement	Public	Large	80 - 89
Lois	Associate Dean for Retention and Student Success	Public	Small	80 - 89
Anne	Director of Student Success and Retention	Public	Large	80 - 89
Daryl	Assistant Vice President for Student Success	Public	Large	80 - 89
Seth	Associate Director, Retention Services	Public	Medium	70 - 79
Lucas	Dean, Retention & Student Success	Public	Large	70 - 79
Heidi	Director for Student Success	Public	Large	70 - 79
Bella	Associate Director of Student Success and Retention	Public	Medium	70 - 79
Justin	Executive Director, Retention and Graduation	Public	Large	70 - 79
Milton	Director of Retention and Student Success	Public	Large	70 - 79
Charles	Retention Program Manager	Public	Medium	<70
Chelsea	Director of Retention and Access to Success	Public	Medium	<70
Clinton	Assistant Vice President of Student Success	Public	Medium	<70
Gwen	Assistant Vice President for Student Success	Public	Medium	N/A

## **Data Collection**

For this study, three forms of data were collected for analysis. First, the participants shared their official job descriptions in advance of the interview. Second, each retention professional was asked to complete an unstructured concept map to provide additional insights and documentation into their lived experiences and efforts as retention professionals (Davies, 2011; Wood & Turner, 2010; Zanting, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2003). The concept map asked retention professionals to conceptualize their responsibilities in advancing students to successful completion of the baccalaureate degree. Third, I conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with retention professionals that lasted between forty-five and seventy-five minutes, with the exception of one participant who was only able to allocate thirty minutes to the conversation. Each of the three sources of data will be described in greater detail in the next section.

**Institutional documents.** As Merriam (2009) emphasized, text documents are key data elements in research and often underutilized in qualitative studies. During this project, I collected the retention professionals' official job description, whether from their original date of hire or most recent review or promotion. Of the 21 participants, 17 shared their job description, while another participant shared an article which described the job though it was not the official duty statement. The job descriptions were collected in advance of the interview so that I could familiarize myself with the language specific to the institution and the retention role. As the first research question intended to explore how retention professionals perceive and experience their role, learning more about how their role is defined by the institution furthered my understanding as to retention officers' efforts and position within the organization. The job description also served as a point of reference during the subsequent interview, allowing me an opportunity to



craft specific follow-up questions as well as allowing retention professionals an opportunity to share whether official job description accurately reflected the work they do on a daily basis.

The job description documents were not to assess the retention professionals' knowledge of their duties or to what extent they perform all of the tasks. Unlike other forms of qualitative research, the phenomenological tradition does not attempt to triangulate or confirm an individual's personal experience (van Manen, 2014). However, the documents served to provide additional insights into the conditions and context that may have brought about the retention officers' role or its continued existence (Bowen, 2009).

While van Manen (1997; 2014) does not consider institutional documents to be key elements of phenomenological research, such documents were important for this particular study to aid my understanding of the work retention professionals do, their position within the institution, and how the institution helps shape the environments and conditions for the officers to operate. These additional pieces of data provided additional insights into the work retention professionals were engaged in, how that work was structured, and how the experiences of the participants differed from the institution's official description of their role.

**Concept maps.** While van Manen (1997) acknowledged that writing exercises can be challenging to implement, he described how these original texts, or "researcher-generated documents," (Merriam, 2009), can provide key insights into the phenomenon of interest. Before interviewing the retention professionals, study participants were asked to complete a written exercise in the form of an unstructured concept map. Wood and Turner (2010) summarized the process of incorporating an unstructured concept map in which "Participants are given a primary concept and asked to identify issues, relationships, phenomena or factors associated with these concepts" (p. 140). To that end, participants in this study were sent an email which included an

attached Word Document for them to print or to use electronically. At the top of the document, the instructions read: “Use the space below to conceptualize your job responsibilities and how they relate to student degree attainment” (see Appendix D). Wood and Turner (2010) found that the unstructured nature of the request produced many different types of responses such as drawings and poems that added even greater context and richness in understanding the phenomenon of interest. In a similar way, this particular exercise was designed to solicit responses unique to each individual retention professional given the unstructured nature of the prompt.

The request to “conceptualize” and not “list” emerged from the idea that the concept map can serve as an opportunity for participants to share their practitioner knowledge in more abstract ways. Also, the exercise asked individuals to express how their responsibilities relate to degree completion, providing further insights into how retention professionals link their work with key institutional outcomes. Prior studies found that a concept map exposed different forms of information and abstractions that were not manifest during individual interviews (Zanting et al., 2003), and were thus utilized for the current study. As a result, this concept map was not just another way to ask an interview question, it also provided an opportunity to document forms of knowledge and understanding that might not have been accessed through other data collection strategies.

In this study, the purpose of the concept map was to provide additional, participant-generated artifacts that provide insights into how student retention professionals understand and conceptualize their roles. Furthermore, since the concept map was completed before the individual interview, opportunities arose during the interview to engage with the participant about how they conceptualized their job and how such conceptualization were represented on the

concept map. This sequence was particularly helpful in leveraging the concept map exercise and combining both concept maps and interviews to produce a deeper understanding as to how retention professionals' have experienced their roles. Although all participants were asked to complete a concept map, 15 of the 21 participants ultimately completed the map in advance of the interview.

**Interviews.** Phenomenological researchers have frequently utilized individual interviews to ascertain the personal and lived experiences of the research participants for reflection and analysis (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013; van Manen, 1997). Drawing upon this tradition, the current study incorporated interviews of retention professionals to collect data about the professionals' role and work after they had completed the concept map exercise. More specifically, interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format because such interviews provide flexibility to explore each individuals' distinct experiences and to follow up on their initial answers (Merriam, 2009). While the semi-structured design allowed for a certain level of spontaneity and adjustments during the interview, van Manen (1997) challenged researchers to properly and thoroughly prepare for such conversations. To that end, a protocol of ten questions was developed to serve as the roadmap for the interview (see Appendix C).

The interview protocol asked for descriptions of lived experiences rather than for reflections or broad statements that deviate from a person's experiences. In phenomenological research, van Manen (1997) argued that there are two types of interviews—those that gather information about lived-experiences (the “phenomenological interview”) and those that involve reflecting upon the material with the participant (“the hermeneutic interview”) (van Manen, 1997; 2014). Although scholars such as van Manen (1997) and Siedman (2013) outline approaches that involve multiple interviews per participant, phenomenological studies have also

leveraged a single, individual interview or focus group to collect data on individuals' lived experiences (Davis et al., 2004; Heinrich, 1995; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Sáenz et al., 2013; Warde, 2008). In a similar way, this study asked each participant to commit to a single interview that would last between 60 and 90 minutes.

The interview solicited concrete stories and descriptions or specific examples and events (van Manen, 1997), and the conversations built upon the concept maps and job descriptions that individuals completed in advance. The focus was on the individuals' professional experiences in their current role, particularly with regards to the responsibilities they possess, the factors that affected their ability to fulfill their responsibilities, and the changes they made, supported, or facilitated at their institution to advance students' retention and baccalaureate attainment.

The geographic spread of the participating retention officers required interviews to be conducted via an online, video interviewing platform. The interviewing platform (Zoom) not only provided an online space for me and the participants to see each other, it also recorded the conversation and produced an audio file for transcription. Among the participants, six individuals were unable to connect via video conference, in which case the interview was conducted via the Zoom video conference platform, but it then only utilized the audio feature. The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed by a third-party company and prepared for analysis.

After the interview, the transcripts were provided to the participants to ensure accuracy and to provide them with an opportunity to revise as necessary.

### **Data Analysis**

The previous sections detailed the specific methods by which participants were selected and the data were collected. It is important to note that both the data collection and analysis took place simultaneously and in a non-linear fashion (Merriam, 2009). Initial data collection and

reflection informed subsequent interviews, and initial themes and understandings were shared with participants to inspire further conversation and reflection. Thus, the analytical process, including reflection upon the key findings and implications, took place in conjunction with the initial interviews.

**Phenomenological analyses.** Unlike other qualitative traditions, van Manen (2014) argued that the analytical process within phenomenology is one that leads to the core of participants' lived experiences, not to generalized laws or principles. He wrote that "phenomenological reflection on lived experience is neither inductive nor deductive—rather it is reductive" (van Manen, 2014; p. 222). In this way, the analyses focused on assessing each piece of data from the documents, interviews, and writing exercises to discern what exactly comprises the essence of the retention professionals' role and work.

As previously discussed, bracketing and reduction were key components of phenomenological research, and they provided direction for how to proceed with both the collection and analysis of data (van Manen, 1997; 2014). Through bracketing and reduction, I sought to understand the essence of the participants' lived experiences and identify and present phenomenological themes. While presenting themes is common across qualitative research studies, thematic analysis within phenomenology takes a particular form. According to van Manen (1997), themes are "more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (p. 90). For this study, the knots were those structures and elements that underlie the retention professionals' role within the academy.

The process of reviewing the lived experiences to identify themes involved reading, and rereading, the institutional documents, interview transcripts, and written exercises. While van

Manen (2014) outlined different approaches to reviewing data for themes—wholistic, selective, and detailed (line-by-line)—this study utilized a selective, or highlighting approach, to develop initial themes. Using this approach, data were reviewed, with phrases or statements (not each individual line) being coded for potential themes.

I reviewed each coded segment and began to identify emergent themes relevant to the research questions. Coded statements that reflected similar experiences or common characteristics of retention work were grouped together. Using MaxQDA 12 to group and review coded segments across interviews, I analyzed how the coded segments worked together and how their common meaning captured the essence of participants' experiences. This was an iterative process, with each subsequent reflection building towards a more complete understanding of the “aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1997; p. 107). This process of reduction involved the comparison of data sources and participants to develop an understanding of the role and work of retention professionals.

**Coding.** Once the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed, uploaded, and reviewed in MaxQDA 12. The concept maps and the institutional documents were added alongside the interview transcripts to complete the set of documents to be analyzed for the study. Once the participants' documents were ready for analysis, I started by reviewing the job description and concept map before reading the transcript in its entirety. Upon completing the initial read of the transcript, I proceeded to write a memo to document my impressions of the participant's account of the role. After the initial reading, I returned to the document for a second time to then identify and code statements that appeared to provide insight into the research questions of interest. In reviewing each document, the software program facilitated the selection

and analysis of phrases and statements that appeared to be thematic of the retention officers' experience (van Manen, 1997). The MaxQDA 12 software also allowed for the comparison of empirical examples, whereby data was compared across participants and interviews. Making these comparisons was part of the iterative process of reevaluating the strength and validity of the phenomenological themes.

In addition to coding and comparing key phrases within the data, the analytical software supported the reflective process of theme development. Within MaxQDA 12, analytical memos were written to consider how pieces of data related to a proposed theme or how certain codes connected to larger themes and patterns. Analytical memos were not only important to facilitate reflective analysis, they also served as an audit trail for explaining how themes and findings were derived through the analytical process (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 2009).

**Researcher processes: Addressing ethical issues.** A key component to any study, particularly qualitative studies where individuals share their views, stories, and experiences to be recorded for analyses, is the care and attention given to ethical issues and concerns that comprise work of this nature (Merriam, 2009). The following section describes the processes I put in place to safeguard the rights of the participants and engage them as full participants in the research process. While the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process at UCLA engaged in these issues with specific details, I will outline key issues and actions in the following section.

***Informed consent.*** In advance of the interviews, all participants were provided with a copy of an informed consent form that detailed their rights as study participants. For those persons who interviewed via a videoconference technology, consent was provided through verbal agreement before proceeding with the interviews, with participants reaffirming their consent with each interview and audio recording.

***Confidentiality.*** First, retention professionals were not identified by their name or institution of employment. Instead, I asked the participants to provide a personal pseudonym of their choice, and if they declined to pick a specific name, I then used a random name generator to assign their pseudonym. I referred to the colleges and universities using general institutional characteristics, and while I provided institutional-level data that provides context as to the participants, I did not present any specific data that revealed the identity of the institution. As Kaiser (2009) noted, there is a delicate balance that exists between ensuring confidentiality to the participants and providing adequate details and context to the audience. Considerations were made as to the level of institutional detail that was shared in the final manuscript.

***Data handling procedures.*** Any data that contains personally identifiable information, such as email information, were kept in password protected areas in which only the researcher had access. At each stage of the research process, attention was given to the documents and data that have been collected to ensure that data with personal information was not accessible to others.

### **Trustworthiness**

Before discussing my approach to advancing trust with this study, it is important to note the ways in which phenomenological research differs from other qualitative methods. First, the purpose of this study was to understand retention professionals' roles and work through their own experiences and viewpoints. In this tradition, I did not test whether participants were completely or objectively factual in their accounts or whether others at their institutions agreed with the details of the experiences that they recounted. Therefore, strategies such as "triangulation," although popular in qualitative research, were not consistent with this particular project (van Manen, 2014). As van Manen (2014) argued, "the more important and difficult issue



is whether the phenomenological interpretations of the underlying meaning structures of these descriptions are valid and executed in a scholarly manner, and whether the phenomenological themes and insights emerging from the descriptions are appropriate and original” (p. 384). To this end, my focus was on maintaining consistency and transparency with regards to the research process and findings. As is with any qualitative research study, clarity and transparency in the scholarly process will not lead others to draw the same conclusions, but will provide others with a clear understanding as to how conclusions were derived for this particular study (Merriam, 2009).

Within this tradition and methodology, I used four primary strategies to advance the trustworthiness of the study. The first strategy relates to the bracketing (or epoché), which is the continual process of recognizing and identifying biases that affect the research process, including the lens through which data are interpreted. As previously mentioned, the goal of bracketing and my attempt at greater trustworthiness with the study was not to eliminate my biases, but to acknowledge their presence and identify, as best to my ability, the ways in which such biases shape this study. As part of the process of making known my biases, both to myself and to the reader, I have included a section on my positionality. The section describes my prior experiences and viewpoints that informed my approach to the study as well as additional reflections about my own views that emerged during the research project. However, this particular section is a single component of the larger process of engaging in reflective practice throughout the entire research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The second strategy involved member checking through which I shared transcripts with the participants and invited them to review, comment, and clarify any part of the conversation (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the member checks ensured that participants felt their

conversations were properly documented and represented. While participants reviewed the transcripts and several responded to confirm their accuracy, the member checking process did not involve further conversations about the initial findings or how each person's experiences were interpreted and presented (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Given the study utilizes a phenomenological approach, the member checking process engaged participants in reviewing their lived experiences but did not focus on the process of interpreting or reflecting upon the meaning such experiences (Giorgi, 2006).

A third strategy involved the search for, and acknowledgement of, disconfirming evidence, or divergent cases and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Given that this research is based on individuals' lived experiences and their work within complex organizations, it was important to recognize that not all data or themes fit neatly and easily together. Therefore, during the data analysis process, my goal was to engage in meaningful reduction to see into the essence of the participants' experiences. At the same time, I sought to avoid the trap of ignoring those experiences and data that did not align perfectly with the phenomenological themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Recognizing this messiness inherent in studying individuals' lived experiences served as a means to improve the trustworthiness of the study.

Lastly, the final element included the peer debriefing process (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam, 2009). The purpose of this process was twofold: first, to review the methodological process as the research unfolded, and second, to work through ideas about the phenomenological themes that were initially identified. In particular, peer debriefing was important immediately following the initial analyses when I first developed ideas about how the phenomenological themes were being presented and how the data were being understood and interpreted. During this process, I created an Excel sheet containing 58 primary codes that I had utilized while

reviewing the transcripts, expanded definitions of those codes, and the frequency the codes appeared in the initial review of the data. The codes were then organized according to the three research questions. This document reflected the initial analyses, and provided an opportunity to review with two different individuals, including the dissertation chair, how the experiences of retention professionals had been presented during the interviews. The conversations helped refine the analyses and helped review how specific data connected with essential aspects of retention professionals' experiences.

**Positionality.** As Patton (2015) contended, positionality is more than a simple declaration of biases or of personal experiences that bring a researcher to a particular project. For Patton (2015), how people conduct research—from the questions to the analysis and interpretation—builds upon who they are and where they have been and is integral to the methodological approach to the study.

Prior to returning to graduate school, I worked for six years as an administrator at a four-year university, holding positions in admissions, fund-raising, and student affairs. Through these experiences, I worked closely with students, staff, faculty, and alumni to promote student success and institutional improvement. These positions contributed to my view that administrators at all levels are capable of implementing and enacting changes, contributions which could exceed a measure of their economic cost. While recent projects such as the Delta Cost Project (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014) have identified professional staff as the main drivers to higher education's increasing costs, it is important to consider the work these staff do and the roles they possess. Doing so will provide a more nuanced understanding of the roles and contributions of administrative staff in higher education. In line with Kezar, Bertram Gallant, and Lester's (2011) work on grassroots leadership, I view administrators not as tightly-constrained, costly

bureaucrats, but as important institutional agents who may create positive changes for the students and institutions where they are employed.

Additionally, I think it is important to acknowledge the experience that sparked my interest in the world of retention professionals and in conducting a study of this nature. As van Manen (2014) argued, phenomenological questions can emerge from reflecting upon personal experiences and beginning to wonder about them. For van Manen (2014), wonder is a key component to initiating a quality phenomenological study, so I will share the experience that sparked my interest and initiated that sense of wonder which brought me to this study.

In the summer of 2014, I participated in a workshop during which I met an administrator who held the title of “Director of Student Retention Services.” Asking questions about the role, this particular administrator shared that the position was relatively new, and they were the first to occupy the role upon its creation. The administrator shared that the institution’s retention rate had dipped slightly from the year before, and in response to the slight decline, the administrator recalled hearing jokes, questions, and concerns from members of the campus community about how that key metric had actually gone down after they had put someone in place to make it go up. In that conversation, I was fascinated how members of the campus community perceived this single individual (someone who was positioned deep within a large and complex organization) as being responsible for the overall institution’s retention rate. I wondered if retention professionals were facing similar critiques and whether this role could truly create institutional change or whether it was, by design, set up to fail.

### **Pilot Study**

Building upon my prior experiences and emerging interest in retention professionals, I conducted an initial, exploratory study of retention professionals as part of my doctoral

program's research practicum. In this pilot study, I interviewed five retention professionals—with four comprising the analytical sample and one serving as an initial consultant for the interview protocol—to learn more about their work and how they were positioned within the organization. While the pilot provided me with an opportunity to interview a small group of retention professionals and familiarize myself further with these roles, the study differed from the current study in key ways. First, the pilot study focused on professionals who worked specifically within Offices of Student Retention. Second, the key research question focused on the how such offices were structured within a college or university's organizational design; third, the analytical sample was comprised only of retention professionals at public institutions; and fourth, I utilized different qualitative methods—primarily grounded theory and case study approaches—to address the questions of interest.

Despite these differences, the pilot study provided me with an opportunity to investigate issues relating to student retention professionals, and it affirmed an interest in further exploring this group of higher education administrators. From that study, I developed a more specific interest into these roles and desired to further understand how individuals enact, shape, and experience these roles. Moreover, the current study focused on the changes retention professionals contribute to at their respective institutions, providing greater insights into what retention officers have been able to accomplish and what forces may restrict and/or enable the changes they have made. The current study sought to build upon these experiences and interests to construct a more comprehensive and complex understanding of student retention professionals.

## **Limitations**

One of the key assumptions regarding phenomenological research and interviews presumes individuals are authentic in describing their experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 61). Part of the challenge in accessing participants' authentic experiences is making a connection with the participants and ensuring their stories will be heard, respected, and maintained in confidence. One of the challenges and limitations of the study was that I was not able to interview each person in a face-to-face format given the geographical spread of the retention professionals. Although I was not able to connect in person with the study participants, videoconferencing technology was used to maximize the interactions and allow for the semi-structured interviews to be informed by both verbal and non-verbal cues. In addition, I used the concept map exercise as a way to jumpstart the conversation and to build rapport with the study participants before the one-on-one interview.

Another limitation was that by incorporating more than twenty professionals in the study, I was not able to describe and explore each person's specific context and situation. While retention professionals are embedded within units within complex organizations, the scope and purpose of the study focused on their personal experiences and perceptions. Nevertheless, I recognized that different foci and analyses could yield further insights to the many contextual factors that each individual person had experienced in their work.

One of the challenges in conducting phenomenological research is to identify and incorporate individuals who can speak to their experiences. For phenomenologists, the challenge of sampling lies not in securing a random sample of participants, but in securing a group who have experience with the phenomenon and who are able to describe their experiences relating to it. For this specific project, one of the limitations was the lack of organizations, associations, or

directories that organize data on retention professionals. While I leveraged available resources such as LinkedIn, institutional websites, and the Higher Education Directory, it was challenging to identify in advance a comprehensive pool of professionals who could provide in-depth experiences of serving as a retention officer.

Additionally, a majority of the study participants had occupied their current role for less than 24 months. While the final sample include participants from a number of different institutional contexts and settings, the study involved a number of individuals who were able to talk about their initial efforts or transition into the role, but relatively few were able to discuss longer-term efforts or changes they had experienced or witnessed as a result of serving many years, or even decades, as a retention professional. However, given the relatively recent introduction of the role, the relative inexperience of study participants in retention professional roles reflects the emerging nature of this particular position within colleges and universities.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PEOPLE, PROGRAMS, AND PROCESSES:**

#### **THE ROLES OF STUDENT RETENTION PROFESSIONALS**

The findings from the study are described in chapters four and five. In chapter four, I utilize data from interviews and concept maps to understand how study participants perceived their responsibilities and how they enacted their role as a student retention professional. Emerging from the analysis, I detail five different ways retention professionals described their roles and responsibilities, reflecting the range of experiences and expectations that were present across the study participants. In answering the first research question, I highlight how the multiple roles and types of responsibilities underscore the variation found within these positions and how retention professional roles have been designed and leveraged in different ways in order to achieve a common objective. After reviewing participants' experiences and perceptions, chapter five details the forces that have shaped these roles and the types of changes study participants have attempted to facilitate at their respective institutions. Chapter five outlines both the challenges retention professionals have faced as well as the opportunities they have uncovered to transform higher education institutions and enact changes to increase student degree attainment.

#### **Roles and Responsibilities**

Throughout the interviews and concept maps, retention professionals explained how their time, attention, and energies fluctuated between very specific, individual interactions with students and high-level conversations and efforts regarding institutional policies, systems, and trends. As exemplified in one of the participant's concept map, Carrie, a Senior Director of



Student Success at a medium-sized, private institution and the only full-time retention professional at the university, described the position as follows:

When I summarize my job, I describe it where I get the opportunity to impact student degree attainment in two main ways...1. I get to work on retention and student success at the 10,000 foot level. I have to gather and analyze data (student, course, financial, etc...), keep informed about national, state, and campus Student Success trends, and work with senior administration and to reduce institutional barriers to student success...2. I also get to work with students individually. Campus staff (faculty, staff and administrators) on a daily basis refer students to me who they think are at risk of leaving the institution. I then meet with students on a one on one basis to help them move forward with completing their degree.

While all participants described working to improve students' timely progress towards the baccalaureate, Carrie's concept map revealed key insights about the way professionals in this study experienced and perceived their roles: efforts to impact retention were made at both the individual and organizational level; participants enacted different roles depending upon the type of work they were engaged in; and individual retention professionals embodied multiple roles simultaneously. While Carrie described moving between roles and focusing on both the local and the global, not all participants described this type of fluidity and range. In addition, while Carrie's concept map did capture a lot about the experiences of retention professionals and embodied the range of responsibilities seen across all participants, the map did not wholly represent every study participant and their specific experiences. In this chapter, I expand upon Carrie's initial insights and explore the full range of participant experiences and perceptions, focusing on how their various efforts to impact student success revealed five specific, yet

distinct, roles. Details of these roles and how they embody the experiences and perceptions of study participants are described in the following sections.

### **Student Support**

Similar to Carrie, a number of participants described how their time was spent in direct, one-on-one meetings with students. Although not every retention professional in the study engaged directly with students, several retention professionals sought to impact student retention through individualized mentorship, advising, advocacy, and support. In addition to this type of direct engagement with students, retention professionals described supporting individual students in other, often indirect, ways. These indirect efforts included tasks such as initiating referrals for campus colleagues to follow up with a particular student or working behind the scenes, perhaps via an early alert system, to connect specific students with colleagues and resources across the institution. While both types of efforts were focused on individual student support—one-on-one advising and connecting students with resources and people—these different experiences and efforts reflected two distinct roles study participants perceived and enacted as retention professionals.

**Switchboard Operator.** Many of the retention professionals described efforts to connect students with a campus resource or opportunity. Similar to what I would describe as a switchboard operator, retention professionals were positioned in between two parties (the student and another person or entity such as a service professional, faculty member, campus program, or resource) that needed to be connected. It was the retention professionals' particular knowledge of the institution and the personal relationships they had formed across many different functional areas that facilitated those connections.

As part of the concept map exercise, Lois, an Associate Dean for Retention and Student Success at a small, public institution, described how making connections were central to the

work. Lois said, “I help connect students to the people, activities, resources, services and support that will help them be successful and persist to graduation.” Similarly, Bella, an Associate Director of Student Success at a midsize public institution, described how students were constantly being referred to and through the Office of Student Success. On the concept map, Bella wrote the words “Referral Center” near the top and then drew a post with four signs pointing in different directions next to the campus directory labeled with “Campus Connections” (see Figure 4.1). During the interview, Bella elaborated on the concept map drawing: “[Students] need somebody to actually connect them with the true person in an office and/or tell them what office they really need to go to or even walk them there. And so that’s kind of like that directional post meaning.”

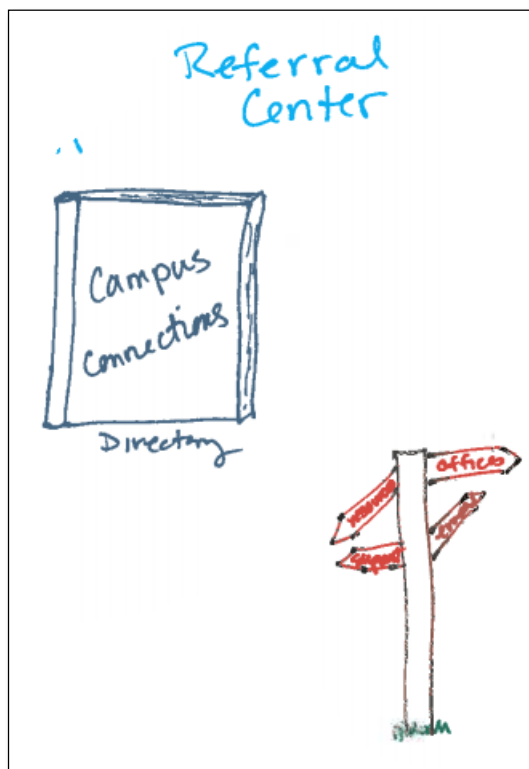


Figure 4.1 Excerpt from concept map exercise (Bella).

Participants in this study discussed how they proactively encouraged faculty, staff, and even parents to refer students to them so they could connect students with a colleague or resource. Charles, a Retention Program Manager at a small, public institution, described the speech given to parents at incoming students' visit day. As part of the speech, Charles emphasized that the only person families needed to remember was the retention professional's name. Charles said, "I kind of try to build that relationship up, that I am the person to contact first because I can get your student where they need to go. So if you don't remember anyone else's name, remember me and I will be here for your student." Retention professionals felt that their particular set of knowledge, skills, and position required them to link students and campus resources that would best address particular needs. During the interview, Carrie described how switchboard operations were a central part of the job and elaborated on the process for creating the necessary connections across campus:

I build as many relationships I can from all the staff and faculty on campus and make sure that they know that if they're ever worried about a student for whatever reason, start with me, and we'll go from there. If I need to refer to Financial Aid I'll – I'll make sure that referral or handoff gets done well. If it's to Counseling and Psychological Services, if it's talking with their Student Success Counselors, that's right here in my office and they're not feeling that that's going well and, you know, they don't understand their degree requirements, whatever it is, start with me and let's go from there.

The idea to "start with me" or "contact me first" was emphasized by many retention professionals, and they sought to spread this message and frequently reiterate that point. Kayla, who served as the Director for Student Success and Retention at a small, private institution, instructed students to simply make their way to the office—an office that was located within a

key campus landmark—no matter the issue or challenge they were facing. Kayla shared her message to students:

We tell them, “Just come back to the back of the library [where our office is located] if you need help.” And so oftentimes we're kind of figuring out or navigating or passing – “What do you need help with? Business office? Let’s take you over there. Financial aid? Let’s take you over there. Roommate consolidation? Hey, let's sit down and walk you through this process.”

Even though Kayla’s office and team were located within the library, Kayla emphasized how she and the team could address any particular issue, not just those academic in nature, which a student brought to their attention. Even though the position reported to the Provost and the office was physically located within the library building, the referrals and the connections would span across the entire campus, highlighting the way that retention professionals perceived their work as inherently cross-functional and intersecting with the entire campus community. Starting from Kayla’s office in the back of the library, students would then be directed and connected to the most appropriate location across the campus. The ability for retention professionals to cut across the entire campus and to make connections with people and resources without regard to specific boundaries made retention professionals particularly confident in their abilities to work with any student to address any specific need. In a related way, Bella described how faculty members referred students when they were unsure where to turn or how to provide students with the appropriate support. Bella shared:

Part of my role with our faculty, I think because I have been here for so long and back when I was in the office of one [person] we really kind of have said, “Hey, Student Success Retention, it’s like you have a student who is struggling, we don’t know where to

send them, send them to us.” And so I probably get three or four every few weeks from faculty who will say, “Hey, can I send Johnny? He is really struggling or just needs something else.”

These types of referrals, when faculty and other staff did not know where to turn within the organization, were part of what made study participants feel valuable to retention efforts. Seth, an Associate Director of Retention Services at a large, public institution, described a similar approach in encouraging faculty to refer students whenever they did not know how to support a student in their classroom who was experiencing personal challenges. In building relationships with faculty, Seth explained how and why faculty could refer students who might need to connect with someone at the institution. From there, Seth assured faculty that students would be routed to the places and people on campus that could best address the issues. Seth said, “You know, my response is you don’t need to do it. You shouldn’t deal with that. Send them to us, we’ll forward them to the office on campus that is equipped with professionals and then you can focus on your teaching, and you can focus on that aspect of your relationship with the student.”

Such descriptions from Seth and Bella revealed how retention professionals in this study built relationships with faculty and colleagues and communicated their switchboard operating role. Retention professionals did not seek to remove faculty’s responsibilities to attend to students’ needs or to familiarize themselves with the wider campus community. Rather, participants in the study needed to find ways to initiate the process, often through a referral or notification of some sort, which would subsequently require them to connect students and resources. Several participants relied upon colleagues to identify students for potential interventions and connections, so they spent time explaining how others could best leverage the

expertise, knowledge, and network of the retention professional. In this way, participants further bolstered their role as a switchboard operator by actively promoting and encouraging others to refer students or to notify them whenever they felt students could benefit from their network, connections, and familiarity with the institution.

As part of their role in connecting students with campus resources, retention professionals described how they did not just refer students to a general department nor did they make a general suggestion about how students could go about reaching the area they needed. Instead, retention professionals called upon specific individuals who worked within these offices and who might be most effective in addressing a student's particular situation or need. In this way, the switchboard operator role was also about connecting students with the right people at the right time, especially with colleagues with authority to address, or who were especially sensitive to, students' specific needs. As Carrie shared, the purpose was not just to make a "handoff," but to make sure the "handoff gets done well." When students had questions about financial aid or needed financial support, Bella described efforts to connect students not just with the financial aid office, but with a specific administrator whose work aligned with a student's needs:

We selfishly have this great list that says, here is everybody in financial aid and what they do. So I will, if a student is in my office, I will call and say, "Hey, Nancy, I'm going to send a student. They need to meet specifically with you," because that's like the part of what you deal with or whatever, so then that student, when they go to financial aid can say, "I need to meet with Nancy. She is expecting me."

At a deeper level, Bella emphasized how the switchboard operator role involved connecting students with specific individuals, not just with other offices or units. In a similar

way, Milton described a network of student success “advocates” who were called upon to help troubleshoot a particular issue or challenge that a student was facing:

I have students here all the time that are wanting to know information about [financial aid]. And I’m calling financial aid offices. They are not waiting in lines. They are not having a call with me put on hold. They are not having to wait in a way because I’m calling direct people that are essentially my advocates for student success in those offices.

As Bella and Milton described, their work was to understand not only which units, but which people within those units, would be best suited to support a student. While anyone could pull up the online campus directory and find phone numbers for various offices and even people, retention professionals described how they knew who students should contact based upon their particular need or situation. In this way, students would not even need to know who they should be connected to or where they needed to go. They only needed to describe their challenge, situation, or need to a retention professional who would then connect them to the person most likely and willing to effectively provide support or information.

The role of switchboard operator extended beyond directly triaging students in need or in crisis by focusing on the idea that, at a fundamental level, a retention professional could simplify and improve the process of connecting students with resources. In this way, even retention professionals who were not directly handling or issuing referrals described how their work facilitated and encouraged this type of activity at their respective institutions. Retention professionals who served as assistant vice presidents or directors of retention described how they built relationships across the campus and explained how staff who reported to them functioned as switchboard operators. For example, even though both Esther and Erick—who served in assistant vice president/chancellor roles—had numerous direct reports and less direct student contact than



other participants in the study, they were still involved in positioning themselves and their teams as the first place others should turn in addressing students' needs. Esther, an Assistant Vice President for Student Success at a large, public institution, shared how educating faculty was a key part of setting the stage for frontline colleagues who worked closely with students:

So I've also been educating faculty, the kind of faculty that say, you know, I had a student out of money, out of food. I made 10 different phone calls, never found a way to help them. And what I've been saying is you don't need 10 phone calls. You need one word, success. Check success teams, you'll find your success center...as long as I can get [them] to that front desk, the right hand off will happen.

As evidenced through Esther's description of efforts to educate faculty and to explain the work of the student success colleagues, the switchboard operator role was not limited to retention professionals who worked directly with students or who served in positions embedded deeper within the organizational hierarchy. While the daily work and specific efforts focused on relationship building and supervising staff colleagues, the switchboard role was also perceived as one that created and facilitated the processes by which students connected to people, resources, and opportunities across the campus. In this way, the switchboard operator role was just as much about building the infrastructure and process of identifying students and making the connections as it was the actual, specific action of linking two parties.

***The technology-enhanced switchboard.*** To facilitate or accelerate their role as switchboard operators, many retention professionals leveraged various software programs and technological tools to identify students who may have benefitted from various supports or resources. The software programs were part of a campus's early alert initiative, in which staff and faculty documented students' progress within the first weeks or months of an academic term.

The software programs facilitated the recording and documentation of this information, and in some cases, could be used to facilitate communication across offices and people. In addition, multiple administrators across the campus could access the system to see notes or progress reports, allowing many individuals to simultaneously identify and understand a student's needs without requiring that student to repeat the information several times to multiple parties. The systems the retention professionals in the sample utilized were either third-party software platforms such as EAB, MAPWorks, Starfish, or Pharos 360 or locally grown solutions designed to serve similar functions.

Though a common element among their work and experiences, retention professionals in this study interacted with their respective institution's early alert system in different ways. Some individuals were responsible for overseeing the system's function in a management or advisory capacity. On the other hand, a number of participants were tasked with reviewing and acting on each piece of information entered into the system. For example, Lois, an Associate Dean of Retention and Student Success at a relatively small institution, read every single update that was submitted to the campus platform. Lois outlined the respective process for reviewing the data and connecting students with resources:

Students who are having academic difficulties, either our coordinator of Advising Services or I typically do outreach to them. Sometimes I ask the Academic Advisor to do outreach. Sometimes it's more of an RA Welfare Check so I send information to our Director of Residence Life and ask him to send the RA out to do a Welfare Check and send information back to me. Sometimes it's a financial aid issue. "Hey Financial Aid folks, can you please do outreach or can you please work with this student? Let me connect you with them." Maybe it's a Registrar's Office issue. "Hey Registrar, could you

please help in this situation?” So I either meet with students or I delegate to other people to touch base with them.

As Lois described, the functional components of the role were similar to those previously discussed, though the process and operation of the role was greatly aided through the early alert software platform the campus had implemented. Similarly, Seth was also deeply involved with reviewing information that came through the early alert system and then connecting students with the appropriate service or resource on campus.

Students of concern are reported through the system through referrals and they can be personal, medical, mental, financial, registration or academic concerns. They all come through [our office]. We identify who they’re connected to on campus and then we route that referral directly to them and then that office is responsible for reaching out to the students.

These early alert systems not only provided information about student progress and experiences, it also allowed retention professionals to make connections quickly and at scale. For example, Seth (on a midsize campus) described the rapid growth in faculty submitting academic updates through their early alert system and the increasing number of referrals they were able to make through the system. Seth said, “The first time we launched, we didn’t get a ton. We got like 500 academic updates. Last year, we got over 10,000 of them. And through that, we’ve got like 600 referrals through those.” The volume of these referrals, and the process Seth described previously, revealed how Seth worked behind the scenes and encouraged others across campus to follow up with students rather than speaking directly with so many students himself. Lois also talked about the increased use of their early alert system as a challenge in time management as well as an opportunity to facilitate more connections between students and resources:

We have seen a 181% increase in the number of alerts and updates that faculty and staff have put in this fall. So I'm pretty pleased about that. That's the good news. The bad news is that there has been a 181% increase in use of [the early alert software] and it's taking up a lot of [staff] time.

In this way, the retention professionals' switchboard operator role was supported by technologies for connecting students with campus resources, yet such technologies also posed challenges to manage hundreds, if not thousands, of updates and alerts that flow through the system. Along these lines, simply purchasing an early alert tool did not mean that information would easily flow across campus or that student referrals would be easily handled; retention professionals in this study were challenged to build relationships and processes that supported the utilization and efficacy of the early alert software.

While Seth and Lois described their in-depth work with the early alert systems, Gwen, an Assistant Vice President for Student Success, engaged with the campus' system at a much higher-level: "My experience with that is really related mostly in seeing how many cases are open, how many cases are closed, what are the trends there, what are – what is the usage from faculty. Are we seeing any consistent markers that multiple students are missing." In this way, Gwen relied upon the early alert tool to discern patterns and gauge the system's overall reach and effectiveness. While the specific tasks and responsibilities contrasted with other study participants who reviewed specific alerts and sought to directly resolve each case, this contrast also revealed how professionals' different efforts were part of a similar role and approach to student retention. Gwen was still engaged in the larger process of connecting students them with someone on campus via an early alert system, but her specific relationship to the switchboard operations were maintained at a higher-level of oversight.

Even participants who did not utilize any software platform to make connections between students and resources underscored their value and had considered introducing one at their institution. For participants who expressed interest in deploying an early alert system, they described how they thought such systems could improve campus efforts to identify students and connect them with campus staff and resources, ultimately boosting retention and enhancing the strategies already in place. One of the study participants, Christopher, who served as the director of a one-person retention office at a private, midsize campus with a first year retention rate above 90%, expressed an interest in deploying an early alert system at the campus. While it was originally part of the campus retention plan, they had yet to introduce it. Christopher said, “We set aside money for it, we never tapped in to that money...I think that would be something that could add that extra 2% or 3% we're looking [to retain] and identify the right students at the right time.”

Christopher saw the early alert software as a tool to assist the campus in identifying a relatively small group of students who might not otherwise be connected to institutional supports and resources. For Christopher, the technology aspect to the early alert system could accelerate the warnings, which at the time, were generated through pulling lists after midterm grades had posted. During that process, Christopher discussed how the students they identified might have a full slate of grades below the passing threshold, at which point it was too late to offer interventions or to discuss strategies to maintain students' timely progress towards completion. In a similar way, Erick felt the technology could really enhance the ability to identify those who might benefit from a particular intervention or resource even though the campus seemed reluctant to purchase a platform. In Erick's view, such a system could facilitate communication

across the campus, which enrolled more than 25,000 undergraduates. Part of the appeal to Erick was in the ability to more effectively identify students:

I'd really like to get to a place where in terms of our retention strategy we're using a lot more information about our students to identify those that need outreach, that need intervention, and then to have a system in place where the left hand knows what the right hand is doing.

Both Christopher and Erick described how the early alert system could better support the identification of students who could potentially benefit from campus interventions or support from colleagues. While Christopher and Erick's views emphasized how early alert systems could improve their current practice of identifying students, a number of participants described how the software systems were only as good as the processes that supported the identification and subsequent follow-up that was needed to take action.

***Establishing a network.*** Retention professionals cautioned that simply having an early alert system and software platform did not guarantee that students would be identified in a timely manner or that the right connections would be made. One of the study participants Anne described the institution's failed attempt to utilize a third-party early alert product, as the platform was not seen as an effective tool for fostering collaboration or connections across the campus. Instead of moving away from a switchboard operation role, colleagues from across Anne's large public institution worked to develop a homegrown platform and survey that were better suited for the campus and which realized the goals of identifying students and connecting them with campus resources and supports. For example, Anne described how the revised product asked students questions that would then send automatic and immediate notification to colleagues, such as when students indicated they were interested in learning more about

resources for those who had aged out of foster care. Anne described how the new system facilitated collaboration and engagement with colleagues:

And then there's this kind of as soon as a student indicates that, we have someone who's reaching out and getting connected, and we have that type of set up in a lot of areas so it's very collaborative again. We have partners all over campus: Military and Veteran student services, LGBT Center, Center for Multicultural Education, our Academic Support Center.

A key component to the role of a switchboard operator was having a deep understanding of the institution, including the offices and the programs, as well as key relationships with many across the campus. Seth also described the investment of time to establish and maintain relationships across the campus, reflecting how such relationships had been built through face-to-face interactions and not generic or anonymous emails. He said:

So I think we've developed that reputation and I think that we can always improve on it. But more and more people or more of our faculty are identifying and says, "Here is an office that you can send it to and they'll do something with it." And a lot of that is personal relationship building and it is not emailed. It is – you're sitting on committees. You're asking to be invited into department meetings, you're going into the lines with the chairs and the deans meetings, and you're recognizing the amount of work that they have and you're framing it in a way that this is here to support them.

A number of retention professionals described how they had already been employed at the institution before assuming their current role, allowing them to jump immediately into the role of a switchboard operator. Others who were relatively new to the institution, however,

described their process for establishing such relationships in order to effectively assume the role of a switchboard operator.

**Case Manager.** A number of retention professionals described a different set of student interactions that were more in-depth than simply making connections with and for students. Among the participants, there were a number who engaged in advising, mentoring, tracking, and monitoring the activities and successes of particular at-risk students. Several retention professionals spent time working one-on-one with students to devise or evaluate action plans that best met their particular needs. The retention professionals were quick to follow up with students upon identifying who potentially needed support and which particular issue might be inhibiting their timely progress to the degree. In this role, participants engaged in high levels of student contact, particularly among those who worked at institutions with smaller undergraduate student populations or who had leveraged technology to quickly identify a small group of students that needed attention amidst thousands of undergraduates.

In assessing students' needs and then collaborating to arrange services, retention professionals experienced their role similar to that of a case manager. According to the Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care (n.d.), a case manager is professional who "collaboratively assesses the needs of the client and the client's family, when appropriate, and arranges, coordinates, monitors, evaluates, and advocates for a package of multiple services to meet the specific client's complex needs" (p. 1). Key to the case management role is the idea that retention professionals were not just assessing needs or making connections across the campus, they were engaged in a more collaborative process to monitor, evaluate, and advocate for students in ways that ensure their particular needs are met.



One of the retention professionals had started in the office as a Retention Specialist whose job was to specifically manage a “caseload” of students. While Alexis had since assumed a more senior role within the office as well as a new set of responsibilities, previous work as a retention specialist involved working directly with a group of students to track their progress and status. Alexis recalled, “The initial position was to support a caseload of about 700 students who were on probation annually. My job was to monitor those students to reach out to them to support them in the intervention mechanisms that we had.” While markers such as probation were key to identify potential caseloads, retention professionals also described how following up on key pieces of information, such as not registering for the next term, provided an opportunity to discern deeper issues that might be affecting a student’s overall success and experience. To that end, participants in the study often utilized critical points in student enrollment processes to initiate conversations about what support a student might need to continue in good standing at the institution. Anne, Director of Student Success and Retention at a large, public institution, described how the registration process served as the spark to contact students and initiate conversations about their plans and experiences:

We did a lot of individualized outreach this year to first-year students who hadn't registered at the end of advanced registration and then those individual phone calls, which turned into individual meetings with a lot of students. [We] helped students navigate holds, helped them get connected with advisors, helped them get registered, and next year we're going to expand that work you know to students in their second and third year.

When retention professionals learned that students had missed registration or perhaps were absent from class for an extended period of time, they did not simply send an email or

make a single phone call to initiate a conversation. Study participants shared how they sometimes went through great lengths to find those students and connect with them. Lois said:

I do go to the residence halls because I know them so well. I know exactly where to go and knock on people's doors and say, "Hey, do you know there are some professors who are worried about you? Come to my office, we need to talk."

Once retention professionals in this study connected with students and discussed their experiences, retention professionals were then able to provide assistance, coordinate a response, and/or to devise a plan of action for both the student and the institution. In many instances, retention professionals described how their support focused on navigating college processes and administrative procedures. In a case management role, retention professionals worked with students to address particular issues or challenges that required approvals from, or interaction with, various parties at the institution. They were not simply making a connection, but playing an active role in navigating administrative or bureaucratic processes that may have prohibited a student from continued enrollment. Lois shared an example of how an initial conversation initiated a more involved, complicated case-management response that required collaboration and coordination of both the student and campus colleagues:

I just dealt with a student who was going to withdraw from the College. I had this conversation with the student last week. The student was going to withdraw because of grandparents who did not support the student and some changes the student was going through, and they were pulling their financial support, and the student couldn't afford to be here. So the student was going to be withdrawing. I made arrangements, one, to get the money refunded to the grandfather, two, to get the student declared independent and to get enough financial aid. That student is going to be able to stay until graduation.

Similar to Lois's experience, Gloria—Assistant Director of Retention at a small, private college—felt that the role of a retention professional involved working with students and helping them see through campus processes that impacted their ability to make continued progress towards the degree. Recalling a recent experience, Gloria described how she worked closely with a student who needed to withdraw from a course due to health issues even though the deadline for withdrawing had passed. Gloria said:

So I laid out the steps that they need to take, and I attached the form that they need to do, and I made sure you have to have these signatures on two different pieces of paper and I don't know why there are two different. Please take both pieces of paper with you, so that you're not having to go back and do this again and have the same focus on the different pieces of paper; and I'm just trying to make those things, so that it's smoother for the students, so that they don't get frustrated with the process that we have in place.

Gloria's experience demonstrates how retention professionals, who experienced their position in terms of case management work, actively supported students in navigating these processes instead of simply referring them to another office or ignoring request for help of this nature. Milton, Director of Retention and Student Success, discussed the active role he took in understanding students' particular situation and needs, brokering solutions with faculty and staff, and ensuring that students were positioned to complete the necessary steps or processes to remain enrolled. While in the midst of registration for the following term, Milton revealed that a substantial part of his time was spent understanding and removing barriers that prevented students from completing their registration. Using the example of students whose financial situation delayed their registration, Milton shared what it took to work with students and colleagues in wading through institutional processes:

During this period of time, every day I am talking to financial aid about, “Okay, this student would like to return. This is what they say is happening. Are they maximizing the monies that are available? What if they took out a loan, what does that mean?” And then go through all those situations and bring financial aid into it so that I become a more informed person. As opposed to doing what a lot of offices do, which is “Oh, it sounds like you have financial aid problems. Go talk to financial aid.”

As Milton emphasized, he did not see his role as a switchboard operator, which would simply involve sending students over to financial aid who needed their assistance; instead, he sought to understand a student’s specific situation and needs and tried to engage both the student and the financial aid office to explore potential solutions. In this way, Milton revealed a different type of role from the switchboard operator, though these types of interactions were also centered on direct, one-on-one interactions with students.

For Kayla, whose portfolio included serving as an advisor for a group of 20 to 30 students, working with students in this way was not just about cutting through bureaucratic processes or helping students navigate administrative procedures and processes. It was part of a larger effort that centered on “intrusive” and “appreciative” advising, walking alongside and educating students rather than simply telling them what to do and sending them on their way. Kayla shared how midterm grades were key indicators for the intensity and type of case management approach that each advisee required:

After midterm grades, I’m on them like a lawnmower on grass depending upon what their grades are. If it's registration time we're talking about how to register for classes, or I'm teaching them how to use our system and showing them how to find classes, and check off their advising worksheet, and things like that.

For some participants, the case management role was not just about completing forms or navigating administrative processes, it was also about continual communication with students about their educational journey and experiences. Charles described how some students needed a person at the institution to listen to their plans and to help hold them accountable to those plans. Charles described serving as an “accountability buddy” for a group of students who were on academic warning or probation:

I've been meeting with students more than I did – more than ever this semester because I put myself up as an accountability buddy for students who completed the mid-year institute. So the mid-year institute is for students that are on academic warning or probation or their suspension was lifted, and it's a course that they have to complete in between semesters.

In this way, by serving as an “accountability buddy,” Charles could work with students individually and ensure that those who were coming off probation or suspension were on track with the new academic goals and expectations they had outlined through the program. Another study participant, Bella, also talked about how she organically became an accountability buddy for a few students at the institution, meeting with them frequently to monitor their progress:

We joke, like we do a lot of handholding, and sometimes we have students who want to meet with us weekly. We are more than happy to do it. They just need somebody to check in with them and just say like, “Okay, so here is the grade they got on this test. Here is what’s happening with this.” Oh wait, I didn’t do that and like we will give them a little to do. It’s like, okay, “This week you have to do these things,” and then we often will give them that academic plan for the week and say, “Okay, here is everything you need to do,” and like I have met with two young men now for two years consistently.

These examples reveal how retention professionals engaged students on so many different dimensions, from students' academic to personal experiences, which impacted their motivation and ability to successfully progress towards completion. However, Bella's experiences demonstrated that interactions sometimes were not perceived as educational or instructional but merely served to ensure students' continued progress against micro daily tasks. In the concept map exercise, Carrie emphasized the range of skills that she utilized during these one-on-one interactions with students. Carrie wrote, "In these meetings I must deploy a combination of skills: financial advice and referrals, academic advising, social-emotional counseling, and career counseling." During the interview, Carrie added:

I'm definitely not doing psychological counseling, I know where to draw the line on that and refer them over to my colleagues in that area, to our Counseling and Psychological Services. There are heavy, heavy conversations that for sure happen and I think – like I said, I feel more comfortable having those conversations and really trying to help the student work through what's going on.

In both the interview and concept map exercise, Carrie highlighted the challenges of providing comprehensive support to students. While recognizing the limits of professional background and expertise, Carrie emphasized how the case manager role attended to students' comprehensive experiences and needs and how such interactions could be quite demanding in terms of the required energy and time.

The time involved in enacting a case manager role was substantial, particularly those who were engaged directly in monitoring and communicating with students. Yet similar to the switchboard operator role, some retention professionals in the study were engaged in case management work despite not serving as a frontline case manager. For example, Erick did not

regularly meet with students to discuss their plans or to help them navigate institutional processes; however, one of the programs Erick helped design, develop, and launch involved case management of a targeted group of first-generation students. Erick was particularly interested in first-generation students who were not connected to other programs on campus, providing case management in a way that avoided the duplication of efforts. Erick described the new program:

So I went to the advisors and I said, “Hey I want to create this position, this is how it’ll work, we’re going to house this position physically in your office so these coaches are part of your advising community and your college culture but they’re going to work with a caseload of students that I identify by looking at the data.” So the way you get assigned to a success coach is that first of all you have to be a first-generation student. Second of all, we have a risk algorithm that we use to identify the students who aren’t likely to graduate in four years...But then we also make sure that these students who are being selected aren’t connected to other structured success programs.

While case management was a more common role experience among individuals at smaller campuses, it was not exclusive to retention professionals from such campuses. In fact, one of the participants at an institution with over 10,000 undergraduates leveraged technological resources to more quickly identify the students that were in most need of personal engagement and follow up. For example, Milton talked about how he focused on those students from the first-year cohort who did not register for the following fall term. Tracking individuals from this key group, first-year students, was crucial for the campus improving their official retention rate given the federal government’s methodology for measuring student retention as the reenrollment from students’ first year to the start of their second year.

But next Monday is like Super Bowl week because I'm going to take that 894 [first-year students who have not registered], that is likely going to go down to probably 150-175, and I'm going to start to look at those students individually and start to work with them individually. I mean, what are the financial situations? Can I talk to the advisor? Does the advisor have an appointment set up? Can I reach out? What are we talking about? Are we talking about \$500 is keeping you from coming back, but in your mind that's \$5,000? I think I can find \$500, but I need to know if that's what we are talking about. So, it is, cohort wise, we do a break down to that level and that amount of information.

In this way, even though there are thousands of students at the institution, Milton was aware of how many students were needed in order to hit certain retention metrics. For example, Milton stated that to reach the 75% fall to fall retention goal, the institution would need to see a specific number of students register and return for the second year. However, to get to that specific number, Milton first identified the approximately 150 to 175 students who were not registered for the following fall term. At that point, Milton worked closely with an even smaller group of students to discern why they were not planning to return and to address any barriers or obstacles that inhibited their continued enrollment.

Another retention professional in the study, Justin, worked at a campus of more than 10,000 undergraduates was also involved in targeted case management of a certain subset of students. In collaboration with a data specialist within the office, Justin identified a group of students on probation who had experienced challenges of some sort. Once identified, Justin then connected with the faculty to discern the type of intervention or the right connection that might best support the student. Justin described how they had recently followed up with a group of approximately 90 students:



So one thing I did over spring break was I primed 90 email messages to go out to an individual student -- all of their faculty. So I have these 90 emails that have gone out over the last week or so and then I get faculty responding to me, telling me here is what I'm seeing in this class or haven't seen the student at all and so then I'm able to follow-up by redirecting messages to our Student Success Center or to an academic advisor or to one of our supplementary advisors.

In this focused effort involving a group of 90 students, Justin was not simply connecting students but reaching out to faculty on campus to learn about the students' specific situation and needs. Based upon that information, Justin wanted to help devise a plan of action for each student given their unique situation and needs.

Retention professionals did not initiate their case management role only after receiving notification from a faculty member or after identifying students who missed a particular checkpoint. Instead, the retention professionals and their colleagues worked to case manage a group of students, or even the entire class of students, from the outset. As Gwen described, the retention team was involved tracking the entire cohort of students from the moment students become part of the class until their graduation. Gwen said:

From the point that a student receives their admission's letter, my team will start tracking those students and interacting with the students. And so -- and then we will continue to monitor those students. In some instances from a distance, but in most instances face to face through success coaching and other methods all the way through -- until graduation.

In this role, the retention professional oversaw an effort in which case management began for all students as soon as they become part of the class, with different levels of interaction and engagement throughout their time at the institution. The actual interactions took place with

academic success coaches, who Gwen described as full-time professionals who were “assigned to students from the point of admission and then students are required to meet with those students all the way up until graduation.” Gloria described a similar approach in case managing a group of students from the moment they are admitted to the institution. In this instance, the case management work occurred with students who were provided a conditional admission to the institution and not the entire class of students. In describing the program, Gloria said:

Part of the condition of their admission is to be in our program. And so what that program is, is they take those two credits of classes with us, the 102 and 101 [courses] in the fall, and then they have us as advisors for their entire first year in the campus. And the purpose of that is that they are connected with us.

Through the program at Gloria’s institution, her work is to connect students with advisors and create plans for monitoring and engaging with a group of students before they even set foot on campus. One of the retention professionals described a systematic effort to connect with students who experienced a difficult semester. In identifying those who experienced difficulties and who might benefit from intensive coaching and engagement, Lucas and his team sent out letters to students. In these letters, the team recognized that the semester did not go well for the student, but that they were invested in supporting the student to experience greater success in future terms. Lucas outlined the key components to the letters that the team sent:

We kind of have three principles. We acknowledge it, so they’re not going to be on probation or they’re not being dismissed, but they had a challenging semester. We noticed, it’s not uncommon for this to happen, and there are ways that we can help support you to make sure that it doesn't happen again, right. So it’s acknowledged, it's normalized, and then we’re in it together to help you, which is a lot different than dear

[John Doe], we noticed that you earned a 1.5, your cumulative GPA has dropped, and if this continues you'll be dismissed, right?

In describing the way they embodied the case management role, the phrase “we’re in it together to help you” stood at the core of how retention professionals engaged with students. For many of the participants, it was not just enough to provide a student with a piece of information or connect them to a campus resource. Their responsibility involves making a personal connection with students, identifying resources that would support progress towards completion, and then, perhaps most importantly, working together to achieve success. In this way, tracking students down in their residences or following up with intensive one-on-one interventions for those who may have experienced challenges was a major component of the retention professionals’ role.

### **Program Development**

In addition to working with students on an individual-level or on a case by case basis, several participants were involved in developing retention programs, events, or initiatives that engaged students across the campus. One retention professional described the wide range of programs and initiatives that fell within the job portfolio, from international and veterans centers to undergraduate research opportunities. In reflecting upon the units that comprised the student success and retention team, Erick said, “It’s a unique cluster of units to be titled Student Success and Retention, but I think it gives the nod that the campus believes that undergrad research, right, is a high impact practice, support and specialized services for students is a high impact practice and study abroad and global seminars all kind of contribute to engagement for students on this campus.”

Erick's reference to campus programs and services as high impact practices revealed a different role that retention professionals in the study enacted—a role which centered on the development of practices and programs that were perceived to be “high impact.” While the amount of direct programming or program supervision varied among participants, as did the specific types of programs and initiatives they worked on, several participants described their role in ensuring students had a positive experience at the institution and were engaged in enjoyable and meaningful academic and social experiences and programs.

**High Impact Practitioner.** When describing programmatic efforts and initiatives, study participants described how they attempted to further students' skills and knowledge, boost their affinity to the institution, increase their motivation to continue, and foster their relationships with peers and mentors who could make the institution smaller and more personable. By implementing and executing programs and initiatives, retention professionals sought to ensure students had opportunities to engage in various academic and social opportunities that supported their continued progress towards the degree. In this way, retention professionals paid close attention to students' experiences and sought to ensure they felt connected to the institution and motivated to complete their respective academic programs. The high impact practitioner role is not meant to suggest that retention professionals' efforts were ancillary to students' academic experience or that they lacked serious effort or rigor. The connection is that for many retention professionals in this study, their work involved attention to the whole student experience by actively devising and implementing programs or interventions meant to enhance their experiences.

Charles, whose job title was “Retention Program Manager,” built a program for students to get to know campus in a more meaningful and sustained way. Charles developed a “passport”

for students, which they used to navigate and reflect upon several different areas and programs that take place at the institution. Charles shared how this program had been the culmination of much effort and it was being discussed as a required part of the first-year seminar program, potentially expanding participation from about 250 students to over 900. Charles shared:

The passport kind of helps students get out of their comfort zone and makes them participate in different things. There are five outcome categories. So there is academic success, sense of belonging, sense of identity, responsible citizenship and global perspectives and then students have to complete one activity per outcome to get credit for the passport.

Other participants were also involved in the various orientation or transition initiatives that introduced students to the campus and to the resources available to them. Heidi, Director for Student Success at a large, public university, described efforts to address transfer students needs and how she went about holding focus groups and administering surveys to learn about what they wanted. As a result of that process, Heidi devised a transfer orientation program, called the Transfer Transition, in which students were introduced to campus resources and opportunities:

This past semester we did it for the first time. It was kind of our pilot where we called it Transfer Transition. We had a nice lunch available for them. We had somebody from the Center for Student Activities, the little “hoorah” people, come in and did information about how to set a goal. “We’re just going to talk about one goal. We want to help you set a goal for this first semester that you’re at [the Institution]. And by the way, we’ve got this helpful guide for you of all the resources that are available. So at the tables, we’ve made into a game format, kind of like jeopardy.”

While a number of study participants worked on programs that centered on students' transition to the institution, retention professionals sought to implement programs that would provide longer-term, consistent support over the course of a year or perhaps students' entire collegiate experience. Some of the programs participants supervised included federal TRiO programs or other student support centers and services that had been part of the campus but were rearranged to fit within the retention portfolio. There were other types of programs that retention professionals designed and implemented as part of new efforts to address student retention. Brooke, Assistant Vice President for Student Success at a private institution, described recent, on-going efforts to introduce a program devised specifically to support first-generation students. Brooke described how the program was being designed, implemented, and coordinated across the campus:

I've already gotten a blessing from the [President's] cabinet to move forward with the first-generation program. But you know in an effort to reduce siloing and duplication of efforts, I was meeting with the School of Business who had been talking about creating their own mentor program. And so we folded them in to ours and we are going to roll out hopefully this week an invitation for faculty and staff – for faculty, staff, alumni to register to serve as mentors. And then we'll recruit the students, first-year students, over the summer to see if they would like to participate in that first-generation student mentor program.

In the case of Brooke's program, a notable challenge involved coordinating with another unit who had similar plans and ideas to avoid duplicating programs. Efforts to avoid duplication, or to coordinate among a group of programs or offices to create synergies, was an important part of program design and development process. For example, Chelsea, Director of Retention at a

medium sized, public institution, created an event to support continuing students' registration for the upcoming semester, arguing that registering students for the subsequent term before they departed for vacation would significantly bump up the persistence rate at the institution. Thus, to promote and facilitate students' registration, Chelsea transformed registration from a process into an event which required the coordination and participation of many colleagues across the campus. Chelsea reflected on the challenges of bringing so many people together for an event that had never happened before at the institution:

Registration happens for us in the evening, and so I said, "Well, why not have a registration one-stop event where students can come –" they're not in class, I understand some commuters would have to make an additional trip but... There's nothing happening in the evening. I'm talking about 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. in the evening. We're going to have these registration events, we're going to link it to when registration opens and a student could, in essence, come in and take care of all of their business all at once. They can get advice, they can meet with a financial aid person, they can pay a bill if they have to, but all of that is taken care of from 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. And the biggest pushback I got was from faculty and staff saying, "I don't want to work those hours. Students should figure out when to come during the day." I mean, that was a hard sell.

As Chelsea's experience revealed, one challenge was to conceptualize and design an event; the other difficult part was to inspire others to join in an effort that had not been done before and which required colleagues to approach their work in different ways. Esther, Assistant Vice President for Student Success, created a similar, collaborative event, whereby the student success colleagues—those who worked within the academic colleges but who also reported to Esther—set up booths outside on the quad and spent time interacting with students. Coordinating

with the deans and making the case for why all of the divisions should come together required a substantial amount of convincing and coordinating. Ultimately, the event created connections and fostered collaboration between many different administrators and units across the campus, resulting in a program that engaged students and raised awareness about student success resources. In describing the event, Esther shared:

We did put it on and what happened is everybody came out, everybody, all the associate deans, the whole teams, the assistant deans, the career specialists. Everybody was out there and we were giving away our little things to students, and we were tracking every student ... And so I did the same [event] again last year, and the next one is coming up. But that first one, it turned into the greatest success. Everyone was out there, everyone realized they'd never been together before. That it was actually really nice for everyone to be out there helping each other and talking to students.

The idea of “selling” a program or fostering collaboration or coordination across a number of units was a key part of the overall process of implementing practices and programs. Erick talked about the process of devising and implementing new programs and how such efforts required a considerable amount of time to launch, particularly when others were unsure as to how new programs would impact student progress and success.

And I would say building a new program like the success coaching program, I mean that program is only in its second year. But I had to really socialize this notion of students can benefit from having a success coach, and it's different than an academic advisor and it's different than a career counselor. And on this campus that took me almost a year, a year and a half just to socialize it, create funding for it, build the program and then continue to report out on the data.



The programs and initiatives were not only co-curricular programs or retention-focused events like the ones devised by Chelsea and Esther, several retention professionals sought to build or develop academic programs, including tutoring programs, supplemental instruction programs, credit recovery programs, or academic courses. Retention professionals in the study who reported up through academic units, such as to the Vice President of Academic Affairs or Associate Provost of Academic Services, focused on programs that enhanced students' academic experiences and ability to maintain forward progress along the academic path towards the baccalaureate. For example, Kayla, who reported to the Vice President of Academic Affairs, maintained a portfolio that included the campus's academic resource center. As a result, Kayla's efforts centered on number of academic initiatives and interventions. When describing one of the key programs, Kayla shared:

We also are responsible for a program called Academic Recovery and that's for second semester freshman. It is kind of like a boot camp but not. They have to take a class with us. We teach them a lot of skills, we survey them to kind of get a feeling for what happened in the fall academically, socially, behaviorally so that we can figure out how can we best help... This is the second semester that I'm not teaching. It's way too many responsibilities. I'm very heavily involved with the design of the program but I also want the people in my department, I want them to feel like they have some independence and autonomy to create a better program. We actually just redid the entire program.

Similarly, Carrie oversaw an academic program, Students Taking Academic Responsibility, for conditionally admitted students as well as those who are on probation. While Carrie had transitioned the daily work of the program to a colleague's responsibilities, Carrie still maintained supervisory responsibilities for the program and monitored its progress:

They've got to be in this program to try and help make sure to either get them transitioned into the institution well as a new freshman or transfer student, or admissions thinks they might have some stumbling blocks and try and help retain and make sure that they do well, and then students on probation—get them back off probation and put them back in good academic standing. I now have a Director of Academic Services who reports to me and she primarily takes care of that.

These types of efforts revealed that “programs” were not always co-curricular efforts or focused on students’ social experiences; in fact, a number of programs that were part of study participants’ job responsibilities involved these types of programs meant to maintain or accelerate students’ success in the classroom. Lucas, a Dean of Retention and Student Success, described an event that his unit had designed to inform students about summer opportunities. When checking in on the event, Lucas sought to boost student participation and get students excited about attending and learning about various summer experiences that would contribute to student success:

If you had walked into me a couple of weeks ago, I would've been touring the [University Commons] and I would've said “Hey, do you know about the summer opportunities fair that is going on this week?” And if you said, no, I'd say, “Well, let me ask you this: how would you like to be able to graduate earlier and have less debt upon graduation?” And so the joke was they could tell when I was over there volunteering because the student traffic I mean, basically I had a 30 second pitch to try to hook you that gets you into thinking about it.

Gwen, who was also not involved in the actual preparation and execution of programs and events, talked about engaging with such efforts, coordinating with colleagues across campus,

and maintaining a presence with these efforts. For Gwen, supervising the First-Year Experience program meant that programmatic initiatives focused on a common book program for incoming students, a peer mentoring program, and other orientation initiatives. The position's focus on these types of programs was what initially attracted Gwen to the position, providing an opportunity "to go back to my roots with some of the orientation and first-year type programming." At the same time, the role also provided avenues for Gwen "to become more invested in my interest with retention, with assessment and again, have that ability to touch multiple functional areas to work across the campus." In describing how she interacted with the programmatic elements of the job, Gwen said:

And so, of course, we have a Student Activities Department, but through First-Year Experience, we try to be a little bit more intentional with some of the programs that we provide... And so making sure that I'm present and involved with those programs so that way students are aware of who we are, how we support them.

Even among participants who did not implement or supervise colleagues who were responsible for program development and implementation, retention professionals could still participate and support campus programming and the development of high impact practices. Daryl, Assistant Vice President for Student Success, described recent efforts to support and encourage undergraduate research on the campus as part of the campus's overall strategy. Even though such opportunities did not fall within Daryl's portfolio like it did for Erick, Daryl discussed his involvement in strategy sessions meant to further develop the undergraduate research program at the institution. Drawing upon the higher education literature, Daryl explained how his efforts connected to the retention program and campus strategy:

The research is clear that if students are involved in one-on-one mentor research at the undergraduate level, they're much more likely to complete and then go on to graduate school. And so this has become a primary strategy for us and so a specific example is last week, we spent a lot of time talking about recruitment strategies for faculty of color to participate in undergraduate research. And then also demystifying a process for a lot of our students of color, who are also a first generation, to predict their likely entree into undergrad research and artistry.

In addition to specific events or programs, retention professionals described programmatic efforts that were focused on fostering an affinity to the campus or creating connections between students and various support offices and programs. Seth described how the programmatic efforts sought to acknowledge students' presence and value to the community as well as raise awareness about key retention initiatives such as the registration process or the office's semiannual student survey. Seth described how programmatic efforts sought to minimize the frustration and challenges during students' course registration process:

And we do a ton of programming. And oftentimes, our programming is – so like our students – for registration, for example, we did all those registrations dates. So we buy a ton of snacks and we stick labels on them, just like, “Welcome back. We know that you have been in the line for probably an hour, and hour and a half, so we're just going to give you a snack. We don't want anything from you. We're just saying we appreciate you being here.”

Charles organized a similar effort, called mid-semester crunch, when student workers went around campus giving students Crunch bars midway through the semester. Unlike Seth's efforts to simply affirm students' presence, the goal of Charles' initiative was to encourage students to

come in for a personal meeting if they needed support, particularly if they had been feeling stressed about their academic responsibilities during their midterms. In the previous year, Charles experienced great success from the program, with a number of students following up on the “Crunch” message, that Charles had planned a more expansive program in the coming year. Charles said, “Last year, that event got to be so large that students were waiting for me for so long because as I am just one person. So I had to – I asked the professional advisors and they're going to come and help me this year. So I am actually going to have five people ready for students to talk through these kind of things.”

While Charles’s midterm crunch event yielded more participants than anticipated, retention professionals also described challenges in actively engaging students in optional programs. Justin, who supervised federal TRiO programs and other campus services, discussed the frustration at the lack of student participation in various programs. Justin said:

We put these programs in place and there are no teeth to them. They are just kind of our best practice recommendations for students and then we are puzzled because they don't show up. And so we spend a lot of time wondering why we planned a program that could – easily should be, we'll say, attractive to 150 students and we've got 27 sitting there end up in the auditorium for example. So we are puzzled by student engagement components.

Brooke acknowledged that depending upon a person’s perspective, attendance at the weekly academic support workshops offered by her unit, which had grown from two students to ten students, could have been viewed as a success or failure. Regardless of the interpretation of the attendance figures, retention professionals recognized that a perennial challenge to program or service design and implementation involved building students’ interest, support, and participation. Milton, who oversaw the campus Writing Center, discussed recent conversations

that sought to reframe the approach to student participation. Milton said, “Right now we’re kind of like, ‘We are here, come see us.’ Can we go to them? Can we take the people that we hired and go to them and realize that we get more utilization by going to class that we know needs help as opposed to just waiting for that class to find us.” Reframing how students engaged with optional programming revealed that retention professionals were considering new strategies and approaches to address the lingering reality that student participation in optional programming is likely to be lower than administrator expectations.

Despite the challenges of student participation, a number of study participants perceived their role and responsibilities in terms of program development and implementation. In this way, retention professionals relied upon research and frameworks which emphasized involvement and engagement as keys to student persistence and completion of the baccalaureate. Whether academic or social in focus, retention professionals’ programmatic efforts attempted to create opportunities for many students to develop their skills and confidence, build their networks, and gain valuable experiences that would hopefully lead individual students to remain at the institution and make timely progress to successfully earning a degree.

### **Community Education and Organization**

In addition to the programs and initiatives retention professionals designed and implemented, a number of participants sought to leverage their position to educate the community about their students’ actual enrollment patterns and realities. In addition, retention professionals sought to form collaborative partnerships that reviewed, challenged, and changed institutional processes, policies, attitudes, and approaches to student retention. In these ways, retention was not described in terms of an individual student’s progress or a single program’s effect; rather, retention was viewed from what Carrie described as the 10,000-foot view. When

discussing his work as a retention professional, Lucas, Dean of Retention and Student Success, emphasized how student retention work was about the organizational components and not a single student's decision to remain enrolled for another term. Lucas said:

My job is not to retain you...My job is to help support the person and attend to the environmental conditions that allow that person to achieve, through behavior, what it is they'd like to do...I have the opportunity to think about how to help people and how to create environments that can help people. And if I do that well—retention, persistence, degree completion, job attainment—those are outcomes.

As Erick emphasized, it was challenging work to consider the environment and to address the conditions at the institution that may promote or discourage student retention. According to Erick, part of the challenge in this role was not being directly connected to an individual student's story of earning a baccalaureate degree.

I just feel that a good portion, probably in a given week or even a given year, over half the things I'm doing are only maybe tangentially connected to students walking across the stage and getting their degree. But it's more fostering the conditions of the student experience that we hope and pray ultimately lead to that outcome.

While attending to the environment felt difficult for Erick, another study participant Justin emphasized that efforts to influence the faculty and staff mindsets as well as the processes that affect student retention felt more within their locus of control. According to Justin, retention work should not focus solely on individual student decisions but should also consider the attitudes and beliefs of faculty and staff as well as the processes and experiences that influence students' experiences and decisions. In this way, Justin felt the campus could make strides in graduating a larger percentage of students in a timely manner. Justin said:

The position is about the process and there are results that we cannot control because of those variables that are obvious to us. Students are difficult to command. But we can control processes and we can control the mindset. We can shape the mindset of faculty and staff on campus. And when we are more student-centered, then we are benefiting students and we have to believe that the outcome will follow from kind of rigid attention to that process.

Professionals in this study discussed two different types of roles they enacted when focusing on the institutional processes and environments relating to student success and retention: epidemiologist and community organizer. The following section details these two roles, highlighting how study participants saw their role as key to addressing the institutional processes and conditions that impacted students' successful and timely degree attainment.

**Epidemiologist.** Oftentimes, student interactions and campus programs were connected to, or informed by, an understanding of retention scholarship and literature or institution-specific data. Many retention professionals were engaged in examining trends in student enrollment patterns and spent time identifying common reasons why students left the institution or when they were most likely to do so. Drawing upon both current and historical data sources, some retention professionals in this study became campus experts on why students departed the institution or which experiences at the institution likely affected attrition. Having formed an in-depth understanding of the patterns of student enrollment, retention professionals sought to engage with colleagues across the campus to inform them of the information and communicate their findings.

In this way, retention professionals served as the institution's resident epidemiologist, investigating causes of attrition and educating the campus community about the phenomenon.



According to the United States Department of Labor and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), epidemiologists “are public health professionals who investigate patterns and causes of disease and injury in humans. They seek to reduce the risk and occurrence of negative health outcomes through research, community education, and health policy.” While retention professionals went about their work in different ways, and leveraged different resources to collect and analyze data, many assumed the responsibility of becoming campus experts in student enrollment patterns and communicated that to campus leadership and colleagues.

***Research as Part of the Job.*** Among retention professionals in this study, many were involved in collecting and analyzing data to more fully understand the landscape of student persistence and attrition. They served as experts on patterns of student enrollment, and they described how they spent time learning about student enrollment patterns that might not have been apparent or known at the institution prior to their work. Christopher described this role in the following way:

In the nearly six years I have held my role, I have become a source of truth regarding why students leave. I spend lots of time with spreadsheets analyzing our student cohorts and the changes in them over the decade to glean areas where the University could improve.

The opportunity to discern patterns and dig into research was particularly important to participants’ first months on the job, as they used that time to uncover key information or identify patterns that were not immediately known. In describing the transition to the role of Director of Retention, Chelsea outlined how the initial efforts were focused on understanding what was happening with enrollments and if there were clear patterns to discern.

That first semester of fall of 2016, I really just spent answering those three questions of who, when, and why, right? Who's leaving, why are they leaving, what can we do, how can we fix that? So I was able to really drill that down by going and speaking with faculty and staff, speaking with students, meeting with those who were struggling, finding out what resources we have, finding out what resources we don't have, and really coming up with a picture of what's happening in terms of progression, graduation, and retention on our campus. So that was the first semester.

With regards to the data collection and analysis, retention professionals in the study described how the campus community was typically familiar with the first-year rates of retention as well as the four-, five-, or six-year graduation rates. Those figures, which are reported annually and published by the federal government, are standardized ways that campuses have measured retention and baccalaureate attainment. However, given that the student path from college entry to departure is a multifaceted and multiyear process, retention professionals often referenced many other metrics they developed and used to understand student enrollment patterns and to track progress against their goals or past benchmarks. For some retention professionals, their efforts involved introducing new data analyses and new ways to consider student retention. Anne, Director of Student Success and Retention, said:

We're always being asked to report on fall-to-fall retention and that's such a focus in our reporting to the Board of Regents and our reporting internally. But we had never looked at fall-to-spring retention, we don't have to report on that. So there was nothing, there was no historical data on that, and so we worked with IR and they developed a dashboard that now I can check on a daily basis whenever I want to that shows how many students you know from fall to spring have registered and how does that compare to last year.

As Anne described, an exciting part of the role involved measuring and assessing retention in ways that introduced new sources of information and insights to the campus community. In addition, the research was not only historical in seeing how the institution tracked over time, but also how the current moment (often in terms of registration) compared against past years. Thus, the retention professionals were engaged in accessing real-time data to assess how current processes were tracking and whether the institution would experience gains or losses in key metrics in advance of the point at which such metrics are measured. During the campus registration period, Milton examined registration counts on a daily basis and worked to understand why enrollments were tracking the way they were. Milton said:

I would say that on a daily basis, I try to gauge where [we're at], especially during the registration season that has hit. The last couple of weeks has been registration where graduate students, senior students, sophomores, in that order and then freshmen are registering for class. I'm able to do more data mining and be accurate on a daily basis. To be able to go in and see what trends are occurring? Are we up or down on a certain area and if we are, can I identify why?

The extent to which retention professionals had prior experience in research or assessment varied, with some describing the steep learning curve in conducting research and analysis. The use of data and research was not something that study participants necessarily had experience with before they assumed their role. Lois discussed how the transition into the retention role brought about opportunities to dive into data analysis:

I'm doing a lot with data but I'm not our data expert so I've got a really good working relationship with our Institutional Research folks who happen to be just down the hall from me. Thank God. And they have dragged me kicking and screaming into data land.

Because of them I have now learned how to do pivot tables and I've just started playing around with VLOOKUPS and the fact that I'm even using those terms is just stunning to me because two years ago I would never have used those terms. So I'm much more engaged with that sort of thing now.

While many of the retention professionals were heavily involved in investigating patterns of success or attrition, there were different ways in which they went about it. Some professionals relied on their institutional research departments to conduct the analyses or create reports while others spent more time collecting their own data or conducting their own analyses. Daryl and Clinton described how their relationship with the institutional research teams allowed them to access timely and relevant information without having to wait in a queue or spend time sorting through raw data files. Daryl said:

The Provost and the President has told IR that student success is their number one priority in addition to accreditation. And so we are prioritized in terms of our data requests and we ask IR to run reports for us all the time and they produce those really quickly, and so I don't have to do that on my own.

In a similar way, Clinton, Assistant Vice President of Student Success at a medium-sized, public institution, discussed how he leaned on the institution's research team to access and analyze key enrollment metrics:

I rely on the work of IREC, Department of Institutional Effectiveness. They currently produce and run all of the reports that I need, however with my new platform I'm able to do, with our Campus Collaborative Platform, I'm able to pull a lot of data that I would normally have to wait for them to get. So normally I can log in and just request a report on performance, GPA, courses, sections, things of that nature, data, and it's a huge piece

because we have to look at retention when we do our programs, you know what students are involved, are those students returning. That is a huge piece of this position.

Though many of the retention professionals discussed their work with data collection and analyses, in some instances reviewing data and checking reports on a daily basis, not every participant was fully engaged in this process. One of the participants described that how the strategic planning process pointed to increased need for data collection systems, such as early alert, as well as a deeper understanding of what characteristics or experiences might confer with student attrition. Charles described a desire to dig into the data in greater depth, but also recognized the limitations in so doing. Charles said:

The last piece, for me anyways, is to develop a method to identify and support students who may be at greater risk for withdrawing from college. So one [approach] is to develop data collection and analysis to assist in efforts to determine students who are at risk for withdrawing. Because I am a one-person shop, it is hard for me to sit down with data a lot. I know I really should be, but it's hard to keep all the balls in the air plus do that.

While Charles had a desire to incorporate data analysis more fully into the work portfolio, other demands and time constraints, along with less direct access to campus data and research colleagues, made it difficult to do so.

***Investigating Who Leaves and Why They Do.*** While retention professionals sought to identify patterns and gain insights into students' path from start to finish, a number of study participants described a specific interest in learning why students stopped out or dropped out of the institution. Engaging with students while they were still on campus but had expressed interest in leaving, or shortly after they had left, provided valuable information. A subset of retention professionals established or improved processes for engaging with, and learning from, students

who were potentially departing the institution. The specific interactions that the retention professionals described ranged from direct, face-to-face meetings to online surveys. No matter the specific format, the goal of these interactions was to fill in the gaps of what was previously unknown at the institution.

Study participants described how before their role was created, students at an institution might have requested a transcript to transfer or shared their intentions to staff or faculty without much follow up. However, a group of retention professionals in the study established ways to identify and connect with these students. While the goal was to gain a deeper understanding of who leaves and why they leave, personal meetings also provided retention professionals with an opportunity to discern whether there were any scenarios in which a student would remain at the institution. For example, Christopher was notified anytime a student requested a transcript from the institution in order to complete a transfer application at another institution.

I meet with students doing well and showing no signs of non-success but who are considering transferring. These interactions have been the most valuable to the University precisely because they never happened before because it was too difficult to identify these students. Now, with the help of online transcript request systems, I am able to meet with between 80-100 students like this each academic year and collect their feedback. It is also an opportunity for [the institution] to intervene in their planned departure, if possible.

In a similar way, Gloria met with students who might have been transferring at the end of the term. Gloria said:

In my role, I also meet with students who have identified an interest in leaving the college for one reason or another at the end of the existing term. My role is to help that

exit be as smooth as possible as well as talk through the reasons why they want to leave and determine if there are interventions we can offer to help them stay, or if the reasons they need to leave are beyond criteria we can control as a college.

Another retention professional had started a pilot initiative in coordination with the enrollment management team to follow up with students who did not continue from the fall to spring terms. By connecting with students who had stopped out, Bella hoped to develop a more accurate and evidenced-based understanding as to why students had left and what it might take to prevent further departures in the future or how they could recover some of the students who had departed.

Next week our Vice President from Enrollment Management, she wants us to pilot each of us taking about five to 10 students who have stopped out who were academically eligible to come back this semester but chose not to. So I worked on a script last week. She gave me some feedback, so we are tweaking that script again. And our office is going to pilot calling five to 10 students to see why did they stop out, what was their experience like, how do we get them to come back.

One of the study participants Anne sought to interact with students who were leaving the institution by way of a survey, which at the time of the interview, was in the development phase. Anne spoke to their recent efforts to devise a data collection strategy that would yield more in-depth and systematic information about students' decisions to leave the institution:

I was asked to come in and speak to the Data and Research Council, and so this is something led by institutional research, and I've been working with them to develop what we're calling a "leaver study," to get better information on why students leave. And so, I

came and spoke to that group to share a draft of the survey we developed to answer questions about when and how that might go out, what we could learn from it.

In these instances, retention professionals acknowledged that such interactions could provide an opportunity to address the reasons behind a student's decision to depart the institution. At the same time, they discussed their interest in learning more about why students were leaving and how those reasons might be able to inform the campus about the conditions or situations that compel students to stop out or transfer. The way retention professionals in this study compiled information about why students departed the institution, identified patterns from those conversations, and shared information with colleagues furthered the development of their epidemiologist role.

On the other hand, simply meeting with students who were at the point of departure did not necessarily lead to this type of role and responsibility. For example, Charles also met with individuals who expressed an interest in leaving; however, in describing this process of meeting students about to stop out or transfer, the interactions took place under different circumstances and in a different context than other participants. Charles described the process which initiated conversations with students who were about the transfer. Charles said:

I get students, when they check into the top floor, which is where Students Services actually is, so that's where you can make your payment on your bill, meet with financial aid, that sort of thing, like the transactional piece of Student Services. Anytime they mention the word 'withdraw', somebody physically walks them down to my office and I have to kind of talk them through it. Now, I wish I got to meet with that student long before they decide to press that button... So I kind of show them how to withdraw. I also kind of talk through, okay, here is your plan for return, so I will be like if you are coming



back in the fall, let's go ahead and get your advising appointment scheduled, so you can get to the classes for the fall.

Unlike others who were attempting to discern the causes and patterns of student departure, Charles's interactions were more transactional, focusing on the process of stopping out. In this way, Charles' interactions in this context was more akin to a case manager. The focus was on the retention professional showing students how to complete a campus process as well as making a concerted effort to discuss their next steps for when, or if, they decided return to the campus rather than creating a larger picture of the forces behind why students depart the institution and what could be done to disrupt the departures.

***Predicting Risk.*** An additional component for some participants involved statistical analyses to predict which students were less likely to persist or graduate. These analyses involved identifying students who, given a set of particular characteristics or experiences, might be among those who stop out before earning their degree. Retention professionals relied upon their early alert software's built-in prediction tools to produce these probabilities, though one participant had conducted her own analysis to predict students' likelihood to continue and complete their degrees. One of the study participants, Seth, described how the campus's early alert software calculated how likely individual students were to depart the institution. Seth shared how student responses to an initial survey were used to predict risk of attrition:

From that survey, once they respond, a risk indicator is developed through their algorithm, so showing the students who are – we're going to find students who are high-risk, medium-risk, low-risk or super high-risk. And that is done with combination of student information that we upload and how students are responding with their student experience.

Kayla also described the alerts they received from their early alert software about students and the probability they departed the institution.

They create what's called a PowerALERT and they use a bunch of different data you know, how far away is the student from our college, what's their EFC [Expected Financial Contribution], things like that. And so, it gives us information initially right off the bat about students as being a potential student that we might lose.

Unlike other study participants who relied upon third-party software to identify "at-risk" students, Carrie developed and refined her own, campus-specific, statistical model to predict retention rates for the student body. These rates were critical for a campus whereby the main source of revenue was their tuition dollars. As a result, the statistical model was used not only to identify students who might not persist but then also to inform the development of enrollment targets and budget expectations for the coming terms. Carrie said:

And the three of us several years ago, gosh, it's almost been probably three or four or even five going on, created a predictive model to try and predict continuing student enrollment as well as the number of students that are going to complete a degree. And this is for all of our traditional undergraduate students.

While predicting students' likelihood of persistence or graduation was not a common or a fundamental component of the experience to the group of participants in the study, this component did align with the broader efforts to collect and analyze data regarding student progression to the baccalaureate. In addition, the predictive analyses were one avenue through which retention professionals sought to identify trends and to understand why students might not attain their baccalaureate degree from the institution. These predictive tools were also crucial for

a subset of study participants to plan for targeted, intrusive interventions as well as to calculate the expected enrollment figures for subsequent terms and years.

*Community Education.* For the retention professionals, the role and relationship to data involved more than investigating student attrition, becoming experts in historical trends, or assessing how current information compared to past years. A key component to the role was sharing the information across the institution, informing campus leaders about the trends they had identified, and making the case for what types of interventions and changes were needed to address challenges they had identified. While describing the new information or insights they acquired, and in some cases discovered, the retention professionals also outlined their efforts to communicate the information so that others within the organization could be informed about students' specific and actual enrollment patterns. Christopher recalled how sharing information early in his tenure led to additional invitations to share more data in a number of different venues across campus:

When we started showing [the Deans] that there was an ability to get a high amount of quality research out of a given cohort and find some really fascinating things, I think they were happy to invite me to meet with some of their upper level faculty, some of their department chairs, and that's really how it's gone from there on out is that once we were able to describe with strong data, what we were seeing, they were all too happy to sort of become part of the solution.

Along the same lines, Daryl described how engaging with colleagues and sharing data and information were key elements to the role:

We share the data, we share kind of the larger institutional vision and then we ask departments and units to innovate, and market to their students and their constituencies however they see fit. And so I think that's how it's largely playing out.

These examples from Christopher and Daryl revealed how the sharing of information not only facilitated the flow of information across the campus, it also encouraged and inspired colleagues to take action and to do something that would disrupt any trends that were perceived to be problematic or that fell short of institutional goals, targets, or aspirations. While Daryl relied upon institutional research colleagues to conduct and prepare analyses, Milton described how new technological resources improved his ability to share key data with various constituents on campus. Milton said:

I've gotten better at my job because of resources that were available to me. We had purchased several years ago Blackboard Analytics and we're using that platform for data information and mining. That has just continued to get better in what I'm able to see and do. And the information I'm able to provide to departments, to the advisors on campus, to faculty members, to deans and chancellors and provosts.

As outlined by Christopher, Daryl, and Milton, part of retention professionals' work involved communicating and sharing information with many campus constituencies, including senior leadership. Furthermore, retention professionals detailed efforts to extend presentations on student retention data beyond simple refreshes of the institution's fall-to-fall retention numbers or six-year graduation rates. They sought to identify "really fascinating things" through a more in-depth process of "mining" data by leveraging new tools and technologies. In his concept map, Lucas identified the importance of not just data analysis but of "data mining." Lucas's concept map included a drawing of a person sandwiched between strings of 1's and 0's. When asked to

further elaborate on the concept map, Lucas talked about how important it was to provide information to institutional actors. Lucas felt that most people at the institution wanted to do good things, but that getting everyone to agree on what to do and how to do it was the challenge. For some, building a common understanding through insightful and relevant data was key to affecting positive change on campus. Lucas said:

If you can't start off with some insight and then you can't use that insight to kind of prop up the actions, it's a lot more difficult to narrow the focus and to do some things that are strategic and that's where I sit right now. So it's one part logistics in terms of data and, a second part, the human relations and lobbying.

Lucas's comments revealed how data analyses was only part of the process. As Kayla shared during the interview, the process of mining data and identifying key insights was only part of the challenge. The other component involved communicating with colleagues, facilitating shared understandings, and creating the space and opportunity for that to happen. Kayla described how she started to share information with faculty, including data that linked advisors with students' likelihood to persist. Recent developments provided new opportunities for Kayla to engage faculty around data, thus incorporating community education elements into the role:

I think we're doing some really good work with revealing this information and sharing it, this has never been done, and ever since my supervisor left, a lot of faculty committees have now invited me to be a participant on their committees and we were never involved in that. So, it's very interesting to be allowed to come to some of these committee meetings and share this information with them.

Embedded within Kayla's description about sharing the data with various faculty committees was the notion that they were invited. In this way, the retention professional's

process of sharing data required an invitation from the faculty committees. This reinforced Lucas's discussion of the challenging human component to sharing data and how complex the epidemiologist role was for retention professionals. It was not simply looking at data or becoming familiar with aspects of the student experience, there were additional challenges of communicating with the campus community in the right forms, and in the right way, so the information could be absorbed and utilized to enact change.

While data was often shared with campus constituencies, there were other examples where retention professionals were engaged with sharing information outside of the institution and with the local community. Gwen analyzed data regarding students who attended local high schools and districts. That information was then passed onto senior administrators at the university, who in turn shared with local high school leadership.

We use 15 to finish, sort of like a graduation pledge program here, so 15 hours each semester. So we do closely monitor that. I receive, I would call it, not a fancy title, but [my] Mega Query. It is like the giant spreadsheet from our IR department that gives me everything from high school, high school rank, all the way up to what grades they make in English or collage algebra. So I will provide reports to our vice president by school district as well as school – she actually meets with the superintendents and principals to discuss their application completion – that comes from enrollment – and then also how they're performing, that comes from me.

In another instance, Lucas worked with the local community to conduct a needs assessment regarding how the institution could support students interested in pursuing certain credentials or educational experience.

The surrounding counties have an initiative focused on literacy and supporting adults going back to college. So you might call this a recapture of students who have earned some credits toward a degree but haven't graduated and/or have not completed a high school or GED. So I work with the local literacy initiative. So I spent three hours with them working on a study to get a better sense of both the need and then local businesses that have employees where we could offer on-site training and development.

Although these were not particularly common experiences across the retention professionals in the study, these additional projects and initiatives underscored retention professionals' role in communicating data within and beyond the institution to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. Retention professionals described how their data analysis and communication efforts contributed to change on campus. Daryl said:

We've got some really strong institutional data that actually the four week mark seems to be predictive for both end of term on success rates, but also overall retention and graduation rates. And so we're trying to shift the institution to think earlier, we're incentivizing faculty to provide early low stakes, but graded assessments in the first four weeks, so that students can get a better sense of what preparation looks like in that course and we can do targeted interventions even earlier.

In this way, Daryl's efforts to shift strategy and encourage different actions among faculty colleagues was grounded in an assessment of college data that highlighted a key tipping point in students' academic experiences. Similarly, Esther also talked about changes the institution was making after reviewing data on the relationship between developmental education courses and student retention and completion.

The data—we have just clear evidence that it's been—25% of those students in remedial [courses] will be gone within a year. And it was not even half of them, I think it was only 37% of them finished in six years, if they started out [in remedial]. Because there's plenty of research now that shows you need to start them. It doesn't matter where they placed, but remedial doesn't speed them out, it slows them down. So, we've had to do new things. We have to do supplemental instruction, or stretch courses and all different strategies to build up their skills without dragging them down in other ways.

For many study participants, their work to understand data, recognize historical trends and patterns of enrollment, and then educate others was a key part of their job and their daily efforts. While the epidemiologist role involved campus-wide partnerships and interactions, particularly when sharing information and educating the community, retention professionals did not stop there. For many, they built upon their knowledge and expertise, and they leveraged their relationships and connections to engage in conversations and processes meant to facilitate and encourage change. However, creating change required more from the retention professionals than data analysis and communication; it involved mobilizing and motivating colleagues across the campus to advance an agenda of student success.

**Community Organizer.** A common perception among retention professionals was that student retention required the collaboration, effort, and participation of everyone at the institution. It was not a single person's job. While acknowledging the need for faculty and staff to work together in advancing student success, retention professionals described the lengths they went to bring people together to collectively address issues they found impeding student success. Given that colleges and universities are complex organizations, and in some cases enroll tens of thousands of students, individuals within different functional areas may act in parallel or, at



times, in opposing ways. The community organizer role that retention officers assumed was about building support for a cause, about bringing people together to advance an issue, and about creating a common purpose and sense of unity within complex organizations.

One of the retention professionals, Gwen, discussed the process for identifying key issues for improving student retention and engaging faculty and staff to spark collaboration.

I'm often reviewing policies, talking to staff whether they'd be frontline staff or up to my directors, monitoring what is happening in their departments and how that is impacting the student experience. And then as opposed to going directly to the students to understand those circumstances, I'm going to the writers of those policies or procedures to understand how that works if there are barriers that are being presented and then sort of navigating how we can resolve some of those challenges and then, more often than not, bringing the players to the table to sort through that.

Upon reviewing policies and investigating whether the policies present challenges to students' persistence, Gwen viewed the retention role as the convener of key stakeholders to revise problematic policies. As part of that role, Gwen sought to understand institutional barriers to student success and identified those individuals who are responsible for, and engaged in, creating and maintaining those barriers. Another participant, Justin, described a specific instance where he found the rate at which students in their first term go on probation to be highly problematic. Upon this discovery, Justin brought together a wide range of individuals from the campus community to make a change. Justin said:

Over 21% of our freshman cohort is on probation after the fall. And that's unacceptable to us. And when I say us, I mean, the Vice President of Student Success, many of the deans, and so there was a lot of hand-wringing because we kind of continue around that

20%, 21%, and yet as we have a group that seems more qualified, we still are missing something. And so what I did was, well, let's try to devise a solution. And so I got around the table two associate deans, a department chair, three, four, five other faculty members, one of our university advisors, several supplementary advisors, the Director of our Student Success Center. So I've got about 18 or 19 people who are frontline interventionists and student advocates and we just kind of started from the ground up.

Although the "No Prob" team that Justin had convened was in the early stages and had yet to enact a solution, a key part to the story involved the process of identifying an issue and then convening a cross-functional team that could address the challenge. The idea of bringing the players together or convening a group of functional experts was discussed across a number of interviews. While many embodied the role of a community organizer, this role appeared even more important for those who did not have a team of direct reports or for those who wanted to make change in areas other than their own unit. Christopher, who did not supervise any staff, described an effort to create collaboration and synergy between several different offices on campus which offered similar services to students.

We've completed a project this summer that was focused on enhancing the student support network around campus and really bringing it altogether, where we did a sort of a deep dive. There were at least eight offices that supported students' academic success. None of them were connected in any way and we brought all those offices together and we had a conversation and we came to an agreement and we sort of started to move things together.

In a similar way, Daryl described how this work required collaborative efforts to build support among many individuals dispersed across the campus. In Daryl's eyes, the process of

bringing constituents together to enact change could be challenging and quite difficult, yet Daryl simultaneously described how such changes could potentially be more meaningful and long-lasting. Given that the organizing work involved bringing people together not just to decree a solution but to engage in collaborative work, retention professionals described how their colleagues became more engaged and invested in the solutions that were collectively devised.

Daryl shared:

We need to therefore manage and lead by influence as opposed to by structure. And that makes it harder, but when done well, we think that it's likely to have a bigger long-term impact because then we've got folks who are really seen as insiders in each department or unit as opposed to folks who are seen as central administrators coming in and trying to tell different departments and units in colleges what they should be doing as it relates to student success. And so much of my work across both divisions then is relationship-building with folks who are in areas of influence to try to get those diffused allies that they have got spread out across the university to try to be thinking in at least a similar direction moving forward. And so that's where I spend a lot of the time cross divisionally.

The way Daryl described efforts to lead by influence and to get “diffused allies” moving in the same direction was similarly described by Seth regarding how the work as a retention professional involved considerable effort to collaborate and persuade institutional agents to untangle a ball of obstacles and barriers that contributed to students’ stalled progress towards the baccalaureate.

There is nothing concrete that my office can do that will say, “If we move A, B will happen.” It is a lot of, look at all these processes that are happening. How can we

influence them through persuasion and suggestion, get people to help understand their role in this process of what student success is and what retention is.

The collaborative work across many different areas was often required given the diffuse implementation and execution of various policies and procedures. For example, Carrie discussed reviewing the registration holds that prevented students from registering for the subsequent term. Given that the holds could be initiated by many different offices across many different functional units, stakeholders from across the campus needed to be assembled to conduct a thorough and comprehensive review and to devise a collaborative solution.

We'll put another hold on them that has the same equal sort of ability to withhold their registration if they have a parking ticket for \$25. So is that what we're – really \$25, huh? That's what they owe the institution and we're going to stop them from giving us another \$20,000? And so we put together a quick task force this last spring and we're now reviewing every single hold that exists in the entire system.

In addition to the administrative processes and policies that retention professionals addressed, study participants also sought to confront academic issues and challenges that students experienced across the campus. For example, Lucas sought to collaborate with many different academic departments to devise a process for improving courses with high rates of non-success. The need for mobilizing a community of individuals to address courses where students are not likely to succeed was due to the diffuse nature of delivering instruction as well as the challenge of addressing an outcome—a student's grade in a class—which is the domain of the individual faculty member, not the retention professional. Lucas said:

We have a new initiative looking at ways to support student curricular changes that consider both the scope and sequence of what we're teaching and also the delivery of

what we're teaching. I've rearranged some of the personnel to focus on a self-study and basically a guided improvement process for courses that have historic high rates of failure. So that's in partnership with academic departments all across campus.

Part of the community organizing efforts extended beyond the work of bringing colleagues together to solve a specific issue or problem. The work of the community organizer also involved fostering a common sense of purpose, community, and responsibility across the institution as well as within their own unit or department. Erick described these types of efforts:

The other thing that I'm really investing in is building this team within student retention and success in terms of getting them collaborating, sharing resources both actual fiscal resources but also personnel and space. So that not everyone has to do a study jam during finals week like let's do one study jam and let's bring in students from veterans, undoc[umented], first-gen coaching, international let's get them all together. So I'm trying to get them to think I just have to build my program and put everything into that program but [have to think about] how can I tap into my colleagues.

Esther also tried to build unity and coordination in establishing an institution-wide event which brought together student support personnel from every academic college. In developing the event, one of the biggest obstacles was convincing the individual units that everyone would benefit more than if they each hosted an individual event with their respective colleges.

When, I proposed to this to the body of associate deans for my peers it was – they could not believe I would ever take these people away from their desk, but I would say when we're going to do – They just – I had questions like, "Why can't we just do our own? We'll go outside our building and do it." That's not the point. The point is we are all one effort, and we are one community.

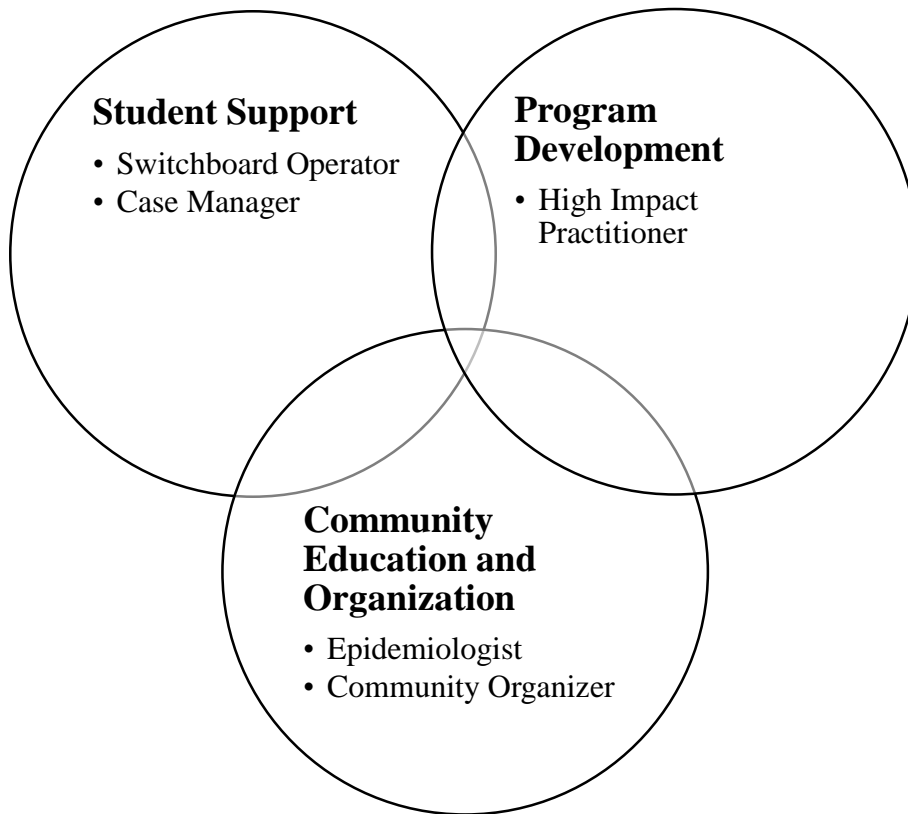
While the third research question considers the specific changes that retention professionals implemented to advance student success, the process of community organizing was crucial to fostering the possibilities for change. By identifying issues students faced and then convening a group of functional experts or invested stakeholders, retention professionals worked as community organizers to facilitate collaboration and to unite individuals through a common purpose and commitment to student success.

### **Summary of Roles**

Through interviews and concept maps, study participants described their different experiences and perceptions of the retention professional role. While participants described their experiences and perceptions in five distinct ways, the roles were organized across three different approaches to student retention (see Figure 4.2). Among retention professionals, one set of experiences and perceptions focused on connecting students with campus resources or coordinating and monitoring comprehensive support that may help keep students on pace to earn a baccalaureate. Other perceptions and roles focused on programmatic efforts, either through support programs and services or initiatives that sought to foster students' engagement with the institution. A third set of participants' experiences and perceptions centered on organizational factors, including community education and organization efforts. These roles revealed how there were study participants who, at times, sought to inspire and coordinate efforts that addressed various environmental factors and processes.

Figure 4.2

*Role Experiences of Student Retention Professionals*



## CHAPTER 5

### SHAPING THE ROLE AND CHANGING THE ORGANIZATION

#### **Influential Forces: Factors that Facilitate and Inhibit Responsibilities**

While speaking about their daily experiences as retention professionals, participants described several forces that influenced their role and how they went about their work. While retention professionals discussed how they went about enacting their roles in various ways, from connecting students with resources to case managing individual students to identifying large-scale and historical patterns of student enrollment, retention professionals also referenced and discussed a number of conditions and situations that shaped their roles as well as their approach to this work. The following section describes five major themes from these discussions and subsequent analyses that shaped the way retention professionals developed and enacted their roles within their specific organizational context.

#### **New Role, No Template**

Most of the participants in the study, 15 out of 21, had been in their role for less than two years, and for many, they were the first person to ever hold the role at the institution. As a result, retention professionals in the study often had an opportunity to chart the direction of the role and co-create the way the position was defined and experienced. Even those who were not the first to occupy the position often traced the history of the position to its inception and knew the individuals who previously occupied the role. In this way, participants described how their role's relatively recent introduction to the campus provided them with a distinct set of challenges and opportunities. Without a long tradition or historical precedence, retention professionals were tasked with giving shape and definition to a role that had been relatively new to the campus and to the entire field of higher education.



In assuming a completely new position, a few retention professionals described their uncertainty at what a retention professional was supposed to do. Charles described the challenges of figuring out what exactly they were supposed to do, and as a result, how they have “just made it up” as they have gone along.

My job is so ambiguous and I have just made it up, if you can tell, because it never existed before me and [my former boss] and so we just kind of made stuff up and it just stuck with us, and that's kind of why I need to explain it the way I do, and that's also why I want more direction because I felt like, “oh, I just made all this stuff up, is this really what you want, because you won't tell me otherwise.”

Others described how they reached out to other institutions or reviewed the academic literature to discern what they might do or how they might construct their role. Chelsea described how she spent an entire semester just answering the question of what someone in the position would do.

And so that first year for me and really that first semester was just trying to figure out what would a person as a coordinator of retention really do and very little guidance other than reaching out to other retention coordinators on different campuses and kind of doing research on my own just like what are other retention folks doing?

While Chelsea attempted to connect with administrators at other campuses to further operationalize and shape the position, Carrie turned to the academic literature on student retention to formulate a plan for the role. Upon identifying and summarizing key findings from the literature, Carrie proceeded to take stock of how the institution's programs and people were aligned with the literature.

And so I approached it at first just dug in, read every piece of literature I could find, grabbed some books, some of them are on the shelf behind me and still that I refer to as my little, you know, bibles and really try to understand what the literature said about student retention...So that's how I initially approached it. I looked up retention rates of everybody I could find, you know, all the good IPEDS [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System] stuff and things like that and then looked at our school, you know, schools that are more similar to us, what do they do, look at the programs, what are the high impact practices, what should we be doing, what are we doing, is it working well, can we assess that, so a bunch of things.

Even though retention professionals described instances where they reached out to other campuses or conducted some informal research on what other campuses were doing, part of the challenge in creating this role was that there was not a clearly identifiable national community of student retention professionals to provide guidance or support. Though they found support from senior leaders on the campus, one participant Gwen felt she was building a new role and position in a vacuum, without any models on which to design their position.

I think finding that community has been probably the most surprising challenge of this role because, you know, even though I can talk to our president or our vice president about retention or student success or anything within that spectrum, there is no one that I'm necessarily trying to model at this point because that community just doesn't exist.

While senior leaders were involved in drafting initial job descriptions or authorizing the creation of the new position, they were also unsure as to what the retention professional would do or how the role would fit within the organization. Chelsea recounted initial conversations with

the provost and how the role had changed quite considerably from the time Chelsea saw the initial job description.

The coordinator [job description] really had everything you can think of under the sun, you know. It was kind of like you're going to fix advising, and you're going to fix that, you know, and it was just like, "Whoa." And I remember sitting with a provost at that time and going, "There's no way, when I'm looking at the title coordinator that what you're asking me to do aligns with that title." And the provost at that time agreed and said, "I think we wanted to put something in [for a grant] but we really didn't have an understanding of what that person was going to do."

Bella also described initially meeting with a senior campus leader, the Associate Provost, when the position was being formed. Without a clear outline for the position, Bella drew upon prior work and connections at the institution and started doing whatever she could to reach out to students and connect with them. In this way, the role quickly became one that reflected a switchboard operator and case manager, and it has been the way Bella had developed the role in the absence of further direction from senior leadership.

Our Vice President, our Associate Provost at the time is the one who pulled me and said, "Hey, let's start talking about retention." There was no direction in the office and he left shortly after my new office was created. And so for about a year I was just trying to reach out to students. We started the early alert system at that point. And then when we realized like, "Okay, I don't really have a purpose."

While retention professionals described challenges to jumping into a new role and creating it from scratch, Christopher described that initial process of wading into the unknown as energizing and exciting. Given that Christopher's role was not designed or experienced as a

switchboard operator, case manager, or high impact practitioner—he did not provide support services, design programs, or work directly with students—he spent the initial days reviewing data and meeting with colleagues about where opportunities for improvement might exist.

It was great because there was so much unknown that had to become known. And so for the better part of two years, it was really a lot of heads down work on old cohorts, looking back a decade, meeting with a lot of people around the university, many of whom I knew personally, but with whom I would have a different relationship or a new relationship. So in a way, those first couple of years were really exciting because there was always something new—a new place to look at or new question to be answered or a new initiative that maybe folks had wanted to turn over in their heads a little bit more.

While Christopher found those first semesters full of new opportunities, Erick described a certain set of challenges that arose in the process of establishing and defining the role. Part of the challenge Erick experienced involved some reorganization at the institution, which included the introduction of another role at the campus which oversaw new resources and spaces for academic support. As a result, part of the challenge has been for both of these positions to find out how they could work together in meeting students' academic, social, and personal needs, particularly as Erick supervised a number of student support offices and campus programs.

Because my position is new there seems to have been quite a bit of, I wouldn't say conflict, but just kind of learning each other and understanding how we can work together and maintain the expertise that we each have without making it look like there's a lot of duplication of services going on.

For participants who were employed at the institution prior to working as a retention professional, their work and portfolio were often incorporated into the newly formed role in

some way. For example, Anne discussed the progression at the institution from orientation coordinator, to assistant dean, to director of student success and retention.

So initially my job changed from orientation coordinator to assistant dean of students for new student programs, and it just added a few more things. And then as time went on and the programs that we were starting were having positive outcomes, we wanted to expand even further and then really to move beyond the first year to better serve transfer students, to better serve sophomores, because we see certain populations of our students who have second- to third-year retention as a real concern. And so that's the moment where we decided we needed to elevate this role. And so, since I was already overseeing many of the programs, they asked if I would move into that role and that's kind of where we ended up.

In this way, Anne was already engaged in many programming elements and had worked with faculty to identify students experiencing challenges. However, in assuming a more expansive role, Anne began to consider the university systems, not just programs, contributing to student attrition. As a result, the role was not simply a continuation of prior work, though it did provide a foundation on which to build a retention professional role. Lois was another retention professional who had been asked to move within the institution to create the retention professional position.

We didn't have anyone doing this kind of work and because of my long time knowledge of the institution and the people and as [my supervisor] shared with me "The respect I have earned from students, faculty and staff," he thought I would be ideal for this role. To be honest I botched it at first. My professional identity is Housing and Residence Life and

to leave – Housing and Residence Life was very – very difficult but he was absolutely right, we needed this position and I’ve grown to love it.

In moving from a role in housing and residence life, Lois developed the position in a way that incorporated a considerable amount of case management work and frequent, direct contact with students. In describing the gradual expansion of the role and responsibilities into areas of data analysis, Lois’s professional background in housing and residence life served as an important springboard for launching and developing the role.

Among individuals who were not responsible for creating the role, they did find there to be a certain flexibility in the position. Justin, who was the third person to occupy the role, described how the previous Executive Director of Retention and Graduation had a professional background much different from his own. In this way, Justin simultaneously described building upon what had been developed while changing the direction of the role enough to incorporate his own professional knowledge and experiences.

[The previous Executive Director] held it for two and a half or three years and did a lot of good, because she brought the financial assistance mindset to the role to really prioritize helping students, it really kind of complemented the work that was ongoing in financial aid. Definitely not an area that I have any expertise in. So I’ve kind of reinvented parts of the role, I’m fortunate enough that the role is flexible enough that I can do that.

By and large, the retention professional position was a relatively new role within the organization. As a result, senior leadership developed initial expectations for the role, but once individuals assumed the positions, they started defining and developing them in ways that leveraged their past training and experiences. While the positions have created new opportunities

at the institution, they have also challenged the retention professionals to give shape and meaning to a position that had few accepted models or historical examples on which to build.

### **Senior Leadership (In)stability**

While the relatively recent introduction of the retention professional position helped shape the design and experience of the role, participants also described how changes within the organization's senior leadership team changed the design and structure of their role. New senior leaders often put forth different ideas about how to approach student retention, and as a result, different ideas about where to position student retention professionals or what they should do. Retention professionals described how these types of changes brought about challenges to understanding and enacting their roles. For example, Bella described how the Associate Provost first established the retention position but then left shortly after it was created. When that happened, the position was moved under a different unit until the Vice President of Student Affairs voiced an interest in leading retention initiatives, thus moving the retention position under the student affairs unit.

Similarly, Charles described bouncing around between different areas of the campus, having started out in Student Affairs and then moving to Academic Affairs under the supervision of the Provost. At the time of the interview, there were discussions of further adjustments, as a new president was considering a potential reorganization of the campus's enrollment and retention teams.

I got into [Academic Affairs], which I think is a smart place because there is a lot of faculty involvement in what I do and I need faculty because they're the key to retention really. If students have that connection with faculty, then they're more likely to be retained. So it's smart that I would have had a role there, but now the new president

thinks that I should be in student services and that I think recruitment and retention were closely aligned in her previous institution is why I think that's the case.

In addition to the way turnover in leadership changed where the retention professional was positioned organizationally, leadership changes also brought about uncertainty in what the role would look like. Chelsea, who had been in the position about a year, described recent conversations with the newly hired provost to consider how the role might change and what elements of the work portfolio might be rearranged. Chelsea said, “We lost our provost, we have a brand new provost, he just started in January, and so we’re still kind of trying to figure out what to do with me.” Gwen also talked about turnover at the provost position, and how those changes established a different relationship with faculty. Gwen shared:

Our campus has had a lot of leadership change. Within my first year here in 2016, we had three provosts. The first provost retired, then we had interim who was from an agency, and then we ended up with our current provost. And that has had a tremendous impact on my role, mostly with the way that he engages with his faculty.

As Gwen discussed, not only did she have to adjust to the leadership changes, she also had to navigate the moments when efforts were led by interim leaders. Bella, an Associate Director of Student Success, discussed the frequent personnel changes in the office, as well as those that were taking place in the student affairs unit at large. Not only had senior leaders moved Bella’s position between different functional units, the office itself had a permanent director for only a short period of time. Before and after the time when the office boasted the permanent director, it was overseen by someone in an interim role. The changing leadership, as well as the interim supervisors she reported to, created challenges for Bella to establish a consistent role and feel confident in the work and responsibilities.



I also think one of the challenges truly is in the turnover or lack of supervision. Every time we have somebody new who comes in it's kind of like "Oh, hey here is the direction," and we're like wait a minute. We've been chugging along this way, oh, wait now we're going this way.

As Bella described, the challenge was not only that there was a new supervisor, it was the way in which personnel changes brought about new priorities and directives that redirected the efforts of the retention professionals. An additional challenge to interim leadership and to personnel changes was the way in which the periods of transition stalled retention professionals' projects or suspended their role development. Retention professionals described other ways that these personnel changes, particularly during the in-between periods when new leaders had yet to assume the position, temporarily suspended their ideas and initiatives. Charles described this type of situation as the institution was in the process of hiring a new provost:

Right now, I have plans for like a sophomore year experience and I have been kind of told to hold off on that until the new provost comes because it has a lot of faculty interaction in it. So waiting until that new person comes, which is killing me on the inside.

Similarly, another participant Alexis discussed hesitation in pushing ahead with establishing new goals and advancing a vision of student success until certain personnel changes were sorted out within the organization. Alexis said:

We're in a space where there's some change potentially happening. And so we need to- we have strategic goals for our office, but when I think of a strategic plan, I think about having measurable and specific goals that we internally want to attain and again like organizing our efforts toward reaching those goals. Because there has been so much

transition in the past year and because of this suggestion, right, that some things may change organizationally and structurally. We are hesitant at this point to put a lot of investment into organizing ourselves toward anything in particular. But that doesn't mean that that is not being discussed.

As her comments revealed, Alexis was hesitant in moving forward until there was greater clarity from senior leadership. The concern was not rooted in a fear of change or doing something differently, but that there was an interest to align retention efforts with the goals and vision of senior leadership. Without consistency in the senior leadership, it was challenging for retention professionals to understand how their role and efforts would link with the larger goals and structures at the institution.

In contrast to the descriptions of instability, one of the retention professionals discussed the consistent senior leadership at the campus and how that had amplified momentum towards reaching the institution's specific retention and graduation targets.

I absolutely think that we've got strong momentum. You know, the other reason for that is the long tenure of our president and provost who are strong, strong allies, and so, both have been in their roles for over a decade. For a provost, that's pretty uncommon in terms of a tenure to be in that role, and so the consistency of leadership in key positions and really strategic hiring I think has really helped to keep the momentum that we've got at the university.

The decade-long tenure of a president and provost duo contrasted with the experiences of other retention professionals who described changes to the most senior administrators at their institution. This consistency in leadership allowed the retention professionals' position to grow

and to adjust over time, but without the sudden changes in priorities or personnel that many others described.

In addition, a few retention professionals found themselves on the other side of the equation as they were asked to serve as interim managers for another unit on campus. Given their familiarity with the institution and relative range in working with many different areas on campus, a few participants were asked to assume temporary management assignments. Christopher spent approximately a year supporting their supervising dean while continuing to manage the efforts as the Director of Student Retention.

We had that vacancy in the dean [position], which meant that the vice dean at the time was elevated to acting dean for a year and needed support from me. So this was about two-and-a-half years ago now. And so that was the support I was able to provide for a year with my excess capacity beyond kind of the work that we were doing.

Christopher attributed his excess capacity to the fact that the role was not designed or built as one that led or implemented time-intensive programming nor did it spend much time interfacing with students or responding to individual student needs. Instead, he had established consistent reporting processes and collaborative retention efforts that provided him with an opportunity to expand his portfolio, especially given his familiarity with the institution having worked there a number of years prior to assuming a retention role.

Similarly, Lois, who had more than 25 years of experience at the institution, was also asked to fill in as a supervisor when a fellow associate dean was out on sabbatical. According to Lois, though her portfolio increased with a temporary assignment, it furthered the efforts to partner and collaborate with a different functional unit and served to bolster the retention professional role.

Our Associate Dean for Academic Services is on sabbatical this year and then when he comes back he's going back to the faculty part-time. So I was asked to take on supervision of the Office of Student Support Services. So the coordinator of Disability Support Services and the coordinator of Advising Services report to me as well as Student Activities. So our office is now blurring those lines. Before it was just my position, now it's our office that is between both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs.

While changes in leadership affects many different constituents within the institution, a number of participants described how such transitions brought about substantial changes to both the priorities and direction of the position as well as its position within the organization. In this way, retention professionals had to adjust to new visions for retention on their campus as well as navigate the starts and stops that accompanied leadership transitions and interim supervisors. However, the dramatic and tumultuous changes were not experienced by all retention professionals, with some describing consistent leadership or instances of more gradual and incremental changes over time.

### **Strategic Plans and Direction**

The extent to which retention professionals engaged in strategic planning, either at the institution-level overall or within their own functional unit or specific office, varied among retention professionals. Planning efforts included participation in a formal process, such as a campus strategic plan, as well as efforts to articulate a clear mission, vision, and purpose for their work and their role within a functional unit. Participating in such processes provided retention professionals with a greater sense of direction and intentionality. One of the participants described the active role they played in the campus planning process, which specifically incorporated retention into the campus's strategic enrollment master plan. Anne shared:

And so, my responsibility along with the associate provost was to develop a retention portion of that strategic enrollment master plan. So, we really put the Retention Council on hold for a year. We dug into lots of data about student retention and completion, identified high need areas, and then we wrote this plan. We ran it by the existing Retention Council, we got feedback and then when we started implementing this plan, we also reconfigured the Retention Council, so now it's called the Retention and Completion Council recognizing that there's now focus beyond the first year and we made it much smaller and there are people on it now that weren't before.

Similarly, Alexis appreciated the chance to engage in conversations and processes within the student retention unit to establish core principles and outline the work that was to be done.

I was grateful to have that opportunity to work one-on-one with students but also to impact larger university conversations and policy; and I was very lucky to work with a director who had a big vision for what student success could look like at our institution and who invited me to partner with her in constructing that vision. I'm constructing goals and mission for our unit on what the approach or the field might be for academic support of students, [the Director] again was enthusiastic about partnering with me to lead some university wide conversations.

The aspect of planning and constructing a vision for student success also took place in smaller venues, sometimes in relation to a more particular issue or challenge. Lucas discussed a working group that came together to map out, in a systematic way, what was happening at the institution in regards to data information systems and to identify opportunities for improvement.

I spent a good chunk of one day with a team that included student affairs, faculty, academic affairs, deans, outlining what we know and don't know, what we collect and

don't collect relative to student satisfaction, completion, degree attainment. And we have a working group to try to improve the intentionality of our efforts in each area of campus.

A key part to Lucas's description of the data collection working group was the idea that efforts to map and plan in this instance were part of a larger goal of improving the "intentionality" of their efforts. Rather than implementing patchwork solutions at the local level, Lucas was engaged in an institution-wide effort to systematically understand and improve how data could be structured to improve their understanding of the current state of affairs on the campus.

For other retention professionals in the study, though there was an interest or even an expectation to participate in and lead planning efforts, they were not able to incorporate it into their daily work. For example, Lois expressed challenges in finding the time and space to develop strategic plans and priorities.

If we were able to have more staff, I would be able to do more at the higher level; the policy, strategic planning, all of that. I kind of assumed, silly me, that I would have more time to do some of that strategic thinking and implementing and all that, but the truth is I don't have that kind of time. I have to be both 'boots on the ground' as well as the higher level thinking.

Similarly, Seth felt a lack of planning also meant they did not have a clear mission and set of priorities for the role and the unit. As a result, Seth looked to connect his work to the larger institutional mission and vision, but such efforts appeared to fall short in identifying a campus retention plan that could help clarify how the campus at large connected to it.

Nor do we really have a retention plan on campus to say, "This is – these are our priorities. We have our, you know, our strategic plan and we have our mission that we

can tie things to, but there is – from a retention perspective, you know, retention is everybody’s jobs. So it is nobody’s job type of thing.” So it is – and that is really kind of what we’re struggling with.

Participants shared how the lack of planning or clear priorities made for challenging experiences. In one instance, Bella likened their position to being the “spaghetti being thrown on the wall” due to the vice president’s consistently changing and urgent messages.

The vice president who put our office together, we used to joke that we were the spaghetti being thrown on the wall, because he would get an idea and he is like “All right let’s do it now and it has to be right now,” and everything was always “right now.”

Having experienced such frustration with perceived chaos and lack of direction, Bella worked with the interim supervisor to create an outline for their work in the semesters ahead.

We actually just completed, we made a spring retention plan with things that we thought were very doable and we’ve just now completed with our interim supervisor our summer plan and then going into our fall, what does that plan look like? And so we had four different areas...cultivating a supportive environment, administrative processes, communication and academic outreach.

While retention professionals described how they became involved in strategic planning, there were a few retention professionals whose official job description explicitly outlined their responsibility to facilitate and create retention plans. For example, the first responsibility in Kayla’s job description read, “Create a master plan for cross-institutional retention initiatives, inventorying or monitoring as needed.” When asked about work in that area, Kayla acknowledged that the master plan did not exist and that reviewing the job description in advance of the interview ultimately served as a reminder for this particular responsibility.

And honestly it gave me a little kick in the pants to say, I want to go back when we have our full group meeting and say “Listen, I had to look for the job description for this study [interview] and I realized this is part of you know, something that we should be doing here. This should not be a secret, we should all be working together. It's not just one department that's responsible for retention or student success.”

The response highlighted that although the retention master plan concept was part of her job description, it was not something that Kayla was engaged in nor was it something guiding the work. In addition, Carrie’s job description discussed how the administrator in the role would create a “comprehensive student success plan.” The full sentence from Carrie’s job description outlined the plan as follows, “The Senior Director is responsible for creating a comprehensive student success plan for the University, collaborating with the appropriate areas of campus to implement the plan and assess the success of the interventions in place that affect student success.”

While Carrie explained that there was not a formal document that contained the plan, she did feel the planning component was important in focusing efforts during the first months on the job. In order to develop a plan, Carrie described her process which involved taking stock of what was happening on campus, devising retention and graduation goals, and considering what strategies to implement in order to reach her goals.

The extent to which retention professionals engaged in planning and strategic thinking varied across participants, with a number of them participating in organizational planning while others were perceived to be “the spaghetti being thrown at the wall.” The idea of strategic planning provided a sense of intentionality and purpose to the role, as well as clarity of boundaries and responsibilities. Though there were retention professionals whose job descriptions explicitly stated they would devise



and oversee a retention plan, such job descriptions did not necessarily align with individuals' experiences in the role.

**“Putting out fires.”** While the extent to which retention professionals engaged in planning efforts shaped their role, their involvement with managing crises on campus or being constantly available for students further influenced the retention professionals' experiences and efforts. In the concept map exercise, one of the retention professionals described the role in the following way:

I have quickly discovered that my role consists of two primary tasks: building bridges and putting out fires...I say 'putting out fires' because it doesn't take long to learn that what appears to be an impenetrable obstacle to the uninitiated or red tape-averse is almost always a barrier that can be managed with the right collaboration, coordination, and determination.

Retention professionals who perceived their role as a switchboard operator or case manager described a number of instances in which they worked with students to address an immediate concern. Perhaps the student just walked into their office right before lunch or were referred by colleagues, and so they had to prioritize that student's immediate issue ahead of most everything else. For example, Bella described how interruptions could make planning and long-term strategies difficult to enact given the unexpected nature of student interactions. Bella shared:

Our counseling center is down the hall. We have lots of students down there for appointments. So when I look at my week it's funny because the calendar doesn't necessarily look packed, but when students walk in, we spend that time and they usually come right at lunch and I love to eat, like food is important, but of course it's just like, "No, you are not interrupting," and you just kind of push it off to the side.

The issues student retention professionals had to address ran the gamut, yet the urgency and importance of the issue was always present.

As a result, addressing an individual student's concern as if were a fire that needed to be put out pressured retention professional into remaining in a case management role rather than in an epidemiologist or community organizing role where they could engage more in systematic fire prevention. Erick shared:

You're getting pulled in other directions, whether it's a building issue, or students being detained at the border, or there's a protest on campus. So even though those things don't fall into my portfolio programmatically, I'm part of our leadership so I'm supporting those efforts however it can be. Like we have an emergency response team, a sensitive issues response team, and I get pulled into those meetings. And I'm happy to be there, I don't want you to get the impression or I don't want the research to show that I'm resentful, but it does make it challenging to like I say take a real strategic and focused approach to student success when you're getting pulled around in different ways.

In this way, it was not just the energy and immediate attention that particular issues required, it was that the time spent putting out fires was, at a certain level, countering the ability to focus efforts in strategic ways. It was not that the crisis response work was unimportant or that Erick did not want to engage in such issues and situations, the issue was how dropping everything to immediately address a specific issue crowded out the opportunity to think and act in a more proactive and strategic way. Esther described a set of crises that she deals with regarding students' failure to complete their degree requirements. Starting in the spring, she meets with students and their parents who want to express their disappointment and anger at not being able to graduate.

Yesterday was another mom and daughter pair. This time of year I get the graduation crisis in my office of ‘that wasn’t fair nobody told me I’m missing a class’... And by and large when dad comes in with a student and they’re both very upset because they’re not graduating and it wasn’t fair. I open up [the advising notes] and I say, “Well, here is the note from 18 months ago when you were told this is still unfulfilled,” and they’ll start crying and that just – then it almost they can take up half my day walking into different offices just calming them down and making people happy and all that. People really want you to compromise and we’re not going to. You can’t sneak your way out of certain classes just because you put it off and kept ignoring it. And then we will find the evidence that they actually registered for the class once but dropped it in the third week and you did know you didn’t –. So yeah, that’ll eat me up for – right after spring break into May.

As Esther outlined, the amount of time it took up to address disappointed students and parents was considerable, up to a half day for one person, and these types of interactions happened over a number of weeks during the spring term. Another retention professional, Lois recalled a recent day and how she had to “deal with” a parent. That single interaction then created a domino effect whereby the other interactions and meetings she had planned with students were disrupted. Lois said, “I had to deal with a parent for about 25 minutes on the phone, which threw off all those other meetings that I had with students this morning.”

As Gwen described, one of the challenges of the role was that when issues about retention are raised, the need for a timely response is great. Given that an unresolved or unaddressed issue can discourage student enrollment, there was a sense that when issues were elevated, it became a priority.

And as the person who sort of oversees student success, that means that my reaction is typically a bit more prompt and a little bit more forceful because, again, we can't wait, you know, months to get a situation solved if it is going to impact the student success and continue the enrollment.

The extent to which retention professionals were putting out fires, interacting with students and parents who showed up or called unannounced or during unscheduled blocks of time, certainly shaped their experiences and role and the ability to enact a proactive and strategic retention agenda.

### **Data Access and Translation**

While several retention professionals worked to analyze data and communicate findings to the community as described earlier, the extent to which they had immediate access to data or to the proper analytical tools varied. One of the retention professionals described the amount of time they spent making the case that they needed access to a certain set of data to devise an intervention.

So the biggest challenge here is that it is, it takes an inordinate amount of time and diplomacy to convince people that I do need that data and I should have immediate access to it. That is, for whatever reason the control and the ability to kind of create transparent opportunities for people to use data is a big change [from my previous institution] and I found that to be very much the roadblock here. I'm accustomed to being able to sit down with a couple of folks, build some reports and then build actionable responses based on the insights pretty quickly [but] that's not how it works.

Another retention professional described the challenge in getting timely and informative information about the students, exacerbated by old databases that store student information but which were not designed for the “big data” needs of the present time. Erick said:

I feel like our biggest vulnerability and liability is really around data and getting consistent reports and data on our students. Not so much – definitely on the impact of our student programs but it's more about how do we use enrollment and progress data and technology to more hardwire student success. We have some pretty antiquated systems here on this campus.

Erick added that while several key pieces of data did exist on campus, including several campus-wide surveys that students completed, the time and effort required to stitch all of the information together had discouraged anyone from taking on the task. Compounding the challenge was Erick’s perception that student success data did not have the same level of priority that was described by retention professionals at other institutions. Thus, Erick and the team did not develop roles that were centered on early interventions or the high-frequency switchboard operations. They simply did not have the information at their fingertips to be able to identify students experiencing challenges or those who could have benefitted from connecting with a particular resource on campus. Erick said, “Unfortunately, our institutional research office is just overwhelmed with a number of requests. And student success data, I think is probably – I wouldn't say it's at the bottom of the pile but it's not at the top of the pile.”

In this way, the issue Erick described is not simply one of having access to data, but in bringing many pieces of information together from across the campus. The challenge was connecting the data they did have in ways that created a more complete picture of student experiences and progress. In addition, Erick and his colleagues had to navigate how student

success work was not perceived to be among the top priorities of the organization's research department.

These experiences contrasted with those of retention professionals who described their ability to access key data and how their needs had been prioritized with institutional research colleagues. Among participants who perceived their role as an epidemiologist and who spent considerable time analyzing data and communicating it with the greater campus community, they were able to utilize and leverage key pieces of information without delay. For example, Christopher described an ability to access and, when appropriate, distribute most every piece of data that the institution maintained.

I'm really lucky. I can see almost anything. I can't see staff salaries or anything like that, but I can see just about everything else—grades, I can find financial data on a student's need, on their [aid] package. I can find all of that stuff and depending on the sensitivity of it and who should know about it, can distribute it to folks who can act on it.

While a few retention professionals discussed the general challenge of accessing data, Kayla referenced a specific gap in their data collection process that created challenges in developing the role. While Kayla did have access to a modern, early alert system, she did not have informative data on why students were leaving the institution. This gap prevented Kayla from developing a comprehensive and accurate picture as to who was leaving the institution and why, further stalling the efforts to address core issues driving student attrition.

But we don't have a very good process for finding out the specific reason for why students are leaving and because it's not done electronically. It's all done on paper, there's not a way to capture that information, which is awful because if we could figure out why they're leaving, if we could automate this we could get real data on it and perhaps we

could do some intervention ahead of time or as an institution and say, okay well this is why they're leaving for this program. Let's look at this program, is it something that we need to fix or is there something that you know we're missing, things like that. So that's a little bit of a frustration level that you know that I have in terms of not being able to get real solid data on why they're leaving.

While the issue of data access and availability was one particular force that shaped professionals' role and responsibilities, several retention professionals described challenges when there was too much data or when colleagues did not understand how to interpret or leverage the information they did have. Seth, who oversaw the early alert system on campus, spoke about the challenge of data overload which stemmed from a campus-wide survey that took place each and every semester. However, without the resources to analyze and interpret the increasingly large dataset, Seth described how the challenge had become one of using the data to inform institutional action.

So we have over 200 data points for at least like 3,000 to 5,000 students every semester.

We don't have the capacity to analyze any of that, especially when we don't have a research agenda on campus. And so it is like, I can give you random information about all the stuff, what do you want to know?...from a data-gathering perspective, it gets very discouraging because you're saying, "We've found all the stuff, but we're not doing anything with it, and yet we're still asking the same questions of why are students leaving." I was like, "Well, we can tell you exactly why the students left, because they told us and they told us months ago that they were going to leave but we didn't do anything about it."

Despite the copious amount of data and information, including insights into which students might depart the university, there was a challenge in analyzing that amount of data and in informing others in ways they could then take immediate action. Lucas described how information alone is not a guarantee that institutions will improve their processes or outcomes. He said, “I think we spend a lot of time trying to diagnose the problem and once you have some general insights about how you diagnose what’s going on there isn’t always the same intentionality about the response path.”

The extent to which retention professionals had access to reports, data, and other forms of information shaped the way they developed and experienced their roles. For some, they had immediate access to key bits of information, while others struggled to overcome outdated systems or restricted access. For the retention professionals who accessed a considerable amount of data, the challenge then became building structures, processes, and venues to analyze and communicate those findings to a wider audience that was ready to receive, and act upon, the information.

### **Numerical Targets and Goals**

While every retention professional hoped to boost their respective institution’s retention metrics over time, there were differences in whether individuals were tasked with improving the retention figures by a specific amount or with achieving certain retention or graduation rates. For example, Christopher outlined in the concept map that his job description included specific goals to increase “the six-year graduation rate to 93-95% by 2020 and increasing the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate to 96-97% by the same date and 2) improve grad rate parity among ethnicities.” Another study participant Alexis described how she advocated for the campus to set



specific goals, even though she was not heavily involved in the process of establishing the actual, numerical targets.

The degree to which we are involved in setting those goals has been limited, which I think is interesting but we have advocated for that. Like you need to have a goal, you need to have a target because it helps organize efforts, it help encourage momentum and it provides incentive for investment.

Alexis described how the targets were important because they provided retention professionals with a sense of scale for the task at hand. Goals and targets that were specified in percentages could then be translated into a specific, discrete number of students that needed to progress to the following year or to the baccalaureate degree to meet the intended goal.

It helps us to break down and identify how many students does this mean? Like if this many percentage points equals this many students I can find those students in this program, I can give you their names. It provides a place to narrow down and say I can see these individual people rather than just a blob of, “Where are we going?”

Retention professionals who worked at institutions with numerical targets provided similar descriptions about the specific number of students they wanted to see continue from their first to second year. They were keenly aware of the number and the institution’s current progress towards those goals. As Milton described, the registration period provided advanced warning for what an institution’s rate might be months before it was actually calculated.

I have this marker board that is to my left, your right. And it’s got every day since registration opened and what the different cohorts’ percentage of retention are. And if we have goals to hit, certain numbers like, so freshman if we hit [a specific number] of our initial students we’ll retain at 75%.

In a similar way, Lois talked about how they needed just a few extra students in order to reach the institution's goal. For Lois, breaking new records came down to getting just over a dozen extra students who might have transferred in previous years to stay at the institution. Lois said, "It still bothers me when I can't convince someone to stay, when we can't keep them because I know if I can keep an extra 15 students here that we'll hit that 90%. And I really want to do that." While the targets pushed retention professionals to reach new heights and to push beyond what had been done before, the targets also revealed areas that were still in need of improvement. Milton said:

Seventy-five [percent] was supposed to be our peak. We had gotten to just under 74 so we are close. I think this fall, I think we'll be pretty close to 75 which will be about 10-year high for us. That's good of the initial goal. That's the retention part of it. The graduation part is a very frustrating thing, because that's, we're just now hitting classes that are at 4-year, 5-year, 6-year and we are seeing some gain [in completion rates], but not a ton. It's been flatter than I had hoped for [compared to] some of the retention gains that we've had.

While Milton had seen the institution's first-to-second year rates increase over time, the fact that graduation goals were not being reached provided new leads as to where further investment was needed and where improvements could be made. The fact that the institution was making progress on one goal but not the others shaped their approach and thinking about what needed to be done to achieve the longer-term targets.

While this clarity and specificity provided a framework and scale for retention professionals, the specific goals also exerted negative pressures that influenced their experiences and daily work. Gwen said:

And then the other thing that I would say is the expectation with retention. And so I've never worked at a campus where the strategic goals have infiltrated all the way down to the frontline so much. And so everyone knows here, first to second semester, the goal is 90% persistence and then really the goal is 89% retention from first to second year, but I think the written one is 80%. And so really to be monitoring that closely has been a great way to stay really laser-focused on our work, but it has also been challenging that we are often trying to support staff who feel it is their job, they're connected to numbers, whether they'd be enrollment numbers or retention numbers.

As a result, Gwen had to help colleagues navigate the pressures of the institutional retention goals and ensure that staff were not working in fear. Another participant, Bella, described feeling uneasy and uncertain about what might happen if they were not able to meet the retention goals and expectations of the institution.

One of our previous supervisors was like, "Oh, well if are you handling withdrawals because you have to save all of them." We're like "No, that can't happen, like are you saying if we don't save them, we then are losing our jobs or what's happening here?"

While Gloria did not experience the same feeling of insecurity as Bella, she still did feel the weight of improving retention rates comparable to the levels of their peer institutions. Gloria commented:

So that's something that I feel some pressure with, but I also feel a little bit disconnected from that just because this retention role used to be in admission - in the same division as admissions. And so I don't feel like I have to get numbers just to get numbers.

Unlike most other participants, Carrie was explicitly tasked with ensuring a certain number of students reenrolled each year so the institution could meet its budget targets. Given

this role, Carrie had to track the progress against their goals and was prepared to explain why continuing enrollment figures—not admission numbers—did not align with initial targets whether in a positive or negative direction. Carrie said:

I'm definitely responsible for like I said that continuing student number and when we overshoot it we have a higher number, they want explanations and they want data and they want to know why even if we overshoot it by you know 10,15. Like one year I went like 40 over the goal and they're like, "So did you or did you not predict correctly or what's going on?" And so I've got to be able to justify and have the data to back up, you know sort of what happened. And then there was one year that I was like 30 below the goal. And 30 students, that adds up real fast and so – and so I better be able to justify that.

In this way, the extent to which institutions specified specific retention and graduation goals shaped the way professionals experienced their roles. Exact targets were transformed into a specific headcount that retention professionals could conceptualize and work towards. While the goals may have provided direction and clarity for some, there were also concerns as to what would happen to the person and to the role should the institution fall short of its retention goals.

### **Contributing to Institutional Change**

While the purpose of the study was to understand retention professionals' experiences and the forces that shaped their respective roles, an additional dimension of the study centered on the ways participants facilitated and contributed to institutional change. Returning to Carrie's concept map, she wrote how part of the efforts at the 10,000 foot level were part of the "work to impact change across the institution that will benefit all students." The idea that changes to the institution, either to processes, structures, or cultures, became part of the institutional fabric or ethos were ambitious efforts that retention professionals sought to advance. As one of the

participants stated in describing her role, Alexis outlined how her efforts focused on the “ways that the institution can take responsibility for student success,” adding how she believed each student could thrive and achieve their own success. However, students would achieve their successes only if the people within the organization created an environment that made that possible.

While retention professionals discussed in broad terms the importance of changing processes and mindsets, and removing institutional barriers, the following section examines the specific types of changes that participants in this study helped develop and facilitate.

### **Mythbusting: Changing the Narrative**

During the process of collecting and analyzing data, retention professionals discovered certain trends and patterns that appeared to run against a narrative or belief individuals held regarding student success. In sharing how empirical evidence countered accepted views of students’ progress towards the baccalaureate degree, retention professionals were engaged in reorienting colleagues’ understanding and perceptions of student success at their respective institution.

Christopher described how even during the interview process for the job, a number of colleagues remarked how tuition at the institution was notably high and that they would face challenges in retaining students because of the substantial cost. However, upon assuming the role, Christopher began to meet with students who requested a transcript for transfer, or who were otherwise voluntarily departing the university, to conduct an exit survey and to learn more about the reasons why they were departing the institution. What Christopher found was not that tuition costs were forcing students to leave, but that there were other, primary reasons for their decision to drop out of the institution. He said:

[Students] were saying that like three to one, it was about their social experience here. It's about how they didn't feel like they fit in, it was about how they didn't connect with anybody at the university. They felt like it was anti-intellectual to them or that it was not hard enough, or there were all these different things, but financial [concern] was actually a pretty small number of students who said that was the primary reason. Now, everyone wished that it cost less, but that's very different from saying I'm leaving because it costs too much. And I think that was a real - it wasn't earth shattering, but it was one of those things where everyone said, "ah, so, it actually isn't a problem we can just throw our money at"... that was the first time people stopped thinking, well, if we just had more money to give to students, all this would go away or there wouldn't be any problem.

In addition, Christopher's analysis further uncovered how the success of low-income students at the institution ran counter to national trends and commonly-held views on graduation rates. He recalled:

We discovered, for example, our Pell eligible students actually graduate at a higher rate than the average of the university. So that was exciting too, because we had assumed that a financial need and that's how we're kind of using Pell as a rough proxy. We figured, oh, well, if they are poor or poor enough that they need to receive a Pell, then they're less likely to graduate. Well, it turns out they're more likely to graduate.

As Christopher's quotes highlight, much of the mythbusting among retention professionals involved analyzing and identifying the students who were likely, or who were perceived as likely, to drop out or stop out of the institution. In other instances, retention professionals sought to explain the scope of the problem and inform the campus community that student retention was an issue that deserved their attention.

I think that when [my supervisor] first started talking to folks even before I came in this role you know she would talk in a certain you know even the VPs or faculty or even other staff and say, “So what's our first or second year retention?” They had no idea. “How many people graduate in four years?” “Well, everyone, everyone pretty much makes it.”...So she did a lot of sort of advocacy to be like, “Actually they don't and here's the data.”

In addition to providing or uncovering information that countered campus narratives or disrupted perceptions of student progression, retention professionals described dispelling assumptions about the student population to gain buy-in for new events or initiatives. When Erick started to pitch the idea of a coaching program for first-generation students, he encountered a resistance from colleagues who thought the idea would not attract student interest. Erick said, “When I first presented the data on our first-gen students and we looked at GPAs or test scores, they were like ‘These are bright students. They are not going to embrace this concept’ and it's been nothing but the opposite.” While these examples highlight the serendipitous ways in which retention professionals have dispelled views about the campus or the students, Seth viewed the work of countering accepted narratives as part of the job. By administering an institution-wide student survey every term, Seth described his constant effort to share data on how the conceptual student experience compares with the how students report actually experiencing the campus or progressing towards their degree.

In a similar way, Alexis described recent efforts to expand a first-year seminar course that focused on students' transition to college life in which she encountered opposition from individuals who felt that such courses stood in contrast to the university's standing as a highly ranked, academically rigorous, research intensive institution. As a result, Alexis has been

involved in communicating the success that the pilot 101 courses have had and how the experience has benefitted students in key ways. Alexis said:

There's a lot of attention on our transition courses at this time, because we don't have a university 101 course and there has been resistance in the past to having a university 101 course because the perspective was, "We don't do that here, we don't need that here."

Lastly, among participants who worked closely with early alert software and platforms, it was crucial for them to share information to faculty about the extent to which the system was being utilized across the campus. As Seth noted, there was a perception that nobody was entering updates into the early alert system, so they made sure to communicate to faculty that it was quite a robust system that was thriving due to the faculty's collective support and efforts.

Here are how many referrals were submitted, here are how many academic updates were submitted by, you know, this many faculty – there are 300 unique faculties that submitted it for a unique – you know, for 5,200 unique students. So that, let's say, like 80% of our student population receives some form of academic update.

Efforts to change the way colleagues understood the student experience as well as what was happening with regards to student enrollment and support were key ways retention professionals attempted to enact and spark change within the institution.

### **Supporting Sophomores and Beyond: Changing the Retention Paradigm**

There were several retention professionals who discussed their efforts to expand the interventions and attention focused on students in their sophomore or junior years. Several participants discussed the previous paradigm for student retention, which included a comprehensive first-year experience program intended to provide students with sufficient knowledge, skills, and motivation to complete their first year and ultimately their baccalaureate



degree. As Erick described, first-year experiences and programs have been the hallmark of so many retention efforts across the country. He said, “Most often we build comprehensive first and second year programs and hope students have the goals, resources, and resiliency to make it to the finish line.” In a similar way, Gloria reflected upon how the first year has looked so different in terms of support and engagement between the students and the institution. Gloria said, “We have all of that stuff for them in their first year, but we like send them off to fly in their second year.” Another study participant Bella described how the issue was not just that they needed to find ways to support students beyond the first year, it was that the data analyses revealed how the second to third year was in fact the biggest challenge in retaining students and needed a new approach. Bella said:

We are realizing our retention, our biggest struggle is sophomore to junior year. So we have a specific taskforce for that to try to look to see what does that look like, how do we get more students to stay – to make it to their junior year?

These retention professionals spoke to the ways in which retention had been traditionally addressed at their campuses through the targeted interventions and programs for students in the first year. For many, the approach had been to provide an intensive and comprehensive first-year experience which would provide students the skills, knowledge, and sense of belonging that they needed to progress from that first year to the successful completion of the baccalaureate degree. Yet through their work, retention professionals found that first-to-second year retention only told part of the story. When embodying the epidemiologist role, retention professionals often found other time points during students’ college experience where noticeable drop-offs would occur. Upon identifying these issues, retention professionals described their intent to develop programs and initiatives that would address students’ needs at different points in their college careers. On

her campus, Lois echoed how data analysis inspired a commitment to rethinking support systems, processes, and environments that were impacting student retention. Lois said:

We don't really have a whole lot [of focused programs] for our sophomores. We do tend to see between first and second year a drop-off in retention, and between second and third year we see a drop-off and I'd like to see if we can do something particularly for that second to third year to increase the numbers [of students completing their degree].

In addition to upperclass students, another study participant described her interest in working with transfer students to improve their performance and experiences. Anne said her efforts were, "Really to move beyond the first year, to better serve transfer students to better serve sophomores, because we see certain populations of our students who have second to third year retention as a real concern." These efforts were even more notable given the way that students who transfer from other institutions do not carry the same importance in national retention metrics as do students who start with the entering, first-year cohorts.

While Charles found that students were not progressing between their second and third year, Charles was interested in developing a second-year experience at the campus. Though the program had yet to be developed, Charles was engaged in shifting the framework through which the campus understood and addressed student retention.

I have already mentioned this is the sophomore year experience. We are losing students a lot between fourth and fifth semester, which I think is some of that financial aid concerns, but it is also they get to a point, they are like "I am not sure what I really want to do" and they kind of just stop out, so I definitely want to do the sophomore year experience.

Whereas Charles was interested in developing a program for sophomores, Heidi's portfolio already included campus programs that specifically focused on second-year and

transfer-students. Her work involved supervising a program built specifically for second-year students to enhance their engagement in five key areas.

Transfer-Year Experience [is] in this office where we look at students who transferred, first-time transfer students that come to [the Institution] and we try and acclimate similar to our Second-Year Experience. So [we ask] are you engaged in your major? Do you like your major? Is that the right major for you? Have you talked with your faculty? Have you done some research? Have you done any career search on here to figure out like what kind of job are you really going to get with that degree? What kind of campus leadership, campus involvement do you have? And also, what are you doing within the community? So [we are] looking at five main engagement areas.

It was not only that a substantial portion of students departed the institution after their first year, Daryl described how notable equity gaps began to arise after students' first year. As a result, Daryl had begun to review the experiences students had as second- or third-year students and had initiated conversations to address these gaps in equity for underrepresented groups.

So what we've noticed is that our gaps for those populations that I've talked about earlier, largely appear after the first year. And so 40% to 60% of our gaps arise sophomore year or beyond, and we believe that because a lot of our students get decent support during their first year and then they get into academic departments and majors and particularly for our under-represented students, they're not seeing faculty who look like them or have similar experiences. Perhaps, the curriculum isn't as culturally sensitive as we'd like it to be. Perhaps the pedagogy is not as validating for students' whole experiences, and so this culture question has become our primary strategy for student success initiatives too.

In this way, the retention paradigm involved initiating close collaborations with the academic departments and touched upon issues such as curriculum and pedagogy, delving deep into issues of academic and classroom experiences even though Daryl did not hold a teaching position nor had he earned a faculty rank. In addition, Daryl's statement reveals how he used equity as an organizing principle, given that there was an increasing awareness as to how disparities emerged beyond students' first year. For many participants in the study, they had initiated and implemented changes at their institutions to adjust the paradigm through which campuses understand and approach retention. Instead of an intensive, first-year program, retention professionals have sought to explain and address the notable drop-offs and gaps that emerge well beyond a student's initial transition to the institution.

### **Rewriting Rules: Changing Policies**

One of the primary ways that retention professionals participated in organizational change was through their work to review and rewrite campus policies. A number of policies and rules were identified as barriers that affected students' ability to remain in good standing and progress towards successful completion of their degree. More specifically, a number of retention professionals described efforts to address policies that affected students' registration or their academic standing. For example, Milton and Anne discussed making changes to the suspension policies, providing students with more ample opportunities and support to improve their academic performance.

We recently got through [approval] a policy on changing our academic standing, to be an institution that has an academic warning, then probation, then suspension. So essentially three steps until [a student is] no longer at the institution as opposed to being a campus that has just probation and suspension.

Anne also described how changes were made at the institution to adjust the stages and timeline for how students might be suspended.

But for those 300 or so first year and transfer students who do go on academic alert or probation in the first semester, first of all, we don't suspend after one semester anymore.

We now give students at least two semesters and then we have this system of support that activates as soon as students hit that point.

Similar to Milton's work to introduce an "academic warning" stage, Lois also sought to address the students who experienced a challenging semester but whose overall academic performance did not initiate any alert or intervention from the institution.

We used to only send academic probation and academic dismissal letters at the end of the semester. When I got into this position I thought, well, no, we need to be doing more because we have students for example who have a semester GPA below a 2.0 but their cumulative GPA is still above a 2.0 so they're not on academic probation. But they had a bad semester. We can't let that just ride without some sort of intervention. So I've created this term of academic warning.

These descriptions demonstrated how retention professionals sought to adjust academic policies in order to avoid student stop-out and to promote timely and immediate interventions that would keep students on track. Another area where retention professionals sought to address policy changes was with registration processes. For many, the traditional approach of placing holds on students' records to prevent their registration for the upcoming term served as an obvious issue to address, a challenge students experienced that was imposed by internal regulations at the college. Daryl described collaborating with colleagues to raise the threshold for placing a registration hold on a student's registration.

We went from \$66 to \$200 [before placing a hold]. And so now, if the student is \$199 or less, they can still register for their classes and we'll work on assessing that and seeing what kind of impact that has. If it doesn't have a negative impact on the revenue for the institution, hopefully that's not the case and if that is not the case, then we'll go back and have the conversation about increasing that threshold even more.

While Daryl described changing the threshold that affected students' ability to register for classes, Anne discussed the campus' work to systematically review not just the amounts that affect students' ability to register but also the entire landscape of registration holds.

I had a meeting for the - it's called the YouBill taskforce. So, there's a group of us that are working to address issues related to YouBill holds how to, whether we wanted to make changes to guidelines for when those holds are placed. You know it's [currently] the amounts of the bill, what it should be is the amount of days past due appropriate for when that hold goes on, and then what are things that we need to take a look at.

While academic standing and registration hold policies were two primary areas where retention professionals sought to advance policy change, Esther was in the midst of a campus-wide review of all the procedures and processes that students had to engage with throughout their experience. Esther said, "I have a group called Procedures Working Group, that's where we're working on everything on – on every form that you need for the registrar, just everything, how do we clear holds for the students admitted, this and that." Additionally, Esther pointed to the changes made to advising processes in which students were required to meet with advisors once they reached a certain number of units to discuss their plan and to declare their graduation date. They found that these changes in advising processes and requirements brought about dramatic increases in students' successful and timely attainment of the baccalaureate, and quickly worked

to implement the process across the campus. However, the intervention's effectiveness appeared to decline over time, as Esther described how other interventions directed at students earlier in their academic journey lessened the need for the advising interactions later on.

In this way, changing policies was a key part of retention professionals' work to implement changes to the organization and the way students navigated through the institution. However, by no means did these policy or process changes solve all of the issues and challenges students experienced. Milton remarked how some of the early policy changes they made were the "low hanging fruit" and that while they had reached consistency as well as new heights for student retention at their institution, they still needed further, more dramatic changes to extend their improvements.

I think we got to 75% by increasing certain things that were, I don't want to call them low-hanging fruit, because some of them are really difficult to do, but they were a little easier to accomplish. And I think the provost is happy with that. I think the numbers are good. She's pleased with where we are at. I think the thing that is next is what is happening inside the classroom, [which] has to evolve.

Similarly, Carrie, who had worked for more than 10 years as retention professional, felt that moving the needle any more than what they had done to date would require further, dramatic actions and not incremental changes to narrow or specific policies.

We've been sitting at about the first or second year retention rate at about 85% for a couple years, and that's kind of our long-term goal is to kind maybe stay there. And then I've been really clear with them that if you want to make any gigantic change in that number in an upward way, we're going to have to drastically do some different things on campus.

In this way, retention professionals found that creating a venue to discuss and consider policies and processes was just as important in changing a specific policy itself. For example, Alexis discussed their work to introduce an annual student success conference for members of the campus community. The goal of the conference was to encourage members of the community to come together and to share experiences and ideas about how various policies and structures could be reimaged to support students.

We have had like an annual professional development conference each year focused on an aspect of student retention. Our partnership really provided a space to lean into a vision for what might be required not only for people on campus who work directly with students to support them in a meaningful and impactful way, but for us to rethink some of the policies and structures around student persistence.

Through the annual conference, the institution had a forum that could continually bring issues to the foreground and, depending upon new insights and priorities, could initiate efforts to review and reconsider the many different policies and processes that nudge students ever closer, or farther away, from successful completion of the baccalaureate degree.

### **Sharing Responsibility: Changing the Culture of Student Success**

In addition to specific, tangible policies retention professionals sought to change, they also described efforts to shape the way colleagues across the institution understood and approached retention. In this way, retention professionals' attempts to change the institution were more about influencing and reshaping the attitudes and mindsets, and ultimately the culture, of the institution. Given a number of the retention professionals were relatively new in their role, a number of them focused on the attempts and process to enact particular changes to the institutional culture rather than on specific descriptions of how they had already changed it.



While changing the culture is a difficult task and one that is not as easy to describe as a documented policy change, many retention professionals were excited about the possibilities and what potentially could come of such changes. Brooke discussed not only what culture change looks like, she also described how such thoughts are motivating and contributes to her success in the role:

When I start seeing the shift in the culture on campus, when I see acceptance by the faculty on some of these new initiatives and projects and not hostility, when I see students really seeking out the resources we have, I get excited.

When describing their aspirations to change the culture, retention professionals also described specific efforts they pursued to bring about such changes. Daryl described one of his recent initiatives which involved bringing information and data to the academic departments and then collaborating with an action team within the department to shift processes and culture.

Daryl said:

And so the primary strategy that we're employing right now to try to shift cultures in departments...so we're leveraging departmental action teams. So there's a whole structure for what these DATs Departmental Action Teams look like, but it involves taking data to departments with a trained facilitator, asking them to construct diverse student success teams that must include faculty, staff, and students and then having them look at those data and come up with their own thoughts and interventions on how to shift departmental culture to help predict the student outcomes that we're interested in to close our achievement gaps. And so we're doing this with six departments right now. There's more departments that are on board, but this gets us into the microclimates of our 60 or so academic departments across the university and allows us to talk about inclusive

pedagogy of what those practices could or should look like and how it influence everything in the department from faculty hiring to curriculum, to co-curricular clubs and organizations and support structures for students. And so far we're pretty encouraged that we've got largely receptive audiences from our faculty and department chairs and our deans who are involved in these efforts with us.

Similar to Daryl's efforts level, Justin also worked to change climates at the department level, leveraging personal relationships to connect with faculty and department leaders. In this way, Justin was able to address issues of curriculum, faculty-student interactions, and encouraged academic units to pay close attention to student success and retention. Justin viewed these interactions as part of a larger-scale attempt to change the way faculty approach their work and scholarship and how they can reorient the role of students within the classroom.

But I think if I get a lot of people on this campus, I can – if I can really change the climates or change the culture, then I think that people will approach their jobs differently. I think if more people start realizing kind of what I realized several years ago [as a former faculty member], that our subject matter is students first and disciplinary content second or as a medium through which to reach those students, then I think that would be a success. And I definitely do have faculty members that I've had long established productive relationships with that will come to me with student problems or student situations. I've worked with entire departments that are trying to revise curriculum to be more welcoming to students or to increase retention, some colleges, entire colleges of the university are emphasizing retention for the first time. I won't say that's because of me, but it helps me develop a partner that is kind of more directly reaching students.

Retention professionals who felt they had contributed to a cultural change at the institution felt proud that changing cultures and climates could result in real improvements to students' experiences and the rates at which they were retained and graduated. Anne, Director of Student Success and Retention, noted how cultural changes were reflected in an initiative that embedded peer support within a particular set of courses.

I think what I'm proud of is one that was really a culture shift that we had this highly collaborative course embedded retention initiative. When in the past it would have been very hard for us to do anything that was touching the curriculum and that the outcomes of that have been really tremendous. So, we saw over the years that typically students in a peer mentor supported section were retained at a rate 6-8% percent higher than students not in one of those sections.

Retention professionals not only pointed to specific initiatives that were brought about from changing cultures, they also described how part of the culture change became apparent when colleagues started to view new challenges through a retention lens. Christopher described how an unexpected change in their incoming cohort of students raised questions among colleagues about how the campus could address the particular needs of the incoming students to ensure their successful transition and progression and at the institution. Christopher said:

This past fall, we enrolled an unusually large, double the previous average size, international cohort, not intentionally, almost entirely by accident. But the very first question that was asked by someone who was, "hey, I know international students retained a slightly lower rate, so let's all get together and start talking about what we should do for these students"... So the fact that someone automatically thinks, hey, that's an important part of this equation is certainly, I think, a success.

Those types of changes, whereby other individuals immediately drew attention to an important issue regarding student retention and had an interest in devising a collaborative solution, were seen as a key marker of success for retention professionals. While many remarked that success in their role meant student retention and graduation numbers were increasing, they also described how success also meant that the campus cultures were changing to address barriers to student success. Alexis reflected:

My job is to facilitate that vision—that collaborative vision—and to facilitate partnerships that help make that possible. One indicator of success might be the degree to which those partnerships are finding more effective ways to solve barriers to retention. Identifying spaces where we could streamline efforts or enhance student experiences and that we get that feedback not only from numbers, but from students sharing individual stories. If efforts or initiatives that we have collaboratively developed together have an impact so for our student success conference hearing from colleagues, “This changed the way that I thought about my job, this changed the way that I approach this particular aspect of my job,” is an indicator of success. Those are two big ones, right, like is the work that we're doing having a culture shift impact in a way that has tangible, measurable results?

As Alexis described, the culture shifts and the change to a collaborative approach and mindset are key indicators as to whether retention professionals have been successful in their work. However, for retention professionals, the work of changing attitudes and cultures was important, but needed to be considered alongside the progress the institution was making in successfully educating students and ensuring their progress from college entry to completion.

## **A Number is a Life: Changing the Individual**

Even among retention professionals who were engaged in high-level data analysis or community organizing efforts, they still reminded themselves not to lose sight of their impact on the lives of individual students. Milton said:

We always have the potential to impact and change a life in what we do, and so I try not to lose focus in the numbers because while my job and my life and meetings are so much better when we are up, I have to realize that if we are impacting a life or changing a student's life, we are doing everything we can to ensure they're successful here at [the Institution], that's changing their life.

For retention professionals who worked closely with students, perhaps in a case management or high impact practitioner capacity, there was particular pride and satisfaction when students recalled how their participation in a specific program or interaction with the retention professional greatly impacted their experience and trajectory. While retention professionals worked to create organizational change, they also were committed to changing the experience, direction, and success of individual students. Chelsea described how she perceived success, recounting how an academic support program she offered saw students who were struggling to read become engaged, motivated, and active readers. She said:

That's how I personally would define success. There's no data tied to it. So I know – like I said, my superior might not want to hear that answer but for me that means that the student, even if just one walked away, is going, “I'm an active reader now and I know how to do that and I know what that means.” That's how I personally would define success in this.

On a certain level, participants enjoyed partnering with students and supporting them in the pursuit of their goals. As a result, participants built strong connections with students, and they felt both the highs and the lows of their educational journey. Lois described how the retention of individual students had become a personal thing for them, and they felt disappointed when a specific student decided to depart the institution:

I have come to take it very personally now when students leave the institution before they graduate, whether it's for leave of absence or withdrawal. I didn't use to take it personally. I take it personally now and feel like I have failed the students if they leave.

While there were disappointments in some instances, there were other moments of joy and pride when retention professionals were able to work with a student and see them through to graduation. Erick described this type of feeling and experience:

So that kind of personal touch from either a current student, a former student, someone who graduated and says "You know what? I remember being in that program and that program was the light of my experience. That made a big difference."

In a similar way, Gloria described with pride how meaningful it was to influence students' college experiences and to have an influence on them that perhaps resulted in their earning a degree from the institution. Gloria said:

So that maybe, it sounds really big headed and selfish of me, but it's really cool to know that there was like a little sliver of their life here, I got to be a part of, I got to help, [see] them walking across the stage and then graduating.

The challenge in retention professional work, however, remained how to combine that deeply personal connection to students and their journey through college while paying attention to larger trends and systematic issues that shaped the experience of not just one individual, but

all students at the institution. For many, personally engaging with students served as a powerful motivator and filled retention professionals with a sense of pride and accomplishment. Many study participants could point to a specific student who might not have graduated without their efforts. These individual student interactions provided inspiration for the retention professionals, guided their work, and helped develop their role. However, retention professionals also admitted that these personal interactions with students were time intensive, and thus detracted from opportunities to address systemic issues for larger, longer-term efforts at the institution. Though working with students closely and directly did not inherently prohibit retention professionals from working on large-scale projects or addressing institutional barriers or retention policies, study participants described an underlying tension in their daily work that was to be acknowledged though not neatly or perfectly resolved. For many, there was a distinct challenge in being held accountable for institutional rates of student degree attainment while feeling drawn to support the unique needs and experiences of each individual student.

## CHAPTER 6

### WHOSE JOB IS IT ANYWAY?:

#### WHAT A PROFESSIONAL ROLE MEANS FOR STUDENT RETENTION

Pressures and imperatives to produce more college graduates and reverse the relative decline in educational attainment have created a sense of urgency among four-year colleges and universities (Duncan, 2015; OECD, 2016). As performance outcomes such as rates of student persistence and baccalaureate attainment have become increasingly important in funding allocations and ranking systems (McLendon & Hearn, 2013; Meredith, 2004), colleges and universities have implemented various strategies and high impact practices to boost results. In this context, colleges and universities have created and introduced administrative roles which explicitly—in both title and work portfolio—seek to coordinate, implement, and improve efforts that shape students’ college experiences and the rate at which they earn a baccalaureate degree. With an increasing number of institutions introducing retention professional roles (Hossler et al., 2011), there is a pressing need to understand how institutions design these positions and how these new professionals experience and enact the role. Understanding these roles and the experiences of those who inhabit them provide greater insights into how campuses are working to improve degree attainment rates and the complexities of the task. In addition, the roles and work of retention professionals reveal how institutions frame issues of student persistence and attempt to deal with challenges to organize structures, policies, and programs to promote student success.

A number of news articles and college press releases have referenced the growth and implementation of the new professional role across the country (Cross, 2016; Lambert, 2016). However, until this study, scholars had yet to study the roles in-depth and explore the lived



experiences of the professionals. A report commissioned by the College Board found that campuses were identifying individuals to serve as retention coordinators, but for many, their retention responsibilities comprised only a fraction of their work portfolio (Hossler et al., 2011). Yet in a quickly changing landscape, a number of full-time retention professional positions have been introduced in recent years as four-year institutions bolster their attempts to improve student baccalaureate attainment. With this notable change in staffing patterns, retention strategy, and resource allocation occurring at a number of colleges and universities, this study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore how retention professionals experienced their roles, and reflected on the changes they made at their respective institutions.

### **Significant Contributions of the Study**

This study addressed three distinct aspects of student retention professionals' experience: (1) how they understood the role and their responsibilities, (2) the forces which shaped the role, and (3), from their own perspectives, the changes they contributed to and facilitated at their respective institutions. The following section describes how the study extends prior research and describes how the study design and findings contribute new insights to the body of student retention literature.

First, the study furthers an understanding of an emerging group of administrative professionals within higher education. While higher education scholarship has explored various roles and positions within the academy, including college presidents (Birnbaum, 1992), diversity officers (Leon, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013; Wilson, 2013), academic advisors, deans (Bright & Richards, 2001), among many others, there is not much known about the emerging group of retention coordinators and professionals. As Rosser (2004) and others have argued (e.g., Kezar et al., 2011), non-teaching administrative professionals contribute to student and

organizational success in key ways, though their experiences and roles are not as frequently studied and explored within higher education literature. Building upon a set of prior studies that introduced the idea of the retention coordinator (Hossler et al., 2009), the current study extends what is known about this group of professionals and the complexity of their roles. The study findings revealed retention professionals enacted and negotiated different roles, creating different experiences and opportunities for change.

Second, not only did the study focus on a relatively new group of administrative professionals within higher education, it did so through a qualitative approach that centered on in-depth interviews, participant-generated concept maps, as well as job descriptions. Whereas the initial studies of retention coordinators utilized a national survey to understand the role (Hosser et al., 2011), data for this study came from retention professionals' descriptions of their own experiences and daily work. In addition, the concept map exercise provided retention professionals a different medium to communicate how they understand and perceive their role, and the method provided further insights into how professionals conceptualized and experienced their role. While the use of a concept map was not unique within higher education research (e.g., Wood & Turner, 2010), the approach in this study leveraged different mediums of participant expression to construct an understanding of the role. Job descriptions were less helpful guides in understanding how retention professionals experienced their roles. As many institutions had recently introduced the position, the job descriptions were sometimes written quickly to establish the role and facilitate the hiring of a retention professional. In addition, retention professionals were less concerned with the job description and more focused on finding opportunities to advance retention within their first weeks or months on the job. As a result, retention professionals described how they shifted their efforts in response to the analyses they conducted

or the relationships they cultivated with colleagues. In these instances, the job descriptions reflected others' original conceptualization and expectations of the role rather than study participants' lived experiences.

Another contribution is how the study focused on the changes that retention professionals made at their respective institutions as well as the forces that shaped their role. Whereas retention scholarship has frequently explored the efficacy of various retention programs and activities (Kuh, 2006; Reason, 2009), this study brought attention to how professional staff foster changes within higher education institutions. The focus was not solely on what on individual people did to advance student success and retention (e.g., introduce an early alert system), the study also explored how individuals operated within the complexities of a college or university to challenge and change current practices and ways of operating. While retention professionals in the study used broad language to describe their commitment to changing the culture, the study furthered an understanding as to the specific ways they felt they were influencing attitudes, processes, and environments within the institution.

This study approach was important because of the long-standing focus on quantitative models and analysis in the study of student retention. Oftentimes, student retention is positioned as an outcome that relates to a number of specific activities or characteristics of both students and institutions. In this way, the complex processes, experiences, and efforts that happen within an institution are unaccounted for or considered via proxy measures. For example, results from the Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017) survey found that tracking rates of academic probation were perceived to be an effective strategy among administrators at four-year institutions. However, these types of lists focus on the action of tracking rather than on the underlying processes of how individuals track that information within an organization as well as how retention professionals

might take action based upon the rate of academic probation. In this study, participants described underlying actions and efforts that transform something like the rate of probation into institutional action and change. For example, Justin, the Executive Director of Retention and Graduation at a large public institution, described how he created a “No Prob” campus team, shedding light on how he organized campus members to respond to probation rates that they had deemed to be unacceptable. Through Justin’s experiences, the study revealed not just policies or programs that retention professionals pay attention to, but it also brought to light experiences and processes in advancing and coordinating retention efforts within a complex organization.

The approach and focus on student retention professionals further pulls back the curtain on what institutions are doing to address student retention and degree attainment. As Ziskin et al. (2009) argue, one of the gaps in retention literature has been the in-depth exploration of the institutional role in student persistence and degree attainment. Since Pascarella (1980) outlined interactions with socialization agents as key influences on student development and Berger and Milem (2000) introduced elements of organizational behavior into conceptual models of student retention, the question of what institutions are specifically doing to shape students’ enrollment decisions has been a persistent question within the literature (Ziskin et al., 2009). Findings from the study not only revealed different approaches to the role of the retention professional, it also uncovered how institutions attempt to play an active role in shaping students’ college experiences and enrollment decisions. In this way, the study challenges past retention frameworks and future research to consider retention as more than a student behavioral outcome and to understand how a number of campus professionals are engaged in addressing and influencing students and their educational outcomes.

## **Theoretical Contributions**

It is important to recognize retention professionals' roles in changing their organizations at the same time that they maintain its stability and are constrained by existing structures. Giddens structuration theory had been applied to the higher education training of social work professionals and their decisions to uphold or transform the status quo (Peet, 2006), and understanding high school counselors' role in promoting student admission to match their qualification for postsecondary studies (Bates, 2017). This study is a new application to understanding an emerging professional group's work in higher education, including the changes they make to campus policies and environments, student support systems, and academic pathways and experiences. For many study participants, the role itself was new to the organization, and so this study extended the concept of structuration to consider not just how a person creates change but also how a newly created role is part of a larger process to changing and reinforcing institutional structures in response to the changing demands placed upon colleges and universities. In addition, structuration theory helps shed light on the challenges retention professionals encounter in advancing change at their respective institutions given past structures, such as traditional distinctions between academic and student life, data systems and processes that were not suited to serving retention needs, and decision-making processes that require campus-wide cultivation and buy-in.

Structuration theory helped illuminate the complex process through which retention professionals sought to promote change for an individual person as well as for the institution overall. Findings from the study reveal how retention professionals focused on institutional change must question existing policies and create buy-in for implementing changes that will benefit student progress. The stagnant rate of baccalaureate attainment suggest that retention

professionals must upset the status quo within their institutions if they are to realize notable gains in student success. However, at the same time, retention professionals sometimes must utilize traditional structures such as campus committees and consensus-building workgroups, professional conferences, or strategic planning processes to change the operations, attitudes, and structures that define the institution. On the one hand, retention professionals must seek to change the rules and guidelines that govern student enrollment while also seeking to change the attitudes and beliefs of staff and faculty colleagues who interact with students across the organizations. At times, retention professionals were engaged in helping an individual student navigate the institutional rules and structures to ensure the student's successful progress, even if that meant retention professionals were reinforcing processes which they themselves did not agree with or perceived as unnecessary barriers to student completion.

### **Research Questions and Key Findings**

The following section discusses the findings from this study and how they build upon prior scholarship and contribute new insights to the extensive body of student retention literature. Each research question is presented along with key finding and a discussion as to what the findings mean for student retention and the student retention professional role.

#### **Research Question 1: How do retention professionals perceive and experience their role and responsibilities?**

The study identified five distinct ways retention professionals experienced and perceived their roles. Whether focusing on individual student-level interactions and support (switchboard operator and case manager), devising and implementing academic and/or social programs (high impact practitioner), or investigating patterns and convening colleagues from across the campus to communicate key information or address processes and mindsets (epidemiologist and

community organizer), this study revealed how retention professionals assumed multiple roles as they focused their commitment on advancing student degree attainment. While the roles were not mutually exclusive or rigid categories, they reflect distinct ways these positions were structured and how individuals ultimately enacted their roles.

Retention professionals' varying perceptions of the role, as well as their daily experiences of enacting it, revealed the complexity and nuance that has yet to be fully explored in the retention literature (Hossler et al., 2009; 2011). In fact, this was one of the first in-depth studies of this relatively new administrative role that spans students' academic and co-curricular experiences and whose location within institutional reporting structures sometimes shifts in response to changing priorities or directives from senior leadership. While national reports suggest the role has become widespread across higher education (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017), the specific, personal experiences of retention professionals had not been documented and analyzed by previous research.

Study participants' distinct experiences and perceptions revealed how such roles aligned with different frameworks of student retention. Case managers and switchboard operators emphasized notions of navigation and students' familiarity with the network of educational supports and resources consistent with social capital concepts (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). High impact practitioners described the importance of student involvement, engagement, and connection to the institution that align with integration models (Nora, et al., 2005; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1993). In contrast, experiences as community organizers and epidemiologists used data and highlighted how student enrollment and degree attainment were often impacted by environmental, structural or other institutional barriers (e.g., departmental climates, registration or probation policies, and gaps in support efforts beyond the first year) which are consistent with

organizational frameworks and behavior (Berger & Milem, 2000). In this way, retention roles reflect not just what retention professionals are doing but how the issue of student retention is being framed and operationalized through the role. These varying roles help shape and/or inform the way retention professionals interact with students and colleagues across the campus. In a crucial way, the different roles reflect the type of contributions retention professionals can make toward advancing student retention on their respective campuses.

Role distinctions are also important because in many instances, scholarship and reports have framed retention as a “program” (e.g., Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2013; Noble, Flynn, Less & Hilton, 2007; Tinto 2006) or as the result of well-designed, high impact practices that drive engagement (Astin 1993; Kuh, 2006). Findings from the pilot studies of retention coordinators highlighted their lack of authority to initiate, and more importantly, to fund new programs and initiatives (Hossler et al., 2009; 2011). While those descriptions aligned with a subset of participants in this study who lacked financial budgets to hire additional staff or to fund their own initiatives, retention professionals in this study also drew upon diverse types of resources and authority—information and data, relationships with colleagues across the institution, the ability to convene functional experts, or connections to senior leadership—to address student retention and advocate for change. This demonstrates that retention has been conceptualized in a way that focuses upon programs and funding, though results from this study indicate retention professionals’ work is not limited to this model or framework.

Instead of framing retention as a specific program or set of programs, many described how their work was connected to everything that influenced a student’s motivation and decision to make forward progress towards the baccalaureate. While some of those things included programs—such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, first-generation mentorship, registration



events, student support centers—the combination and range of roles revealed that retention may be more appropriately considered as an organizational effort rather than a program or a process. Building upon recent scholarship that offers new frameworks to approach retention (Kalsbeek, 2013), this study’s findings revealed the range of retention-related roles and efforts, providing additional evidence that retention encapsulates more than a program or set of high-impact practices and can be approached in different ways. These new roles highlight that conceptualizations of retention frameworks must incorporate the professionals who coordinate and advance retention as well as how they go about their work.

In a similar way, previous scholarship has offered recommendations on what colleges and universities can do to promote student persistence (e.g., Berger, 2001; Braxton & McClendon, 2001; Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Tinto, 2010). A perennial issue is that these recommendations have focused on what to do—e.g., “Provide student with advocates” (Berger, 2001, p. 16) or “Effective methods for the communication of rules and regulations important to students should be developed” (Braxton & McClendon, 2002, p. 59)—but not explicit about how to do it or who should be involved. This study’s focus on the experiences of retention professionals revealed that understanding how and why things happen within an organization can be just as informative as to understanding what happens.

Various conceptual and statistical models emphasize the importance of student-staff interactions to student retention (e.g., Hurtado et al., 2012, Nora et al., 2005; Pascarella, 1980). This study revealed what those interactions look like, including specific ways participants engaged directly with students, particularly through case management or switchboard operating roles. Yet these models do not fully account for the efforts of individuals within the organization who seek to address problematic, systemic barriers to students’ ability to persist or who, using

software tools, meet with students who might consider stopping out or transferring. Such practices highlight how student success models, often driven by quantitative analyses, consistently fail to capture a range of staff efforts and contributions. Given that these new positions are specifically tasked with promoting student retention at their respective campuses, the need for such models to include the greater range of staff contributions and efforts is increasingly important to understand how retention works inside of colleges and universities.

Lastly, the different roles revealed how retention professionals stood “in-between” managing institutional operations and also doing their best to touch the “15 students” (identified with analytics) that would make a difference in changing their completion rates. This “in-between-ness” is part of the flexibility of their position and what is needed to cut through institutional red tape to achieve their primary goal. Ironically at times, study participants’ descriptions of “handholding” or helping students with administrative processes and forms appeared to reinforce the institutional red tape they were attempting to cut through. In some instances, retention professionals’ work sustained burdensome institutional processes (e.g., printing out the two forms and helping students complete them), particularly when they were not actively engaged in questioning or reforming such processes. The way retention professionals approach these constant tensions—between the individual and the institution or between assisting students with a process versus challenging the process itself—provide insights into the type of roles retention professionals enact and the way they may bring about change within their respective institutions.

## **Research Question 2: What factors shape student retention professionals' ability to fulfill their roles and responsibilities?**

This study identified five distinct forces that shaped the work of retention professionals, those which inhibited as well as facilitated study participants' ability to fulfill their responsibilities and enact their roles. These conditions, often missing from our knowledge of other roles in higher education, provide key insights into how retention professionals felt constrained or supported when addressing issues of student retention. Understanding these forces can guide institutional leaders, retention professionals, and scholars in building more effective and empowering positions.

**Constructing a new role.** Retention professionals in this study described challenges in introducing a role relatively new to higher education and how they were unable to leverage national networks or models to build out their roles because these do not yet exist. Most other roles in student and academic affairs have associations or established professional groups. As a result, they drew upon past experiences, either within higher education generally or within the institution specifically, to further refine and adjust how they lived out their professional expectations.

While the lack of templates or precedents made it hard to discern whether they were enacting the role in the "right" way, these situations also provided flexibility for them to draw upon their professional history and personal understanding of what a campus retention role should look like. A constant tension during this role-making process was that retention professionals' past experiences were often grounded within traditional academic structures and positions such as residence life, enrollment management, or academic affairs; however, their new roles required building legitimacy and connections across many different units within the campus

community. These roles sought to breakdown traditional boundaries separating academic, student, and administrative affairs, creating new possibilities for what roles within higher education might look like and how individuals within a college or university can work together to create change around a common goal.

Regardless of retention professionals' position within the organization—whether reporting through academic affairs, enrollment management, or student affairs—professionals sought to engage students and/or colleagues across the campus to address all aspects of students' college experience to promote their continued enrollment. These types of interactions and efforts revealed how such roles are different than traditional student affairs or academic affairs positions and how they have created new forms of collaboration and coordination within the academy (Rosser, 2004; Bess & Dee, 2012). Though retention professionals described crossing traditional boundaries and creating new partnerships, they also described the challenges in ensuring their work and tasks served to support, and not duplicate or replace, other efforts and roles within the organization. (e.g., existing student affairs programs, mental health counselors, academic advisors, etc.).

These “boundary-spanning” roles extended beyond the idea that colleagues from academic and student affairs needed to work together or support each other. While several scholars and practitioners have advocated for coordination across units (Kezar, 2001; Komives, 1999), these roles reflected a new type of professional whose roles were perceived to track along with all aspects of students' experiences. Recent scholarship has introduced the idea of the “blended professional” (Whitchurch, 2009) and how higher education professionals may operate in a “third-space” (Whitchurch, 2008), essentially working in between and across academic and professional domains. In this way, retention professionals had to build new roles which extended

beyond their past experiences and break traditional boundaries, they also had to educate others about how their roles sought to support colleagues across the campus instead of replacing them. This research revealed how these new types of roles have created new possibilities for how institutions can address students' comprehensive college experiences and how new roles may be better viewed outside of the academy's traditional organizing structures. If colleges and universities are to attend to students' whole experiences and ask professionals to improve retention and graduation rates, then such roles must be able to engage colleagues from across the campus in ways that break away from, and not reinforce, traditional notions of academic organization.

**Senior leadership shapes roles.** Participants described how leadership changes sometimes brought about changes to their role's position within the organizational structure as well as the specific goals and priorities for the role. Even if leaders did not make immediate changes, turnover in senior-level positions could also delay in-progress efforts or emerging plans. These sudden changes in strategy, direction, or position relate to previous studies of presidential turnover and the pressures incoming presidents face to implement new ideas when assuming office (Kezar, 2009). Similarly, Skinner (2010) argued that incoming presidents also faced pressures to meet increasing accountability standards, thus amplifying pressures for senior leaders to implement new ideas in the way of student retention.

Role-making theory (Graen & Scandura, 1987), particularly when focused on how the role is made through supervisor-employee interactions, fails to fully capture how retention professionals assumed their positions and went about creating their roles. With the retention professional role new to higher education, sometimes retention professionals' supervisors were unclear how the role should operate or what should comprise the work portfolio. As a result, a

number of study participants spent time engaging with colleagues across the campus to understand and define what they were supposed to do. In addition, retention professionals had to discern not only what to do but also needed to discern who their key contacts and allies would be to advance institutional change. Furthermore, turnover in senior leadership and the immediate expectations for change (Kezar, 2009; Skinner, 2010) was found to create downward pressures on retention professionals and shaped the context in which they enacted their roles. For this reason, considering the stability of senior leadership and their approach and understanding to issues of student retention extends the understanding of how professionals go about enacting and developing their roles.

While new leadership can bring about new opportunities to reorganize or shift efforts, such changes can also disrupt current momentum or prevent efforts from realizing their full potential. This became even more pronounced when comparing the experiences of retention professionals whose senior leadership teams experienced infrequent turnover. In these instances, retention professionals were able to see through various initiatives as well as begin, or consider, new phases of efforts and initiatives. This type of scaffolding can serve to expand efforts in ways that create synergies rather than starting over or abandoning previous work. As such, new presidents and senior leaders should be cautioned against making changes just for the sake of change without regard for the work that retention professionals may have already put into place.

One of the challenges to advancing student success is that degree completion is a long-term outcome, with outcomes being measured four, six, and even eight years after an incoming cohort first enrolled. In addition, first-year retention is measured annually for each new cohort, creating a 12-month to 18-month delay to discerning whether a new effort, initiative, or process yielded notable improvements to an institution's student success metrics. As a result, it may take

a considerable amount of time to discern whether the new leadership's directives and initiatives yield significant improvements above and beyond retention professionals' previous strategies and efforts. This creates challenges for retention professionals to respond to the immediate needs and desires for improvement in ways that may lose sight of the longer-term patterns and trajectories of completion metrics. Similarly, it prioritizes short-term or first-year efforts without further focusing on challenges for students in the third or fourth year or beyond even when retention professionals found later years to be particularly lacking in coordinated efforts.

Senior leaders not only shape where retention professionals were positioned within the organization or what these professionals should do but also communicate how important student retention and degree completion are to overall campus efforts and goals. Some retention professionals felt that retention was one of the most important, if not the most important, priority to the president and/or the institution, which provided them with access to key information or support from a number of offices across the campus. While retention and student success is often viewed as one of the most important parts of a president's agenda (Maguire Associates, 2010), the experience was not universally experienced by the study participants. In addition, new leaders may communicate the importance or the meaning of retention in different ways, creating further challenges when senior leadership experiences frequent turnover.

**Strategic plans.** Some retention professionals in this study engaged in formal planning processes—participating in the college's strategic planning efforts or drafting plans for their specific unit or position. Another subset of participants described how their roles lacked strategic direction or that they were frequently interrupted with immediate student concerns such that their days could become overrun with “putting out fires” or unscheduled, time-intensive meetings instead of long term planning.

Over the years, calls for strategic planning and intentional effort have increased, particularly during times when colleges and universities experienced accountability or financial pressures (Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2002; Keller, 1983). With respect to student retention, it can be challenging to create plans and devise strategic efforts given the way retention involves nearly every aspect of students' experiences. For retention professionals, discerning how to allocate their time to various efforts can be difficult, particularly when previous scholarship has listed dozens of strategies and programs that are often linked to effective retention practices (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Tinto, 2012). While these many options present different possibilities for the retention role, it also creates challenges in enacting a role in which professionals perceive to be both effective in advancing student retention and reaching many different aspects of the student experience. Kalsbeek (2013) emphasized that retention efforts should focus on efforts that reach the greatest number of students, which offers greater potential for larger boosts in retention rates, rather than focusing on the small group of student outliers whose enrollment decisions may have much less impact on the institution's overall retention or graduation rate.

While Kalsbeek's (2013) framework offers ideas for making larger improvements to institutional retention and graduation rates, student retention professionals described how spending time to support an individual student was time well spent, especially for that student—whether they were considered an outlier or not. Yet retention professionals also wanted to know that their efforts made a difference in students' lives and that they were moving the needle of the institution's retention and graduation rates. To that end, one notable strategy to determine whether such efforts were effective were to link daily efforts with strategic plans and priorities.

**Goal-setting and accountability.** Prior literature that examined retention policies and practices highlighted the role of goal setting and developing strategic plans to direct the work of



campus retention efforts. Goal setting has been identified as an effective practice across all types of institutions (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017), and retention goals clarify how efforts connect to one another and provide key contextual benchmarks when evaluating programs (Hossler et al., 2009). Despite this recommended practice, the extent to which retention professionals had clear goals or participated in the processes to develop such goals varied greatly across participants in the study.

On the one hand, goals and specific numerical targets reflected increased enrollment pressures in which student tuition dollars are increasingly needed to meet financial obligations (Fry, 2012). Many retention professionals talked about how ensuring students' continuous enrollment was a more cost-effective enrollment management strategy than trying to recruit new students to replace those who had stopped out or left the institution. In this way, the retention role was sometimes attached more to enrollment management metrics and financial operations than notions of students' timely and successful progression to the baccalaureate degree.

While student retention contributes to an institution's financial health and sustainability, retention goals were part of the new wave of accountability that have emphasized student success and timely completion of the baccalaureate degree (Zumeta, 2011). However, retention goals reflect aggregate student success metrics, including timely completion to the baccalaureate, at the institutional level, but often do not reflect the efforts or effectiveness of individual people and their efforts within the institution (Reason, 2009). As a result, these aggregate institutional metrics are often confused for the retention professionals' effectiveness, furthering the misconception that professionals employed at institutions with higher retention rates are somehow more effective in their roles. This remains highly problematic as institutions, practitioners, and scholars search for ways to assess whether the retention professional role "works" and what types of efforts are proving to be effective. Nevertheless, institutions and

individuals within colleges and universities need to be accountable for both improved retention rates and for making strides to improve institutional efforts and climates that support degree completion. Findings from the study underscored retention professionals valued both outcomes, such as first-year retention or the six-year graduation rate, as well as the processes that contribute to such outcomes. Retention professionals often perceived their work to be effective when they were engaged as community organizers and inspiring faculty and other administrators to perceive retention as a shared responsibility.

Previous scholarship has sought to address issues of accountability and assessment for various roles within higher education such as student affairs (Barham & Scott, 2006; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2010). However, given the relatively recent introduction of full-time staff roles that focus on retention and student success, professional accountability standards and expectations have yet to emerge. In their absence, institution-level retention and degree completion goals and specific targets serve as proxies when defining what accountability means for retention professionals and their supervisors. Yet as retention professionals discussed, they worked to affect processes, to alter environments and attitudes, and to inspire students' continued enrollment. Together, those efforts were meant to yield higher rates of degree completion, but a persistent question lingers as to what happens when campuses do not meet their targets or fall below prior years' outcomes.

While goals and targets can be helpful, the efficacy and impact of retention professionals' efforts remain difficult to measure, especially when strategic plans do not lay out clear priorities or expectations for how the role can contribute to student success. In addition, the study found how part of the role-making process involved discerning not just what professionals should do but also what they were being held accountable for. Without a clear vision or direction for the

campus as well as outlining expectations for what the retention professional should do, retention professionals stand alone in achieving a bottom-line goal for institutional improvement since their roles depend on results. This study indicated that while retention professionals accept this responsibility, they also hold broader views of their accomplishments, such as basing their success on getting other faculty and staff to also accept responsibility for ensuring student success.

**Data access and use.** Information was viewed as a key resource which provided professionals with opportunities to devise, adjust, and inform current and future retention efforts. Regardless of the role that retention professionals experienced in their daily work—whether engaged as a switchboard operator or an epidemiologist—a critical aspect of their role involved accessing student information. Many participants were able to quickly access comprehensive information that directed efforts and/or informed retention strategies, while others felt frustrated they did not have full or open access to student information or key data. Access to data also provided retention professionals with evidence regarding how their efforts were affecting student progression, enrollment, or other important measures such as the number of units students earned or the rate at which they registered for the subsequent academic term.

The extent to which individuals could access information was key in shaping their role and experiences, providing opportunities to build a comprehensive picture of student enrollment patterns, to follow up with specific students at crucial times with appropriate resources, and to predict expected retention rates based upon the characteristics of a particular cohort of students. While prior research on retention professionals focused on retention professionals' authority in terms of introducing or funding new initiatives (Hossler et al., 2011), data access and the ability to leverage data to inform institutional efforts appeared to be key sources of influence and

authority. The varying experiences of data access and data use across participants revealed how efforts were not always constrained by a lack of money but rather a lack of information. While many recommendations for improved higher education practice often focus on the amount of financial resources allocated to a particular cause, retention professionals' authority was also derived from their ability to gather, understand, and communicate information across the institution.

**Research Question 3: In what ways do retention professionals create institutional change?**

On the one hand, retention professionals in the study described retention work in very personal terms. Improving retention and graduation rates meant transforming the experiences, possibilities, and futures of individual students. When discussing their work, retention professionals described the many ways they followed up with students, connected them with campus resources, and in some cases, stood side by side with them to provide support in navigating the campus and administrative processes. Working with a student and seeing them earn their baccalaureate degree elicited pride and a sense of accomplishment.

In addition to the interactions with individual students, retention professionals also sought to change the institutional structures, policies, and practices that prevented students from reaching their goals. Findings from the study revealed four ways retention professionals sought to enact and facilitate institutional change, as they made changes to (1) campus narratives, (2) retention frameworks, (3) institutional policies, and (4) institutional culture and climate. While the study did not assess the effectiveness of the retention professionals' efforts, it did explore how retention professionals enacted and implemented change through their own experience and perceptions. Retention professionals emphasized that realizing gains in student success and

degree attainment would be sustainable by changing the institution and the way people and processes operated on campus.

**Changing the narrative.** One of the ways retention professionals created change was by upending narratives colleagues maintained about their institution. These “mythbusting” efforts helped align organizational members’ understanding of student retention with empirical evidence that ran counter to anecdotes or compelling stories that were part of the institution’s folklore or ways of operating. These efforts sought to upend any feelings of complacency and create urgency by unmasking inequities and communicating where the institution might not have been doing well, even if aggregate measures of retention and graduation appeared promising. In this way, retention professionals helped hold a mirror up to student progress, providing opportunities to understand and confront whatever appeared to interrupt student success and persistence. Given retention professionals were able to blur traditional boundaries within the academy, retention professionals appear uniquely positioned to provide colleagues across the campus, including faculty, with information about the barriers that delay student progress towards the degree. With job pressures to sustain and improve student success metrics, retention professionals were eager to identify and communicate where improvements can be made, particularly when campus narratives failed to recognize the levels and causes of student stop out and drop out.

Disrupting and creating new narratives is important because of how narratives and sagas provide key insights into how a community defines itself (Clark, 1972). Retention professionals positioned themselves as experts on student progression and were able to leverage that experience to communicate important messages across the institution to a wide-ranging audience. In fact, these efforts appeared even more powerful when retention professionals were not promoting programs of their own but when they were communicating information about

particular institutional strengths and weaknesses regarding student retention. In this way, retention professionals and their efforts to disrupt complacency helped make the case for why retention was important and what the institution could do to accelerate improvements.

**Changing the retention paradigm.** Institutions and scholars have focused heavily on students' first year (Tinto, 2012), although studies have shown that first-generation students may be more likely to depart in their second year or beyond (Ishitani, 2006). Therefore, in examining enrollment patterns and the timing and rationale for students stopping out, retention professionals in this study began to leverage their understanding of student attrition to rethink their campus's support structure for students after the first year.

These change efforts are particularly important as so many institutions have built entire programs and units meant to support students' initial experiences through orientation and first-year seminars, and then send students on their way into the second year and beyond. As retention professionals help build a new understanding of what retention is—continual progress towards the baccalaureate and not first- to second-year enrollment—campuses have been able to consider how to support students' distinct needs and experiences after the first year. These new, coordinated efforts—focusing on the departmental climates, financial aid issues, academic advisement, transition into the major—serve as promising efforts to improve baccalaureate attainment rates by reducing the rate at which students depart after the first year. Even if a single effort does not yield intended increases in retention, the important part is that these professionals are reframing retention as something that transpires over the course of a student's entire college experience, breaking away from the view that retention is a single program that supports students' initial adjustment to the campus.

These efforts reflect how institutions are becoming more responsive to students' changing needs throughout their college experience; they also involve faculty in ways that first-year programs do not. As students move beyond the first year and join academic departments, these contexts become increasingly important in considering students' progress towards degree completion. Along these lines, retention professionals have sought to understand how student progress towards the baccalaureate can be improved as they move beyond traditional frameworks and approaches, and focus on previously unexplored areas to boost institutional performance no matter when or where it happens.

Lastly, retention professionals described how they were able to make improvements in first-year retention while their institutions' four- and six-year graduation rates had not realized the same types of improvements. This discrepancy reveals how the traditional model, focused solely on first-year experiences, fails to have a lasting impact on long-term baccalaureate rates. In this way, retention professionals who monitor and address retention outside of the first-year framework may potentially further transform institutional approaches to student success and can improve the long-term goals that may require an institution-wide approach for upper-division students.

**Changing policies.** In addition, retention professionals spoke about several policies, processes, or procedures that they sought to change, including informal processes that had become part of the institution's way of operating and doing business. For example, retention professionals talked about how they questioned the purpose behind every single form students were required to use on the campus, or the way three different offices might notify students that they have three different holds on their registration for the following term. Through these efforts, retention professionals engaged in a process of questioning several administrative procedures

that students were expected to complete. Seidman (2005) acknowledged that institutions face challenges to strike the right balance in asking students to complete administrative procedures—several which are crucial to their educational journey—yet doing so in a way that does not overburden the student or in ways whereby administrative processes become more important than the purpose of the process itself.

Over time, institutions have become increasingly complex and in turn, have introduced several policies or procedures to facilitate a specific process or activity. One of the challenges is that each procedure or process, in its own way, may serve an important purpose or appear rational in facilitating and documenting a particular action. Yet in their totality, the accrual of processes and procedures may be redundant, burdensome, or do not serve the intended purpose in the most effective way. Given retention professionals' boundary-spanning role, and in some instances, an ability to bring together constituents from across the campus to create change, retention professionals are uniquely positioned to examine not just a single process, policy, or procedure, but how all of them together are redundant and create unnecessary burdens on students. In addition, retention professionals in the study were able to address policies, both administrative and academic, that appear to delay student progress or make it more difficult to build forward momentum or recover after experiencing temporary setbacks or more serious challenges. The extent to which retention professionals can put all of the pieces together to create a comprehensive picture of the procedures and policies may further reduce the administrative burden on students and increase coordination and enforcement across administrative, academic, and student affairs offices. These are important efforts to transform the institution's administrative requirements into student-centered processes that advance, not complicate, students' progress to the degree.



**Changing the culture and climate.** When discussing how they conceptualize success, several retention professionals described how their efforts were not intended to produce a specific, short-term measurable outcome, but were part of a larger effort to change the culture of the institution. Their goal was not only to advance the success of specific individuals, but to transform success so that it became part of the core fabric of the institution and was a shared value and priority among all within the organization. While the idea of institutional climate and culture are well documented within the higher education literature (e.g., Kuh, 2001; Hurtado et al., 2012; Rhee, 2008), the idea of retention climates is another key dimension to this body of literature that is specific to retention professionals' efforts and responsibilities (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). While recommendations to improve student experiences and success often revolve around "changing the culture," this study revealed what individuals do to inspire and promote new attitudes and mindsets within the organization.

Given that retention professionals must rely upon others on campus to advance student success and progress to the degree, they need to create a shared understanding as to what retention means and to clarify how each person contributes to student success. A perennial challenge is that retention involves everyone at the institution; however, each person has a different responsibility and makes a unique contribution to students' experiences and their motivation and ability to progress to the baccalaureate. Retention professionals do not need each person to be experts in all things retention; rather, they seek to engage others in ways that link larger goals, understandings and conceptualizations of retention with localized and specific daily actions. Creating these shared frameworks are just as important to the long-term strategy as implementing a new initiative or building a new program. Through efforts to adjust mindsets, attitudes and experiences, retention professionals are reframing the adage that "retention is

everyone's responsibility so it's no one's responsibility" into one that emphasizes each faculty and staff member's unique contribution to student retention.

Even though efforts to transform the retention culture are key to creating lasting change, they are more difficult for retention professionals to measure or to describe to senior leadership. Implementing a new program or changing a specific policy might generate immediate short-term gains and be more appealing to managers or senior leadership. However, retention professionals described how challenging current approaches to student success, linking individuals' actions and mindsets with student experiences and larger enrollment trends, and reframing retention as a shared responsibility instead of a shared excuse is a key part of their role that has the potential to create lasting change. These efforts to create common understandings and to reframe how colleagues approach their work and issues of student success are even more important when considering how student cohorts, institutional efforts, and environmental contexts are always changing.

## **Implications for Practice and Policy**

Findings from the study not only extend the retention literature and scholarship, they also provide insights into how institutions, professionals, and outside agencies may further develop the retention professional role and its ability to advance change within the organization. The following section outlines specific recommendations for institutional practice, educational policy, and higher education scholarship, and how each area may continue to make strides to position this emerging group of administrative professionals for success and consequent institutional attainment of retention and graduation goals.

### **Practice**

The study revealed that campuses have gone about developing and implementing the retention professional role in different ways. In addition, with many professionals being the first professionals at their institutions to serve in this capacity, a number of participants described their efforts to jump right in and take action. Over time, the way they spent their days or the projects they were most engaged with began to change, and their original job descriptions were not necessarily able to reflect the way they experienced their current role. Given the different possibilities and perceptions of the role, a clear implication is that senior leadership and retention professionals must continually reflect upon their goals and intentions for the positions and assess how current responsibilities and actions align with such goals. The point of the research was not to identify whether a certain role or set of responsibilities was more effective at boosting student retention or graduation rates; rather, the study explored how administrators with similar titles and functions experienced and enacted their roles in different ways. So often, notions of institutional practice focus on a program or intervention or on broad efforts to engage students without considering the way staff members facilitate, coordinate, and initiate such efforts. Campus

retention efforts cannot be understood without also considering the way that individual staff members build such initiatives and opportunities as well as the structures that enable or constrain staff in their efforts. Qualitative studies that center on staff members and their stories can provide insights into how the people and their daily experiences accelerate and/or counter the goals and priorities of the institution. For campuses that have already embedded retention professional roles within their organization, this research may help them revisit how the position has changed and how the experiences of the retention professionals relate to the expectations for the position and the professionals. That is, do the institutional structures support the staff members who are tasked with simultaneously addressing courses with high failure rates and mediating roommate disputes that threaten a student's continued enrollment? For institutions that have yet to implement a retention office or hire a retention professional, they can use the multiple role information from this study to clarify expectations for a retention professional and how the boundary-spanning role might be structured on their campus. They can outline the types of experiences and work on improved job descriptions and that align with their overall strategy and approach to student retention.

No matter how retention roles' were structured or positioned—whether embedded within academic affairs, student affairs, enrollment management, or reports to multiple supervisors across different areas—retention professionals described how their work was a core, fundamental process of the organization. They conveyed that their role was not ancillary to the institution's goals, nor was it restricted only to students' academic or co-curricular experiences. They were often “community organizing” to bring different individuals and units together to change policies. To that end, supporting students' successful journey through the institution required collaboration and engagement from all members of the campus community, including faculty. In

this way, a second implication for institutions is that they must consider not only where to position the retention professional role within the organizational hierarchy, but also must reflect upon how the role, however designed, connects across all aspects of a students' college experience. The extent to which the role has authority to transcend silos, has access to institutional resources, and is understood to be central to the organization's core function and addresses students' complete educational journey, the greater the opportunities to enact changes that permeate throughout the institution. In addition, an institution must consider the way student retention is prioritized and valued by senior leadership as well as by individual units across the campus. Retention professionals experiences were shaped by the value the institution placed on promoting student success and degree completion amidst a number of other competing goals and objectives.

Daryl, vice president for student success at a large public institution, provided a clear example of how his role can engage multiple partners across the campus to address students' experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Upon discovering the strong relationship between a students' first four weeks and their likelihood to persist, Daryl began working with faculty to encourage the use of early, low stakes, exercises and assignments within those first four weeks. The goal was to identify students well before the midterm point in order to offer interventions before they had dropped the course or fallen too far behind to reasonably earn credit for the course. At the same time, Daryl worked with student clubs and organizations to delay their initial activities so that students could focus more on their academic experiences in the first month of the academic year. In this way, retention was not positioned as an extra-curricular program or a specific co-curricular intervention, the role was engaged with members from across the campus community to consider the complete arc of students' experiences. The

experience of study participants highlighted how important it was for the retention role to connect with and engage faculty and staff from across the campus in authentic and meaningful ways rather than a role that was restricted to a specific dimension of a student's college experience.

While institutions should reflect upon the expectations for the position and the way the retention professional engages with faculty and staff colleagues, a third implication is the need for retention professionals to participate in forming specific plans and goals as they relate to student retention and degree attainment. While this recommendation has been offered in previous research (Ziskin et al., 2009), the study found inconsistencies across campuses in how participants engaged in the planning processes. Even when job descriptions referenced formal retention plans and strategies, such campus plans did not necessarily exist or inform their work. In addition, with a number of retention professionals jumping into the role without any historical precedent on their campus, there were a number who described how early efforts lacked a sense of intentionality and purpose. Furthermore, given that some retention professionals found themselves dedicating a substantial amount of time to addressing individual student crises or immediate needs and unable to find time for longer-term strategic priorities, it is all the more important for professionals and campus leadership to outline the larger institutional goals to clarify how individual staff and key faculty are connecting to such goals. In this way, individuals may leverage those goals and plans when allocating their time and attention to the many potential tasks that fall under the general role of a retention professional.

Yet simply creating a retention plan or specifying numerical targets is insufficient in providing direction and clarity to retention professionals. The way goals are structured and how they are approached is just as important as the goals themselves. Retention professionals

discussed how goals, when positioned as institutional aspirations and not hardline ultimatums, provided incentives to make improvements and created a context for understanding whether their efforts were leading to the desired results. Furthermore, retention professionals also discussed instances where they had reached their goals, or perhaps when they had come close and were only a few percentage points away from doing so. Reaching their goals gave the retention professionals reason to celebrate, yet these accomplishments provided campuses and professionals with opportunities to consider the next phases of their retention strategy and approach. In this way, healthy goals and plans are not seen as a finish line, but as a check-in point or benchmark to assess the current state of affairs and future possibilities in a continuous process for institutional improvement.

There were other instances where overly specific goals and numerical targets created uncertainty about what exactly retention professionals in this study were supposed to do—as participants wondered, were they to convince students to stay at any cost? Similarly, there were concerns about what might happen if the institution did not achieve their goals: would their staff or individual administrators lose their jobs if they fell short of their targets? These concerns were brought forth when the institution had established particular goals or expectations for performance with the results served as an indicator of an individual's job effectiveness instead of an indicator of how the institution, and all its specific components that affect student success, were collectively supporting students from entry to completion.

Given the pressures to boost retention and meet institutional goals and targets, retention professionals must be prepared to describe their specific efforts and how they have contributed to student success on campus. A number of retention professionals discussed how they demonstrated the value of their position and the effects of their programs or efforts through

campaign activities. One retention professional even described the traveling “road show” they had put together to inform colleagues about the success of one of their programs, particularly as the retention professional was new to the campus and was unfamiliar to a number of staff and faculty. However, others were engaged in their daily efforts and tasks such that they had little time to reflect upon, and clearly identify, the specific ways their role had contributed to student progression and success on campus. This is particularly important as college costs continue to increase and as the growth of administrative positions comes under fire for contributing to these increases (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). While I am not advocating that retention professionals simply view the role via an economic cost-benefit analysis (i.e., how much extra tuition they generated from keeping students enrolled), this study revealed the need for retention professionals to step back from their daily schedules and efforts to reflect upon their contributions to students’ journey from the point of entry to degree attainment.

Lastly, professionals articulated how the lack of a coherent, professional community for their roles made it difficult to compare their work and efforts with others across the county. While they did cite various retention conferences and meetings that they had attended—often in a specific functional area within higher education that they were previously connected to—there was a desire to find a professional community built specifically around the retention professional role. Retention professionals expressed an interest in creating a community for people to connect, to share experiences and efforts, and to find and offer support to others in similar positions. Moving forward, building a professional organization or creating space within a current one could accelerate the opportunities for professionals to share ideas and information and to further develop their efficacy and success within higher education. There are few boundary-spanning roles in higher education and this one is important to evaluate and revise



practices across units and actors responsible for the multiple areas of students' experiences and degree attainment.

## **Policy**

Study participants referenced how federal and state policies were instrumental in defining retention as persistence from year one to year two among first-time, and often full-time, students. However, as retention professionals analyzed how many students, and at what points, students stopped out of the institution, they emphasized the importance of rethinking second-year experiences and beyond, and they expended effort to rethink and restructure campus supports and interventions. While programming and efforts for upper division students did exist, retention professionals in this study described how there were opportunities to improve the intentionality, intensity, coordination, and reach of such efforts. However, without a standard year-to-year retention metric or other type of student momentum measure, retention professionals were focused on the standardized retention and graduation metrics that are reported to the federal government. Consequently, there is a clear need for more robust reporting of student milestones and continued progress than currently reported to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and accountability measures such as the College Scorecard.

Similarly, while individual retention professionals sought to address the needs and experiences of students who transferred in or sought to improve any equity gaps that occur in first-year retention, there is not a consistent policy measure that draws attention to the efforts in this area. Although IPEDS tracks the first-to-second year retention in the aggregate, which is one reason why campuses focus so closely on that goal, these measures are not disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, or Pell Grant status in the same way that graduation rates are. The challenge, therefore, is not just that the retention rates are aggregated and are restricted to first-time, full-

time students, there is no indication regarding any equity gaps in retention until graduation metrics are reported for the cohort six years, or perhaps eight years, down the line. This delay—or what some retention professionals described as the “long game”—make it difficult to assess how current efforts are changing student enrollment patterns and progress towards the degree. Although retention professionals may do so at the local level, federal retention metrics do not provide insights into students’ yearly momentum nor do they reveal inequities that may exist in the current format of first to second year retention reporting.

In addition, retention professionals referenced working with incoming transfer students to address their transition to the campus and overall progression towards degree completion. Anne, for example, discussed conducting a needs assessment of community colleges in the state to identify how the institution could become a better transfer partner. Currently, there is no public reporting of student transfer progress at institutions. While such efforts would seem to improve the educational experiences for students and improve the institution’s ability to boost baccalaureate attainment, these efforts are also only currently assessed and valued at the local level. Efforts to reframe and measure aspects of retention beyond first year to second year may go a long way in acknowledging the importance of students’ continued momentum towards the baccalaureate, in recognizing that retention is not just about the first year, and in providing feedback mechanisms that reflect the current cohorts of students.

While changes in federal policies may be able to provide greater insights and feedback to the work retention professionals are engaged with, findings from this study also reveal how accrediting bodies and other grant-making agencies can more effectively approach the issue of student retention and retention professionals. In some instances, retention professionals referenced how an outside, non-governmental organization such as an accrediting body or non-

profit organization, played a key role in spurring the campus to create a retention professional role. In this way, it is important that organizations or agencies not simply recommend the role as an accepted practice to boost retention—the retention professional is not just another high-impact practice or silver bullet that will automatically boost degree attainment. The study found that there were different ways to approach the work, and even still, the current research does not reveal whether a particular role or experience is more effective at fostering student success. In this way, organizations must not present the retention professional role as simply another program to implement but as part of a larger process for campuses to learn about their students, structures, processes, and cultures in order to engage in meaningful learning and improvement. This study revealed how the role is designed, enacted, and integrated into campus culture is just as important as the presence of the role on a campus, which previous studies had simply counted.

### **Scholarship and Future Research**

While this study brought new insights into the role of the retention professional, there are a number of ways that further scholarship can build a more comprehensive understanding of the retention professional. One of the most important possibilities will be to follow up and investigate how these roles change over time. Though the current study provides a snapshot of current retention professionals and their role, it is clear that the roles are fast-changing, and institutions are at the early stages of designing and implementing these positions. Retention professionals described how their positions had been moved around within the organizational structure, shifting between enrollment management, student affairs, or academic affairs units. In addition, without a consistent, clear model of retention offices and positions, campuses are working to implement these roles in ways that align with their organizational structure and view of student retention. Future research may continue to examine the retention professionals and

their experiences to understand how the roles continue to evolve and whether over time, there becomes a more consistent structure and perception to the role.

In addition, among the retention professionals who had served in the role at their institution for several years, they described the work in terms of phases. Their initial efforts were focused on implementing early alert systems, building consistent reports for the campus, or improving registration processes—things that were described as “low-hanging fruit.” However, once those had been established, retention professionals were looking to other areas of the campus that were more challenging to change and improve. For example, Daryl talked about the campus’s retention strategy 2.0, which began to focus on departmental cultures and microclimates as a strategy to addressing change. Milton described new efforts to address elements of the curriculum that appeared to stall student progress after having improved their registration processes and probation policies. Studying these developing roles can also illuminate how campus retention efforts evolve over time.

Another implication for future research is to consider not only the individual positions and roles, but the Offices of Student Retention or similarly titled units that are also emerging. Future research could explore both individuals and their experiences as well as focus more intently on the entire administrative structures that are developing to support student success. In this way, future research may capture retention offices and the variation in the way retention units are developed. Further structural analyses can identify the way the roles are designed and positioned within organizational hierarchies and how such units mirror current functional areas within higher education or to what extent they create new elements within the organization.

The retention professional role, however, is not only part of four-year institutions, and one of the most important opportunities for future research involves extending this work to

incorporate those who occupy similar roles at community colleges. This study could serve as a template to explore the work and role of retention professionals at community colleges, further developing the framework of roles and how they are shaped by contexts. After all, many baccalaureate attainment results depend upon the flow of students from two-year institutions to four-years, and prior research has emphasized the challenges students face in succeeding at two-year institutions and subsequently transitioning into four-year colleges and universities (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

Given this research focused on the perceptions and experiences of the retention professionals, I utilized a phenomenological approach to center the individuals and their particular experiences. However, future studies could further explore how others within the organization interact with student retention professionals and how individuals across the campus understand the contributions and effect of a retention professional. Other methodologies, including case studies, may be able to further explore the role in the context of an individual campus, and at the same time, learn more about how others within the organization, including students, staff, and faculty, interact with the retention professional and how they work to advance student success.

While a goal of this study was to understand the ways individuals enact change on their campus, a key question remains as to the effect such individuals have on changing the culture of the campus or boosting the rate at which students reach key enrollment and success milestones. While there is no easy approach to isolating the effect of a single person on a campus's retention rate, understanding retention professionals' effect on student enrollment patterns can further shed light on the extent to which this specific role improves student progression and degree attainment. Without evidence that these positions positively contribute to student success,

implementing similar roles across the country will not serve as an effective strategy to boost student retention. Although the adoption of retention roles can provide legitimacy to an institution's structures and retention efforts (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), an increasing focus on these roles should be to further understand how retention and graduation rates change at colleges and universities upon the introduction and development of retention professional positions. Though measuring and interpreting the costs and benefits of the role will be complicated and invites controversy, it is important to connect this type of research about roles and experiences with an understanding of how institutions' retention and graduation rates change over time.

### **Conclusion**

There is no magic recipe to improving retention rates and baccalaureate attainment across the country. However, one thing is certain: without new strategies and bold steps that dramatically change the status quo to institutional processes, efforts, and cultures, the rate at which students earn a baccalaureate degree will remain fairly flat and continue to fall further behind other nations. While retention professionals are not miracle workers, their experiences and efforts offer hope for accelerating institutional change and reframing how professional staff can contribute to student success in ways that blur traditional boundaries that have separated students' curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

Regardless of how retention professionals experienced their role, they sought to change the direction of students' lives and transform the institution where they worked. In their own ways, they sought to become an active participant in students' educational journey—whether standing alongside them or working behind the scenes to pull levers that could change the trajectory or speed of the institutional efforts relating to retention. Such efforts reinforced the idea that institutions, through staff positions and efforts, contribute to student success in

important ways—that retention is not simply a student’s individual decision made independently from the institution they attend. Through the collective efforts of this emerging group of higher education professionals, retention and graduation rates may become less about who enrolls at an institution and more about what the institution does to foster the success of students who enroll.

The work of retention professionals inherently involves engaging with a complex web of people, practices, policies, and structures that collectively influence students’ college experiences and enrollment decisions. This complexity creates challenges in building common frameworks or a shared understanding of what retention means within an institution, but it also offers opportunities for retention professionals to engage and empower colleagues across their campuses to foster changes that better support learning and development. This study reveals that instead of “drowning the bunnies” as one former college president suggested, retention professionals have the potential to inform and facilitate changes in how institutions promote student success from college entry to completion. With proper support and collaboration, retention professionals have an opportunity not only to redirect an individual student’s trajectory but also to transform an institution’s commitment, approach, and efforts relating to student baccalaureate attainment.

## APPENDICIES

### Appendix A: Initial Screening Form

#### Retention Professional Screening Form

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the work and role of retention professionals within higher education.

Please answer the questions below. Your responses will remain confidential. If selected for the study, you will be contacted to schedule a convenient date and time for the interview. Your name and email address will then be unlinked from the rest of your responses and deleted. If you have any questions, feel free to email Joe Ramirez, PhD student at UCLA and a Research Analyst at Fullerton College, and the primary investigator of this study, at [jjramire@ucla.edu](mailto:jjramire@ucla.edu).

Name:

Email:

Official Job Title:

How many years have you held the position:

Office where you are employed:

Are you a full-time (36 hours+ / week) employee at this college or university?

Title of Your Direct Supervisor:

Would you be willing to participate in a study on retention professionals at four-year colleges and universities? Participation will involve (1) a sixty to ninety minute interview held either in-person or via videoconferencing technology, (2) a short writing exercise to be conducted on your own time in advance of the interview, and (3) sharing your official job description from your date of hire or most recent promotion.



## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### Interview:

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1. Please state your title, how long you've held the position, and how long you have worked at this institution?
  - a. How long have you worked in higher education?

### Guiding Questions

1. Can you describe how you came to occupy your current position as a retention professional?
  - a. Looking back at when you were hired for this job, can you describe what specifically attracted you to the job?
2. What was it like for you to transition into this role?
3. What is it that you do?
  - a. (Probe for specific examples and descriptions)
  - b. How do you describe your work to others who might not be familiar with your role or what it is you do?
  - c. How do you go about deciding what to do or what to prioritize?
  - d. Who do you work most closely with?
    - i. What's it like for you to work with other administrators? Faculty?
  - e. What committees do you lead or participate in?
    - i. What has it been like serving on these committees?
4. What do you do now that you didn't do or know when you were hired?
  - a. What were you doing initially but are no longer doing now?
  - b. How / Why were those changes made?
5. Can you describe any changes you have made at this institution or anything you have helped change at the college?
  - a. What was the experience like for you in creating that change?
  - b. Is there something you have tried to change but have not been able to?
    - i. What has prevented you from making that change?
6. Can you identify anything in particular that has made your work easier?
7. Are there specific things that have made your work more difficult than you anticipated?
  - a. Can you describe an experience when you felt you were not being supported or heard? What was that like?

- b. What challenges do you face in fulfilling your job responsibilities?
- 8. What has success looked like for you in this job?
  - a. Can you describe an experience when you did not achieve success?
- 9. What are student interactions like for you? Are there any in particular that stand out?
- 10. Is there anything else from your work that I have not asked about or that you would like to discuss?

## **Appendix C: Concept Map Exercise**

Prompt:

Use the space below to conceptualize your job responsibilities and how they relate to student degree attainment.

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