THE COMPLETION AGENDA AND PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC ADVISORS AT REGIONAL PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

By

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study explored the experiences of professional academic advisors at three broad access regional public universities as they worked in the policy environment of the completion agenda. Employing a narrative inquiry approach through single-session semi-structured interviews, I gathered the stories of the nine participants about their professional experiences.

This dissertation includes an in-depth discussion of the state of the completion agenda when the study was conducted. The existing literature related to policy issues in higher education and academic advising is also presented. The study employs three theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis of the collected data. The first framework is the agency and structure theory as presented by Coburn et al. (2016). The second framework is based on the work of Cohen (1990) and is rooted in his foundational work on policy implementation from Mrs. Oublier's classroom. The final framework is the community of practice theory as presented by Coburn & Stein (2006).

The key findings of this study are that the advisors lack agency in their professional roles and often times find themselves constrained by the structure and systems in their offices and universities. This manifests into three overarching themes that were found in the data. The first is that the participants are disconnected from the policy process at all levels. The frustration with this lack of agency leads to the second

theme which is the advisors view themselves as student focused and not policy focused, which allows them to reclaim a level of professional agency. The third theme finds that often times the participants find themselves at odds with professional staff members in other departments on their campus that have different missions and purposes.

Through the stories of the participants this study provides a context rich and empirical view of the experiences of academic advisors as they contend with the policy environment created by the completion agenda. The dissertation also provides implications for practice, research, theory, and policy. The key implication is the need for the involvement of advisors (and all student-facing professional staff) in the policy creation process at all levels. The advisors understand their work the best and should have a role in shaping the systems and structures that effect their ability to successfully work with students.

This dissertation is dedicated to my children. My dearly departed sons Aiden, Carter, and Declan – you were here for but a moment but are loved every day. And my daughter Grace – the light of my life and reason for being.

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It was either an indication of the quality of the HALE program or a stroke of luck (or maybe a little of both) that I was assigned Steve Weiland as my advisor. I could not have asked for a better advisor and would not be completing this program without his guidance and support. He helped me through the rough patches with understanding and care and prodded me when I needed it. I cannot thank Steve enough but will try.

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The other part of my professional/academic life during most of my time in the HALE program was with the MSU Student Food Bank (SFB). Being able to be involved in the SFB broadened my experiences and engaged me in an emerging issue within higher education – student needs insecurity. While at the SFB I was able to help co-found the

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Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the implementation of a multi-faceted policy change in higher education, known as the completion agenda by academic advisors at three four-year public universities, with low graduation rates. This study explores the role of front-line service providing professionals in the policy environment created by the completion agenda and how policy changes affect the work of said professionals.

It should also be noted that the interviews for this dissertation were conducted during the summer of 2016 and much has changed in the policy environment since that time. However, the completion agenda remains a relevant policy and its current form will be discussed in the literature review chapter.

Introduction

Modern post-secondary institutions have entered an era of enhanced accountability (Bok, 2006). Both public and private institutions face demands from their funders to increase graduation rates, move students to their degrees more quickly, and have their graduates be ready for the jobs of a dynamic global economy, in what has come to be known as the completion agenda (Applegate, 2012). These demands are coupled with the market demands of students and parents that are seeking institutions that offer an array of academic and social support services, near-luxury accommodations and food options, and vibrant extra-curriculars for an active social life (Bok, 2006). These competing demands require institutions to broaden the responsibilities and professional practice of many members of their staff. As members of complex organizations university employees often expect their positions to consist of many different responsibilities and job expectations. At the same time, university employees are often highly specialized in a particular area of professional practice. Thus, the resulting intersections of differing responsibilities can create instances where professional staff members are conducting job functions (or have functions of their jobs) that do not fall within their normal or expected area of practice.

This study will explore one of these areas of non-traditional professional practice that is unique to the modern postsecondary institution. Academic advisors do not typically view themselves as public policy actors, instead they see themselves as educators and/or student affairs professionals (Burton, 2012). However, the completion agenda and its environment of enhanced-accountability from federal and state governments and large funding foundations has made the work of academic advisors part of the public policy equation at most postsecondary institutions. Advisors by virtue of the domain of their regular professional practice are directly involved in two major areas of overarching public policy implementation.

These areas are retention and completion. While a focus on graduation rates is hardly new, the previous and current federal Administrations and large foundations such as Lumina and Gates have made increasing postsecondary completion a national policy priority (Ruiz, 2016**;** Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011). Advisors play a key role in helping students understand and complete requirements (NACADA, 2005) and positive advisor relationships have proven to be an important factor in student completion

(Light, 2001). Some state governments, Michigan in particular, have put an emphasis on retention and completion via the state's higher education budget. Michigan has included incentives for universities to move students to their degrees through a new performance funding formula (Bowerman & Jen, 2012). This model allocates any new money in the higher education budget to institutions based on their four and six-year graduation rates. If institutions hope to receive additional funding over the prior year's allocation they must improve, or in some cases maintain graduation rates (Bowerman & Jen 2017). This is a two-pronged approach to incentivizing institutions to improve completion as once the money is added in one fiscal year it becomes the new base to which additional funds for continued improvement in completion rates can be added to in the next fiscal year (Bowerman & Jen, 2012). One of the most important factors in timely degree completion is structured and informed academic planning (Gordon & Habley, 2000) and again advisors are a vital part of the process for successful academic planning (NACADA, 2006).

However, it is not clear how active of a consideration overarching policy goals are to the day-to-day work of academic advisors. This study explores how broad policy goals influence the work of academic advisors and how the work of academic advisors effect public policy implementation and outcomes. Academic advisors will be the unit of analysis for this research and the study will seek to better understand how advisors' work is influenced by policy changes to increase retention and completion, brought on by the completion agenda. By more fully understanding the influence of public policy goals on the work of academic advisors the study seeks to better inform both academic advisors and policy makers about this relationship.

The Completion Agenda

The phrase completion agenda/movement refers to a coordinated effort to increase post-secondary degree attainment amongst US citizens. The completion agenda is led by a coalition of foundations and governmental organizations, chief among them the Lumina Foundation and the US Department of Education (Lumina, 2013). The agenda is focused on the goal of having sixty percent of adult citizens complete some level of post-secondary education by 2025 (Russell, 2011). As post-secondary education policy (outside of student financial aid and research funding) has traditionally been the purview of state governments, they too have come to play an important role in the completion agenda through the creation of policies focused on degree completion (Donnelly, 2015). This section will discuss the key issues related to the completion agenda and provide important context for this study.

To more fully understand the scope of the completion agenda it is important to review the origins of this policy movement. Since the 1980s most higher education policy initiatives focused on the concept of access to post-secondary education (Bragg & Durham, 2012). Widespread access to formal education beyond high school was seen as the key to workforce development and economic development for the overall economy and a tool for economic and career stability for individuals. This resulted in policies that focused on expanding opportunities for post-secondary education to a broader spectrum of students (Russell, 2011). As the 1990s turned into the 2000s discussion began to shift beyond the sole concept of access. The access agenda had increased post-secondary participation but it had not increased degree completion. This occurred at the same time as many European and Asian nations (the chief economic rivals and partners of the United States) were not only increasing post-secondary (or tertiary education to borrow the international terminology) participation but also increasing completion (Russell, 2011). Thus, as the United States continued to have a high percent of its workforce with post-secondary degrees, the trend for young workers with completed degrees was below that of its peer nations. The Obama Administration saw this as a competitive disadvantage that needed to be addressed and began the shift towards the completion agenda (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

The Administration was joined in this effort by many prominent foundation and organizational players. Chief among the foundation players is the Lumina Foundation that has provided the bulk of funding for the myriad of programs and initiatives that comprise the completion agenda (Lumina, 2013). Another early partner in the completion agenda was the National Governors Association (NGA). Many governors had been working on increasing completion in their states as part of their economic development strategies (Russell, 2011). This confluence of interests was bolstered by reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that further documented the slip in degree/certificate attainment amongst young workers in the United States (Russell, 2011). This facilitated the wholesale change in policy discussion, direction, and initiative toward completion and away from access.

The completion agenda took form around the creation of long-term goals that are focused on increasing completion rates and boosting the number of adults with tertiary education by 2025 (Donnelly, 2015). The completion agenda has focused on moving from the current 40% completion rate to 60% by 2025 (the initial goal was by 2020). The goals have taken the shape of policy initiatives/programs initiated by a host of foundations and organizations with the support of the Department of Education (Russell, 2011). From the start, efforts have focused the completion agenda on community colleges and the key role states play in the higher education policy landscape (holding early state summits and incentivizing governors to action with grants focused on the development of completion strategies for their states). The two major foundations leading the completion agenda, Lumina and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Gates), have also been instrumental in placing most of the focus for completion on community colleges (Bragg & Durham, 2012). The reasons for the focus on community colleges are two-fold. The first is related to the concern driving the agenda, workforce development and long-term economic stability. Completion agenda proponents argue that the jobs requiring post-secondary training that are and will be key to continued economic growth will not be jobs that require a bachelor's degree but rather specialized training that can be accomplished through an associates or certificate program (Russell, 2011). The second reason for the focus on community colleges is that the sector has had the lowest completion rates in the higher education field (Donnelly, 2015). This "low performance" made them the low hanging fruit in solving the completion puzzle. Additionally, it is also easier to improve completion in the adultlearner segment through associates and certificate programs and improving completion rates amongst the non-college age cohorts is an important component of reaching 60% by 2025. For the same reasons, regional universities with low graduation rates that serve a high number of non-traditional students are also an area of focus for the completion agenda.

There are twelve major initiatives that form the bulk of the completion agenda (Russell, 2011):

- Access to Success (A2S): This was the first major program and is funded by Lumina and Gates and focuses on low-income and minority student completion;
- ACE Commission on Education Attainment: As the completion agenda moved to the front of the higher education policy discussion the "big six" Washington DC based higher education associations formed the ACE Commission on Education Attainment. The ACE effort is focused on institutional presidential leadership to improve retention and completion across sectors;
- Achieving the Dream: Lumina is the key funder for the Achieving the Dream initiative which focuses on community college completion;
- Adult College Completion Network: Lumina partnered with the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) to create the Adult College Completion Network that works to connect state governments,

institutions, and organizations to help support adult learners with college credit complete a degree program;

- Boosting College Completion for a New Economy: The Education Commission of the States (ECS) and Gates Foundation direct the Boosting College Completion for a New Economy group that works to engage state legislators in the completion agenda;
- College Completion Agenda: The College Board and National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) collaborate on the College Completion Agenda, an effort focused on adult completion of associate degrees;
- College Completion Challenge: The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) with funding from Gates has established the College Completion Challenge, which has an institutional focus on completion commitments and a call to action for each community college;
- College Completion Initiative: The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) began their College Completion Initiative in 2008 with 10 recommendations for improving completion to their member states;
- Complete College America (CCA): Serves as the primary umbrella effort for the foundation community that is focused on 60% goal. Lumina, Gates, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Ford Foundation are the major funders of CCA. This effort focuses on state-level policy changes and has an Alliance of States (29 in total), which have all committed to setting annual campus-level

completion goals, developing state and campus-level action plans and policies, and to report progress through a common measurement tool;

- Complete to Compete: The National Governors Association (NGA) established the Complete to Compete initiative that focuses on gubernatorial leadership to increase completion;
- Ensuring America's Future (EAF): Excelencia in Education with major support from ACT and Gates formed Ensuring America's Future (EAF) by Increasing Latino College Completion to focus completion efforts on PMIs that serve Latino students;
- National Coalition for College Completion (NCCC): The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) created the NCCC which focuses on building organizational-based support for the completion agenda from organizations outside the traditional educational organization and foundation community (e.g.: The Boys and Girls Club of America);
- Project Win-Win: Also created by IHEP is focused on supporting state and institutional policies that connect students that have stopped-out with nearly completed associates degrees to easy access to courses for completion (the project also supports efforts to improve academic record keeping and award degrees that should have been conferred but were not due to mistakes in record keeping or complicated graduation application policies).

The twelve major initiatives outlined above constitute the bulk of what has become known as the completion agenda. These initiatives have resulted in policy shifts at the state and institutional level that focus on completion through performance funding, increased program funding (primarily at the community college level), and changes in degree requirements (Donnelly, 2015). By any measure the completion agenda has become the dominant force in shaping post-secondary education policy at the national, state, and institutional level. This study will further explore these policy shifts from the perspective of the institutional staff members directly involved in moving students to completion.

The Role of Academic Advisors

Ideally, students have contact with their full-time academic advisors from orientation to graduation (Hunter and White, 2004). Often times, advisors are one of the few people students work with over the entirety of their college experience. Faculty change from course to course, as do tutors, even roommates and living arrangements change from year to year. Along the way, the advisor should become one of the primary points of contact for the student to their institution. The advisor works with students to develop their program of study, choose majors and minors, fulfill requirements, navigate the university bureaucracy, learn the academic norms and expectations of their institution, and complete the process of graduation (NACADA, 2005).

The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) holds that academic advising is central to the college experience in that it connects students to their higher education community, assists students to think critically about their academic roles and responsibilities, and prepares students to be educated citizens in a democratic society

(NACADA, 2006). Advising is intended to be the process that helps students to connect their experiences together into a comprehensive program of study. This process has influence on both the academic and socializing aspects of the student experience. NACADA (2006) argues that advisors not only recommend courses to take, they also enculturate the student into the academic community of their institution. Both the curricular and socialization aspects of the advising process can influence the students' choices for their program of study. Therefore, advisors play a critical role in moving students toward completion of their program of study and the pace at which they approach completion. These influences are driven by institution policy and culture and the advisor as the primary contact person with the student acts within the policies and culture of their institution (NACADA, 2005). Thus, as pressures from public policy makers begin to influence institutional policy makers it will become important to understand how that influence affects advising relationships and the implementation of the public policy.

The History of Academic Advising

Advising as a specific function within the university is a relatively new development in the long history of higher education (Thelin, 2011). Frost (2000) outlines three distinct eras in the history of academic advising. In the early years of postsecondary education there was generally only one curriculum and students had no choice in the courses they took (Frost, 2000). Thus, there was little need for the services of an academic advisor. In the mid-Nineteenth Century colleges began to expand offerings and provide more elective choices for students (Frost, 2000). This met with criticism from traditionalists (Thelin, 2011) but it also required that institutions begin to provide support for students as they made course and curriculum choices (Frost, 2000). This approach to advising, as a necessary but generally pro-forma function of the institution, continued for almost a century; Frost (2000) has titled this the era of academic advising as defined but unexamined activity.

Beginning in the 1970s, academic advising entered into the era of academic advising as a defined and examined activity (Frost, 2000). The work of advisors began to be recognized as unique, with its own field of professional practice and study. A body of literature began to grow and a national association, NACADA, was formed in 1977. The professional organization allowed advisors to share resources and connect with fellow professionals regarding the practice of advising and the roles and responsibilities of advising. Since its founding NACADA has grown into a comprehensive organization with state-level affiliates, national and regional conferences, and a scholarly journal (NACADA, 2006). The field of academic advising has been clearly defined and established in postsecondary education.

Academic Advising in the Context of Teaching and Learning

As the field of professional practice in academic advising has grown so too has the role of the academic advisor as a key educator in the undergraduate student's experience. Advising can be seen as an instructional process that is rooted in the teaching and learning of the institution (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2005). Advisors connect the curricular choices students make to the overarching goals and culture of their institution (NACADA, 2005). This process brings together the student's program of study to the policies and mission of their institution. The advisor works to ensure that the student not only makes the best course choices, they also insure that the student is properly sequencing their selections and working within the context of the goals and objectives of their academic unit and institution. This process of teaching and learning within the context of an overall curriculum helps the student to connect what they have learned in individual courses to a coherent program of study, understand processes within their institution and set the stage for lifelong learning (Lowenstein, 2005).

Hemwell and Trachte (2005) offer seven principles of advising that create an advising relationship that is rooted in teaching and learning and connects the advising process to learning within an overall curriculum of study. The seven principles are as follows:

- Students should learn about the mission of the institution and its goals for their learning;
- Advisors should assist students in connecting their academic and personal goals with that of the institution;
- Advisors should note how the particular frame of reference of a student affects learning;
- Students should be able to learn what it means to be a critical thinker, a global citizen, and an educated person;
- Advising is a dialogue between the student and the advisor;

- An advisor should distinguish between telling the student what they need to do and teaching them how to gain the information on their own;
- The advising process should assist students in finding a way to reconcile what they are learning from what they thought they knew in a positive manner (Hemwall & Trachte, 2005, pp.76-81).

Following these principles advising becomes the connection between the mission and goals of the institution and the student's curriculum and collegiate experiences. As the choices students and advisors make within the overall curriculum begin to connect to goals and policies of the institution, these connections begin to play larger roles in the public policy initiatives related to higher education.

Research Question

As outlined above the completion agenda drives policy at the state level towards increasing completion rates. However, the completion agenda is macro-policy that is part of the broad array of initiatives funded and supported by the foundation/philanthropic community and the US Department of Education. The implementation of the completion agenda is largely up to the states and institutions to determine. As also outlined above, academic advisors play a crucial role in moving students to completion. This provides a unique opportunity to study the completion agenda from the perspective of front-line educators. The experiences of academic advisors in the current policy environment has not been explored and can provide useful context for advisors and policy makers. This study places the overarching policy issues into the experience of the advisor and their everyday work with students. By better understanding any influence the policy changes have on advisors and their work this study will provide valuable information to help shape completion policy and the professional practice of academic advisors. Therefore, the research question explored in this study is: How do academic advisors understand their work as it relates to the implementation of the completion agenda?

The following sub-questions will also be explored:

1. How do advisors approach their work?
2. How did they learn to do their work? Do they continue to engage in work related learning (professional development, continued education)?
3. How do organizational structures (e.g., departmental configuration, reporting lines, etc.) influence the advisor's work?

Significance

This study is timely in that it explores issues of much present debate in the public policy realm from a unique perspective. The present study seeks to connect the practice of advising, a distinct aspect of postsecondary institutional organization, to the public policy implementation process. By taking the "in the trenches" perspective the study will inform both policy makers (at the governmental, institutional, and foundation levels) and the professional practice of advisors. This will help to improve the policy development and implementation process as well as the work of advisors on matters of retention and completion. Given the current public policy environment for higher education, particularly as it relates to funding, this study hopes to provide a valuable resource for policy makers as they make funding decisions with constrained resources.

Further, it will also serve as a resource to advisors as they continue to develop their professional practice and connect the importance of their work to the overall well-being of the institutions in which they serve.

Conceptual Frameworks

As this study seeks to better understand the completion agenda from the perspective of on the ground professionals in the form of academic advisors, it is important to explore the relationship between public policy implementation and professional practice. Most of the higher education policy literature focuses on institutional policy and resulting changes to practice (for instance see: Harvey, 2014). However, there is a rich literature within the elementary and secondary fields that explores public policy implementation and the professional practice of teachers. This research best informs this study as the role of the advisor in implementing the completion agenda is akin to that of the teacher implementing new curriculums, standards, and assessment regimes. This study will employ three of these frameworks to guide the analysis of the collected data. Each of these frameworks is discussed in the following three subsections.

Agency and Structure. A relatively new approach has emerged within the policy implementation literature that borrows from sociology and explores the varying degree to which agency and structure effect policy implementation. This approach falls into the category of educational policy implementation research that focuses on front-line actors (bottom-up approach) that Cohen began with his research on Mrs. Oublier's classroom in the early 1990's. The proponents of using agency and structure as the framework for guiding the study of policy implementation argue that most policy implementation research makes assumptions about the nature of agency and structure. This then influences the research without much examination or acknowledgement of the effect on design and data inferences created by these assumptions (Coburn, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to make agency and structure the focus of inquiry as that will more fully explain what is occurring in the policy implementation process (Rigby, Woulfin, & Marz, 2016). Coburn (2016) lays out the thinking that forms the foundation of the agency and structure approach in the following way – policy is one aspect of larger social structures in that policy is a set of rules and resources that seeks to direct action and/or behavior, and these social structures are the patterning of social relations and activities over time. “Implementing policy depends upon the ability of this aspect of social structure to shape individual and collective action to bring about desired goals. Thus, the question of policy implementation is fundamentally about the relationship between social structure and agency” (Coburn, 2016). Agency is understood to mean an individual’s ability to have some influence on their social world through effecting a change of rules, relations, or resources (Scott, 2008). Structure is viewed as the context within which people and policies interact, they are the regular patterns that both enable and limit individual action (Rigby, Woulfin, & Marz, 2016). This means that structures can vary from the formal systems of institutions to the informal norms and practices of social networks or cultural traditions (Rigby, Woulfin, & Marz, 2016).

The use of agency and structure to understand educational policy implementation has its roots in a 2016 special issue of the American Journal of

Education (May 2016) that focused the entire edition on research employing the approach. This special issue included five studies that looked at policy implementation issues by examining the agency and structure question at differing levels and issues of front-line policy implementation. The first study explored how institutional logics effect mentor teachers and their understanding of their role in broader institutional changes (März, Kelchtermans, and Dumay, 2016). The second article examined the process by which reading coaches make senses of policy changes during the implementation of a new reading program (Woulfin, 2016). The influence of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) on planning meetings between teachers, students, and parents was explored by Bray and Russell (2016) in the third article. The fourth article studied how principals and school leaders viewed their ability to market their schools in the post-Katrina New Orleans educational structure (Jabbar, 2016). And the fifth article explores how informal structures influenced the views on instructional leadership of six new principals (Rigby, 2016). These studies provide the beginning of the body of literature that examines agency and structure in educational policy implementation.

On the whole, this special issue found that addressing questions of agency and structure provides a new line of inquiry that further illuminates the policy implementation process. By focusing on the relationship between agency and structure the researcher is able to better understand how actors at the front-line influence the structures within which they function and how actors are affected by their social context(s). This type of research has a cumulative effect as it accounts for complexity, time, and power (Coburn, 2016) and thus goes beyond traditional educational policy implementation research as it allows us to see how the use of agency (or lack of use) changes structures rather than structures merely exerting control over individuals (Coburn, 2016).

Since the 2016 journal special issue other studies have used the agency and structure approach to frame the research. This growing body of literature includes a study of teachers and their work as policy agents (Good, Barocas, Chavez-Moreno, Feldman, & Canela, 2017); a study on changes in state education policy and teachers' sleep (Fujishiro, Farley, Kellemen, & Swodoba, 2017); studies of principals' sense-making during education reform initiatives (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2018, 2019); an exploration of successful policy implementation in a low performing school (Salazar-Morales, 2018); a study that examined how teacher educators use standards to educate future teachers (Bourke, Ryan, & Ould, 2018); and research on principals' agency when enacting teacher evaluation systems (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). While the data and results of each of these studies relate to their particular topics, all of these studies demonstrate that exploring agency and structure has value in better understanding the policy implementation process.

The study within this body of literature that is of the most particular interest to the topic of academic advisors and the implementation of the completion agenda is the work by Bray and Russell (2016) on Individual Education Program (IEP) planning and teacher, student and parent agency. Bray and Russell found that the structure of the IEP document served as a guiding script (structure) that greatly influenced the direction and nature of the planning meetings. The IEP is a federally mandated legal document that establishes a plan for special education students. Part of the IEP process includes annual meetings to review and update each student's plan. Bray and Russell (2016) found that during these annual meetings special education teachers used the IEP document to direct the discussion and rarely varied from the script of the IEP. This left all parties feeling that they lacked agency in being able to steer the discussion in a direction other than what was on the IEP. This meant that individual concerns about postsecondary planning, learning challenges, and instructional strategies became disruptions rather than part of the normal discourse (Bray and Russell, 2016). This has many parallels to the experiences of the academic advisors in this study as they contend with new systems and policies that are focused on retention and completion. Much like the IEP, the elements of the completion agenda that focus advisors on retention can be viewed as an outside artifact (Bray and Russell, 2016) that greatly shapes the interactions of advisors and students (e.g. course planning program at University B). This not only has implications for the quality of the relationship between advisors and students but also provides a lens through which to view the interplay of agency and structure in the implementation of the completion agenda. The connection between the findings of Bray and Russell (2016) and the data of this study will be further explored in the analysis chapter.

The Dilemma. The relationship between policy and educational practice did not garner much interest from researchers, policy makers or practitioners until the 1970s. Most early studies focused on the allocation of resources and creation of regulations with the assumption that resources and adherence to regulation would provide positive educational practices and outcomes (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007). However, studies began to emerge that showed resources had relatively weak and inconsistent effects on practice and outcomes. This led to further research that sought to better understand the connection between policy and practice. In other words, how policy might influence practice to achieve the desired results of the policy (Cohen et al., 2007). Much early research focused on policy development and implementation as a top-down process in which resources, incentives, and oversight were all that was needed to shape practice towards desired outcomes (Bardach, 1977). It became clear that there was more to the relationship between policy and practice than the top-down approach accounted for as reports and court cases showed funding and resources were not being used as proscribed by federal policy (Cohen et al., 2007). This led researchers to reverse the view and study implementation from a bottom-up perspective. This perspective holds that the complexity of educational practice and remoteness of policy makers from educational practice requires study not of compliance and control but the work that practitioners (i.e. policy implementers) do and the situations in which they do them (Lin, 2000). The top-down versus bottom-up perspectives of policy implementation assumes a conflict between policy makers and policy implementers. Cohen and his colleagues (2007) captured the essence of this inherent conflict: "Street-level bureaucrats are portrayed as knowing things about their work, their clients, and their circumstances that policy makers do not know but are crucial in any effort to adapt policy to local practice. Policy makers are portrayed as knowing things about political goals, policy instruments, and the policy-making process that are crucial to policy formation, but these are things that practitioners are unlikely to know." (2007, p. 519).

While researchers were focused on what Michael Lipsky coined the *Street Level Bureaucracy* (1980) policy makers continued down the path of top-down policy implementation to change practice. These policy efforts reached their zenith in the 1990s-2000s standards based reform movement (a movement in K-12 that is closely similar to the completion agenda movement in higher education). The standards-based policy changes lead researchers down a new path for viewing policy and practice in education. The focus shifted towards better understanding the role of cognition in the implementation of practice (Cohen, Moffit, and Goldin, 2007). The cognition perspective focuses on the effects of policy implementation as a resource utilization problem. The effects of resources are dependent on their use, therefore studying the resources users' (practitioners') knowledge, skill, and awareness of context is key to understanding how policies are implemented (Cohen, Moffit, and Goldin, 2007). The landmark study in this field of inquiry was David Cohen's 1990 article on the work of a classroom teacher in California implementing a new math curriculum and set of standards. The study of Mrs. Oublier's classroom demonstrated how policy effects practice but that practice has an even greater effect on policy (Cohen, 1990).

Cohen has termed these competing concerns as "the dilemma." The root of the dilemma is that when policy makers create a new policy they are seeking to correct a problem that they perceive. Often times the problem solvers are the practitioners within the schools that the policy makers identified as the problem (Cohen, Moffit, &

Goldin, 2007). Therefore, the success of the policy depends on the same people that the policy seeks to correct. No matter how elegant the policy design it will still depend on the knowledge and skills of professionals within the system that will implement the policy. Cohen and his colleagues identity the key to understanding the dilemma as viewing the parts that cooperation and conflict play in the implementation process (2007). Effective policy fosters cooperation by providing the funding and resources to support practitioners and also takes into account the concerns and capabilities of practitioners. The more that policy differs from practitioners' practice and capabilities the greater the chance for conflict. Cohen argues that one of the keys to limiting conflict in the policy implementation process is the improvement of knowledge to inform efforts to manage conflict (2007). This means that effective policies are ones that encourage the creation of new knowledge about practice and how to improve practice. In many instances this has been the missing component of many educational policy changes.

The dilemma is a framework that guides an understanding of the systems and structures that influence policy implementation. The theory rooted in the experiences of Mrs. Oublier provides a perspective for viewing the various ways that structure shapes how policies are implemented and individuals in the process are constrained and/or freed by the structures to act. This framework will provide for a rich analysis of the data collected for this study and help to inform the discussion of its implications.

Communities of Practice. The third area of inquiry in the field that is of interest to this study of academic advisors and the completion agenda is the work by Cynthia

Coburn and Mary Kay Stein on the role of communities of practice in policy implementation. Academic advisors have both formal and informal communities of practice that make this view especially applicable to the current study. In short, communities of practice are the social and cultural processes that shape practitioner learning (Cobb, McClain, Lamberg, & Dean, 2003). Coburn and Stein "view policy implementation as a process of learning that involves gradual transformation of practice via the ongoing negotiation of meaning among teachers" (2006, 26). Policy implementation becomes a sense making exercise where the practice of teachers' professional communities helps them to understand and interpret policy changes. Where there are strong communities of practice policy implementation becomes dependent on the relationship between policy makers' communities of practice and practitioners' communities of practice. As policy makers call for alignment to policy goals, practitioners seek authority to create their own meaning that reflects their local concerns and practices (Wenger, 1998). These competing goals create tension in the process and can be a source of policy failure. To better understand the dynamics between the communities of practice it is important to look at how practitioner communities of practice are connected to the broader policy community. Coburn and Stein also highlight the many levels of communities of practice that policy passes through before it gets to the front-line practitioners. In a university setting these communities of practice might include university administrators, college level administrators, academic governance committees, and boards of control. No matter the level of education, policy implementation becomes a social process of learning within and between communities of practice (Coburn & Stein, 2006).

The community of practice framework provides a lens to view the agency of the study participants as they implement policy changes. How do the advisors view their professional practice in response to the changes brought on by the completion agenda? The community of practice framework helps to understand how the advisors' social networks and experiences create meaning for them throughout the process. Continued research on communities of practice has demonstrated their lasting value in sustaining the role of professionals while implementing policy changes (Coburn, Russell, Kaufman, & Stein, 2012). This reinforces the value of this framework as the process of implementing the completion agenda has proven to be an ongoing undertaking.

Understanding how the participants view their agency and the support from their community of practice will provide additional insight into the data and help to better understand how the data informs the answer to the study's research question. This framework fills in the other half of the agency and structure dichotomy as it allows for a deeper exploration of the participants' agency and how they view themselves as professional advisors. The analysis using the communities of practice framework will demonstrate how advisors retain some level of agency in the policy implementation process and how their communities of practice impact their work experiences. This perspective compliments the other two frameworks and together all the frameworks work together to provide a solid basis for analysis of the research data.

Overview of the Dissertation

This chapter has served as introduction to the present study and presented the research question and conceptual framework that guided the research. In the second chapter the relevant literature in the fields of academic advising and public policy will be discussed. In the third chapter the methodological approaches for the study will be presented. In the fourth through sixth chapters a narrative profile of one study participant will be presented and then followed with discussion of the theme from the data that it best represents. The dissertation ends with the seventh chapter which presents an analysis of the data based on the theoretical frameworks identified above and then concludes with a study summary and a discussion of further research on the topic.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The frameworks section in Chapter One discussed a great deal of the relevant literature that informs this study. However, there are additional areas of the literature that are also relevant in the field of study as they relate to the exploration of academic advisors and public policy. Chapter Two will address these additional areas of the literature. There is an extensive literature in both the academic advising and postsecondary public policy fields and this review will discuss the relevant research that pertains to this study. This review will also identify the gaps in the literature and how the present study seeks to address the identified gaps.

The review will be divided into sections for each of the relevant fields and the fields will then be divided by specific topic. The review will start with the public policy literature. The literature topics in the public policy review will focus on the completion agenda and current issues in higher education policy – namely performance funding and student success. The second section will focus on the academic advising literature and topics will include the role of academic advisors in retention/completion, academic advising as a unique feature of postsecondary education, and academic advisors and public policy. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of literature as a whole, the gaps found in the literature and how the present study will address the gaps.

Public Policy

Completion Agenda. In the modern era, The United States has been viewed as the global leader in higher education (Thelin, 2011). A key part of this view was based in the fact that for most of the Twentieth Century the United States was the world leader in citizens holding postsecondary degrees (Kanter, 2011). This lead has slowly been erased and the United States in now ninth on the list of citizens with postsecondary degrees (Kanter, 2011). The Lumina and Gates Foundations have made it a priority to restore the United States to the top of the world list in degree holders by increasing the number of postsecondary degree holders to 60% of the college age and above population (Murray & Ullman, 2010). This policy did not spring up over-night at these foundations or in the previous Administration, as key players in the foundation world began the conversation of increasing college completion rates in the early 2000s (Bensimon, Dowd, Longanecker, & Witham, 2012). Chief among these foundation players is the Lumina Foundation. In fact the 60% figure that was the official policy of President Obama was taken directly from Lumina's "Big Goal" policy initiative (O'Banion, 2010). While Lumina has carried much of the rhetorical and policy weight for the completion agenda, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has provided much of the financial heft to the completion agenda (Evenbeck & Johnson, 2012). Completion and graduation rates have always been a concern of higher education leaders and policy makers (Thelin, 2011), however in the past this concern often lacked a coherent policy regime and goal (Adelman, 2005). President Obama's incorporation of the Lumina and Gates Foundations' completion agenda pushed the issue to the fore of higher education policy.

As such, there has been a growing body of literature related to the completion agenda and its effect on higher education institutions, and students. Perhaps the biggest shift noted in the literature is the completion agenda's shift in the definition of success in higher education. In the recent past, success had either a personal definition (a student-centered measure) or was based on broadening access to postsecondary institutions (O'Banion, 2010). The completion agenda has redefined success from the public policy perspective to mean graduation from a defined program of study (Rhoades, 2012). This is not a small change as it moves the goal of higher education beyond simply getting students in the door or helping them to learn, to a much more definite and purposeful goal. Completion has become the key determining factor in success and federal policy and many state policies are shifting to recognize this new goal above all other considerations (Humphreys, 2012; Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011).

This raises a myriad of issues for institutions and their leaders to consider. One of the largest themes in the literature is looking at the completion agenda from the perspective of capacity. This is a chief concern in the community college sector as the Obama Administration has made it clear much of the 60% goal will fall to community colleges (Humphreys, 2012). Institutions must increase capacity and do so in a manner that does not compromise quality or place graduates in fields with poor job placement potential (McCalla-Wriggins, 2000). As institutions struggle with funding decreases from state governments this capacity challenge has become all the more daunting (Walters, 2012). Institutions are being forced to find creative methods for increasing capacity with stagnant or declining funding (Humphreys, 2012; Titus, 2006). There is a limit to the creativity and often times the capacity demands result in institutions demanding faculty and staff do more with less (Barrett, 2005; Humphreys, 2012). This raises significant concerns as to the long-term viability of adding capacity without identifying systems to support the influx of students (Titus, 2006). At the federal level the completion agenda has largely been without funding (McLendon, Tuchmayer, & Park, 2010) and the most significant foundation funding has gone to research not capacity building (Rhoades, 2012). Without a clear mechanism for supporting the resources required to build capacity some argue the completion agenda will not be successful (Humphreys, 2012).

Another important concern raised in the literature is the focus on completion could impact the quality of learning. If the public policy only rewards completion what will happen to the classroom and learning experience? Members of the academy fear that students will be warehoused in large lecture halls (both in person and online) and pushed through the system without real consideration if they have learned anything of value (Rhoades, 2012). There is a real concern that the demands of completion will lead to a further commodification of the postsecondary experience and student learning will be sacrificed for completion (Rhoades, 2012).

Regardless of these concerns, the completion agenda was the policy priority of the Obama Administration and is still supported by significant foundations in the higher education world. These goals have found their way to many state level policies as well (Walters, 2012) and do not appear to be going away any time soon. It will be necessary for institutions and educational professions to understand the full scope of the completion agenda and how it affects their work and students.

Current Issues in Higher Education Policy. As mentioned in Chapter One, most higher education policy implementation literature focuses on the macro-level. Kohoutek

(2013) provides a history of policy implementation in higher education and finds a field of study that lacks sector-specific theories on policy implementation and a majority of research is based on top-down theories from other fields of study. This creates an opportunity for a study such as this that explores an overlooked aspect of the higher education policy implementation process. By providing insight into the micro-level of policy implementation this study will help narrow the ill-defined focus of higher education policy implementation literature.

In the following two sub-sections, I discuss two research areas of research in the higher education public policy field of study that are of interest to this study. These two areas of literature are of particular interest as they reflect the current status of the completion agenda. As mentioned in the note at the start of chapter one, this study was developed and research collected when the completion agenda was at the fore of higher education policy. In the subsequent years, there has been a change in administration which has de-emphasized the completion agenda as a policy priority of the US Department of Education. However, the completion agenda remains an important part of the policy agenda for states and the foundation community. The following two sub-sections explore the key areas for the current incarnation of the completion agenda.

Performance Funding. While the foundation and federal focus has been on completion, the states have been left to determine the mechanisms to increase completion as part of their higher education public policy program. To this end, most states have employed a performance funding model to incentivize institutions to focus on improving completion (Bowerman & Jen, 2012). The states seek to reward schools that move students through their programs of study in an efficient and effective manner (Burke & Minassians, 2001). For example, in Michigan this has meant incentivizing institutions to have students complete their degrees in STEM fields within five years (Bowerman & Jen, 2012). The more students that complete their degrees on time, the more funding increases the institution receives (Bowerman & Jen, 2012). However, a recent study found that the limited financial incentives of the model have resulted in few changes in institutional decision making (Opoczynski, 2016).

Performance funding is not a new concept in higher education policy. Tennessee was the first to adopt performance funding in the late 1970's (Sanford & Hunter, 2011). Following Tennessee, some states adopted the practice in the mid-1990s as a means to increase access and retention (Burke & Minassians, 2001; Miao, 2012). However, the results of this policy are not entirely clear. In the states that adopted performance funding the measured outcomes did not dramatically increase as the policy makers had predicted (McClendon, et al, 2006; Tandberg, Hillman, & Barakat, 2014; Hillman 2016; Opoczynski, 2016). Further, the increases in the performance outcomes did not out pace similar increases in non-performance funded states (McClendon, et al, 2006; Sanford & Hunter, 2011; Tandberg, Hillman, & Barakat, 2014; Hillman 2016). Dougherty & Reedy (2011) found that performance funding policies did effect the response from institutions causing them to become more aware of data and outcomes as it relates to state policy. This resulted in the increased use of student performance data in institutional policy-making and planning, and changes to academic and student services connected to student outcomes (Dougherty & Reedy, 2011). Despite these mixed results, performance funding saw a resurgence as a policy tool that many states employed in the 2000's (McClendon et al., 2006). It is interesting to note that a number of states have abandoned performance funding models due in part to the mixed results and opposition from institutions (Dougherty, Natow, & Vega, 2012). However, performance funding models are once again on an upswing with many states readopting old models and/or adding performance factors into existing funding models in what Daugherty & Natow (2015) term "performance funding 2.0." As of 2016, 37 states employed some type of performance funding model in their higher education budget (Opoczynski, 2016).

It is interesting to note that the reemergence of performance funding in the 2010s is likely tied to the success of Republicans in winning gubernatorial elections in 2010. Daugherty and colleagues (2014a) found that states with Republican governors were much more likely to implement performance funding models. Since the 2010 election, nine states with newly elected Republican governors implemented performance funding models (Daugherty et al., 2014a). This builds off of the findings of McClendon et al. (2006) that found Republican state legislators favored performance funding models. Daugherty et al. (2014b) found that Republican governors, appointed higher education commissioners, and business leaders in three states (Indiana, Ohio, and Tennessee) favored the implementation of performance funding as a means to increase graduation rates. These policy makers viewed increases in post-secondary completion as necessary for economic recovery and growth (Daugherty et al., 2014b).

Critics of performance funding argue that it could lead to institutions restricting admissions and access to students that are better prepared to graduate within four years. This is described as “creaming” (from the cream of the crop colloquialism) where institutions enroll students that fit the performance metrics rather than serving access missions (Daugherty et al., 2014b). There is also a concern that a focus on completion could result in lowered academic standards to meet completion goals (Lahr et al., 2014).

In the current environment of limited resources, institutions have to consider the performance funding metrics as they make internal policy decisions. Failing to do so could result in stagnant funding or minimal increases (Bowerman & Jen, 2012). And even as the proportion of state appropriations in university general fund budgets has grown smaller and smaller, potential funding increases of even one million dollars are significant. Thus, performance funding has remained as the primary method state governments have to influence institutional policies and priorities toward retention and completion.

Student Success. Another growing body of literature is focused on the efforts of policy makers to foster what has been term comprehensive reform geared at student success (Maxwell & Person, 2016). Most of this research focuses on the community college sector and aims to understand the reforms taking place across the sector to improve student success. However, as Maxwell and Person (2016) point out one of the stumbling blocks in this area of research is that a consistent definition of student success does not exist. As the completion agenda is focused on retention and completion, I will discuss a few studies that expand beyond retention and completion in their definition of student success.

The need for institutions to better capture and utilize data in planning and policy making processes is the focus of several studies (Bailey, 2016; Brock, Thomas, & Rutschow, 2016). These researchers argue that comprehensive reform is not possible until community colleges improve their institutional data. The expanded view of student success includes reforms that ensure programs of study and curriculums are career ready (Person & Thibeault, 2016) and changes in remedial/development programs that prepare students for college-level academic learning (Edgecombe, 2016). Other research has focused on specific academic skills that improve student learning, in particular the success of a writing support program showed that improving student writing lead to better outcomes (Barhoum, 2018).

In many respects the student success movement is the current form of the completion agenda as it has come to dominate the discussion of student services and affairs (Picton, Kahu, & Nelson, 2018). As the completion agenda has diffused to the states and foundations it has taken the form of student success. In the current environment, almost all work with students by non-faculty professionals is framed by a focus on student success (Wood & Beyer, 2017). As this focus has expanded to include almost all of student affairs it has also expanded beyond simply retention and completion (Picton, Kahu, & Nelson, 2018). However, as York et al. (2015) have demonstrated retention and completion remain at the core of any definition of student success. It is difficult to overstate how much the talk of student success dominates the literature in any topic related to higher education students. A search of scholarly articles in the last three years using the ERIC database finds almost 4,000 results related to student success. The student success movement is rooted in the same ideas as the completion agenda (York et al., 2015) and as the current incarnation of the completion agenda shows the continued relevance of studying the completion agenda.

The student success movement literature is a growing field and is being propelled by many of the same forces that have driven the completion agenda – large foundations and state governments. The research in this area will be interesting to follow and offers insights for further research on the completion agenda and policy implementation.

Literature Gap. Presently, there is little research in the higher education field that addresses policy implementation research at the micro-level. As Cohen (1990) has shown the experiences of front-line service providers that actually implement the policy changes are vital to more fully understanding the process of policy implementation. This study addresses this gap by providing the perspective of academic advisors as they work with students in the policy environment created by the completion agenda. This will be a new addition to the higher education policy literature and provide a unique perspective to the study of public policy implementation.

Academic Advising

Academic Advisors Role in Retention/Completion. It was not until Vincent Tinto's original work, *Leaving College* (1975), was published that the study of institutional factors in retention and completion became common, before Tinto most research looked only at student characteristics to determine the causes of student attrition. In the forty-plus years since Tinto (1975) advanced his theory that student retention is an ongoing process of interactions between the student and the academic and social systems of the university, a body of literature has grown that clearly demonstrates the influence institutional factors have on student success when it is defined as retention and completion. A number of studies have focused on the role of positive student and faculty interactions in advancing retention and completion (Patton, et. al., 2006 and Young, 2010).

And while the student and faculty role is important Kuh (2001) found that it is one of many factors and there are a variety institutional factors outside of student and faculty interactions that play a role in retention. Habley (2004) found that quality interactions between a student a concerned individual on campus, usually an academic advisor, is a primary factor in student retention. As Lowenstein (2005) points out, an excellent advisor does the same for a student's entire curriculum as an excellent teacher does for one course. These works built off the findings of Light (2001) and Nutt (2003) that found academic advising was vital to student success and retention efforts. The role of academic advising in student success is presented by Campbell and Nutt (2008) as providing a visible demonstration of student satisfaction and learning through the experiences of student that are well served and engaged in their campus.

Student satisfaction has long been a primary focus of research on academic advising. Numerous studies have focused on gauging student satisfaction with the academic advising process (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Hemwall & Trachte, 2003; Propp and Rhodes, 2006). While student satisfaction is important it does not fully capture the relevance of academic advising to student retention and completion. Breaking away from this trend of the research Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, and Hawthorne (2013) conducted a large-scale study to determine the role of academic advising in student success as defined by retention and completion. The authors found that academic advising did have a positive impact on student success and that engaged advisors improved student outcomes. The study did find that differences emerged with regard to the advisement of demographically diverse student populations. The following year Smith and Allen (2014) conducted an even larger study that found students that had contact with an advisor reported knowledge and attitudes consistent with retention and completion. Much the same was found by Kot (2014) as students that engaged with an advisor had higher GPAs and were more likely to be retained from the first year to second year of college. The body of literature that demonstrates the positive connection between academic advising and student success, retention, and completion has continued to grow and numerous studies have shown the impact advising has on retention and completion (White, 2015; Campbell, Nutt, & Joslin, 2017; Joslin, 2018; Thomas & McFarlane, 2018). Campbell and colleagues (2017) provide a comprehensive review of the role of advisors in supporting retention and completion and find them to be essential to student success and developing students throughout their college career.

The literature related to the role of academic advisors in increasing retention and completion is extensive and clearly demonstrates that academic advisors play a key role in retention and completion. The body of literature on academic advisors makes clear that they are key players in the process of interactions between students and their institutions that lead to retention and completion that Tinto first identified in 1975.

Academic Advisors and Public Policy. NACADA (2006) holds that academic advising is a directed learning activity in which advisors and students engage in a process to develop the student's program of study in a manner that is in-keeping with university policy and regulations. Advisors serve in this role to support the student as they advance in their studies within the parameters set by the institution. Academic advisors are called on to serve both the student and their institutions in a collaborative manner (NACADA, 2005). This means that the advisor must connect the student's program of study to the goals of the institution. As part of upholding this value of academic advising, advisors recognize the importance of completion and time to degree in their work (Spight, 2013). Institutions' increased focus on completion and time to degree has resulted in a renewed focus on the work of advisors and the need for comprehensive academic advising services from enrollment to graduation (Nutt, 2013). The positive effects of advising on completion, time to degree, and successful major selection have been long established in the advising literature (O'Banion, 1994). Numerous studies have shown that positive and supportive academic advising relationships lead to increases in student retention and completion (Gordon & Habley, 2000; Light, 2001); improved major and career choice decision making (Creamer, 2000; McCalla-Wriggins, 2000); and successful academic and professional goal achievement (Crookston, 1972; Cuseo, 2004; Light, 2001; O'Banion, 1994).

However, while the advising literature has highlighted the many positive aspects of successful academic advising on completion and time to degree only passing attention has been paid to the role that academic advisors have in effecting the overarching public policy goals that are pushing these topics to the top of the higher education agenda. There is nothing in the peer-reviewed literature that connects the professional practice of academic advisors to the implementation of these top-line policy goals. We know that the policy goals are important considerations for the daily work of advisors (Nutt, 2013) but there is nothing to connect this work to the success or failure of the policy goals under consideration in the present study. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature by understanding the policy implementation process from the perspective of the regular professional practice of academic advisors. The present study will seek discover how do the policy goals impact the advisors work with students, colleagues, and faculty; how organizational structures affect the implementation of the policy goals; and how the implementation of the policies is affected by the work of advisors. This research will fill the gap in the advising literature and provide a basis for continued study on the topic within the research communities interested in academic advising.

Advising as a Unique Feature of Postsecondary Education. NACADA (2006) asserts that academic advisors scope of profession practice encompasses the following role within postsecondary institutions:

> "Academic advising, based in the teaching and learning mission of higher education, is a series of intentional interactions with a curriculum, a pedagogy, and a set of student learning outcomes. Academic advising synthesizes and contextualizes students' educational experiences within the frameworks of their aspirations, abilities and lives to extend learning beyond campus boundaries and timeframes." (NACADA, 2006, para 5)

This work is set within the confines of the institution in which the advisor works and the curriculum of the advisor’s institution. NACADA (2006) sets the following guideline for the professional practice of advisors within their institutions:

> “This curriculum includes, but is not limited to, the institution’s mission, culture and expectations; the meaning, value, and interrelationship of the institution’s curriculum and co-curriculum; modes of thinking, learning, and decision-making; the selection of academic programs and courses; the development of life and career goals; campus/community resources, policies, and procedures; and the transferability of skills and knowledge.” (NACADA, 2006, para 2).

Therefore, the advisors professional practice is bound with the structures and settings of the institutions where they work.

Most of the literature related to institutional organizational factors that impact student retention and persistence (the public policy goals focused on in the proposed study) focuses on factors such as selectivity (Chen, 2012; Gansemer-topf & Schuh, 2006; Kugelmass & Ready, 2011; Pike, 2013) and not surprisingly have found that more selective institutions have higher completion and persistence rates. Institutional expenditures related to student retention have also been the focus of researchers (Gansemer-topf & Schuh, 2006; Pike, Kuh, Mccormick, Ethington, & Smart, 2011) and these studies have found increased and focused spending on retention and completion efforts have led to increases in both areas of concern. However, the literature is missing studies that look at the systematic structures in which staff members working on persistence and completion operate within. The literature has numerous studies that look at organizational factors as outcomes but none that look at the impact the organizational systems have on the work of advisors (and others engaged in retention and completion programs). This study will address this gap in the literature and provide a better understanding of how organizational structures and systems impact the professional practice of those charged with increasing completion and persistence rates.

Summary

This study addresses the gap in both the higher education policy and advising literature by providing a first-person exploration of the experiences of academic advisors in the policy environment of the completion agenda and how that environment has influenced their work with students.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological considerations for the present study. These research methods allow the researcher to better understand the experiences of advisors as they do their work in the current public policy environment. This was accomplished by studying the regular work setting of advisors and the policies that guide this work setting. To do this I used qualitative interviewing techniques to gather the rich context of the advisor's experiences. The ensuing chapter discusses each of the components of the researcher's methodological approach.

Sample

The unit of analysis for the study are academic advisors. The participants in the study are nine academic advisors at three broad access regional public universities in the Midwest. I employed an intentional sampling approach, colleges and staffs willing to work with the researcher that fit the following profile (Creswell, 2009):

- The university has a centralized all-university undergraduate advising office;
- The advising office employs at least three advisors (not including the office director);
- The university is a broad access public institution that is in the last quartile of six-year graduation rates for public universities in its state.

After researching, via the Common Data Set and university websites, to find the institutions that matched the profile requirements, I contacted potential participants directly after securing the authorization of the appropriate administrator within the institution. The initial contact was conducted over email and most subsequent contacts were also handled over email.

Data Collection

The present study will follow an exploratory approach to research the work and experiences of academic advisors at three universities of similar size and mission. Seeking to better understand how advisors experience changes in policy and role lends itself to narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016). By prompting the advisors to tell the story of their experience it allows for a richer understanding of these experiences. The narrative inquiry approach reveals how the participants view and understand their experiences (Josselson, 2011). This will provide data that is rich in context and conveys the experiences of the subjects in their own words. The voice of the frontline service provider is rarely heard in policy discussions and this study will give these voices a forum for consideration as the experiences of academic advisors influence the success of retention and completion efforts.

The source of data will be interviews with advisors that focus on the advisors' work experiences within the policy environment created by the completion agenda. I conducted the interviews following a semi-structured format. This allowed the advisors experience to guide the conversation and allow them to build their narrative. Seidman's (2006) approach to stories being the key to knowing and understanding was my primary influence in developing my interview protocol and approach. I also acknowledged that the interview process is an encounter between two individuals with differing perceptions of power and authenticity (Nunkoosing, 2005). Thus, I worked to create a comfortable and trusting environment for the interview. All interviews were conducted in the subject's office and I made every effort to insure the subject's open and free consent to participation in the study.

Site Selection

Understanding the relationship between the work of advisors and policy goal implementation is important across sectors and locations for both advisors and policy makers. However, a cross-sectional and multi-regional study is outside of the scope of the present research. As such, it was necessary to find a research setting that provided opportunities to discover the context of advisor's experiences in a sector of higher education responsive to the changes brought on by the completion agenda. Regional public universities with broad access policies and large undergraduate student populations that also have low six-year completion rates provided just such a setting. The three broad access regional public universities used as sites in this study have the three lowest six-year graduations rate in their state. Each institution has developed a degree completion and retention plan (DCRP) as a result of these low numbers and the shifting policy environment (Institutional websites 2014). These DCRPs are comprehensive plans that call for changes to admissions policies, advising programs and structures, and academic support programs (Institutional websites, 2014). Many of the changes called for in the DCRPs have direct connections to the some of the completion agenda programs highlighted in Chapter One. For instance, one of the DCRPs calls for a change in university policy to streamline the process of applying for graduation and audit existing student files to find students eligible or nearly eligible for graduation, this is the mission of IHEP's Project Win-Win. The DCRPs are an institutional priority as evidenced by its prominent position in official university communications and dedicated websites. Therefore, these settings allowed the researcher to study how the advisors within institutions directly impacted by the completion agenda respond to the policy changes that are part of the completion agenda. The settings all matched the criteria discussed in the Sample section above. Additionally, the three sites are each in a different geographic setting (urban, suburban, and rural). All three sites serve similar and diverse undergraduate student populations.

Table 1: Common Data Set Highlights 2018-2019

	University A	University B	University C
Six-year Graduation Rate	44%	43%	43%
First-year Retention Rate	71%	72%	77%
UG Total Enrollment	16,997	6.097	7,739
First-year acceptance	73%	66%	77%

Participants

As discussed above, recruitment for the study was conducted through both direct and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2009). After identifying the sites which matched the criteria I contacted all of the advisors at each institution via email to gauge interest in participation in the study. At each campus, I promptly heard back from at least one advisor and I promptly followed up with each of these advisors to further discuss the study and ask their assistance in helping to contact their office colleagues to participate.

This led to the other participants agreeing to join the study and interviews were conducted over the summer semester as the advisors had more schedule flexibility during this time period. The following chart outlines additional information on the participants:

Table 2: Participant Information

	Years in position	Years at current univ.	Years as an advisor	Highest Degree
Advisor 1	1	1	14	MS
Advisor 2	2	2	4	MSW
Advisor 3	15	27	20	MA
Advisor 4	1.5	1.5	7	MA
Advisor 5	1	3	1	MA
Advisor 6	>1	>1	>1	MA
Advisor 7	16	27	16	MA
Advisor 8	2	10	7.5	MA/MPA
Advisor 9	>1	3	>1	MA

Data Collection

I conducted all of the interviews face to face and subjects were interviewed in their office or in a conference room within their office suite. The interviews usually lasted 45 minutes to one hour. With the consent of the participants each interview was audio recorded. The total recorded time for all of the interviews was 364.24 minutes with the longest interview running for 1.04 hours.

The interview protocol (Appendix B) was developed using the guidance of Glesne (2011) and Seidman (2006). The protocol begins with a few close-ended questions regarding the participants professional and educational background. The remainder of the interview protocol is focused on the collection of narrative data. As this was an exploratory study seeking to create a narrative of the experiences of advisors the protocol was designed to allow the advisors to tell their stories using as few prompts as possible. As such the questions were open ended and sequenced in a manner that would lead to the participant building their own story via their responses.

The Michigan State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study as exempt in May 2016 (see Appendix C). All interviews began with the verbal reading of the IRB approved consent form (Appendix A), and although not required as an exempt study each participant signed a consent form and retained one for their records. I made it clear participants could stop the interview at any time or chose not to answer any question. Participants were assured of their confidentiality both in the written results of the research and in the protection of the data using password protected files and secure physical storage.

Data Analysis

As this study seeks to explore the experiences of academic advisors in the policy environment created by the completion agenda by telling the story of advisors in their own words, I rely almost entirely on the approach to narrative inquiry and analysis outlined by Seidman (2006). This is a labor-intensive process (Seidman, 2006) that dives deep into each interview to extract the context and meaning of the participants experience. Seidman (2006) suggests that this methodological approach “allows us to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis (p. 119).” The first step in the process was to audio record each interview. All participants agreed to having the interviews recorded and signed the consent form which included consent of recording. I also kept notes during the interview and wrote a few reflections of each interview immediately after the interview concluded. The notes helped to guide my memory of each interview during the analysis process (Glesne, 2011). Seidman (2006) argues that an accurate transcript of the interview is essential to creating the narrative profile of each participant. Therefore, I had each interview transcribed by a transcription service and checked each transcript by confirming its accuracy from a three, two-minute-long samples of each interview.

Once I was assured that each transcript was accurate I began the process of creating the narrative profile of each participant. I read each transcript and marked the passages of interest and labeled each of the passages. I kept a running list of each passage label. I then grouped the passage labels together based on similarity and found the that three larger themes emerged from the labels. At this point, I followed Seidman’s (2006) second phase of profile creation and cut and pasted the passages of interest from each participant into a new edited transcript of their interview. I then reread each of the edited transcripts to find the interviews which best lent themselves to crafting a narrative profile. Seidman (2006) suggests that one in three interviews lend themselves to creation of a narrative profile and with nine participants I was able to find three participants for a narrative profile that best represented each of three themes that emerged in the first phase of analysis. In a slight deviation from Seidman (2006), I did not remove as much of the participants' responses as he suggests. Due to constraints of opportunity and time I had just one interview with each subject to work with and therefore had less content to edit than from the three interviews per participant that Seidman suggests. Nevertheless, I was able to craft the three narrative profiles following Seidman's format of keeping each profile in the participants own words with minimal clarifying statements and transition prompts from researcher and the narratives are in the order of response from the participant. This allows each profile to be a first-person story of their experience in the context of the participant's thoughts and words (Seidman, 2006).

Throughout the process of creating the narrative profiles I made every effort to protect the identity of each participant and respect their dignity and the dignity of their work (Seidman, 2006). This resulted in generic labels for each participant and each research setting. I also eliminated the patterns of speech that did not add to the context of the narrative and could be distracting (um, err, hmm, etc.).

In order to fully explain what I have learned about the research question and the experiences of advisors the three chapters that follow this one will present the narrative profiles which best represent each of the three themes. I will then discuss the profile's connection to the theme and use examples from the other participants in the study to further illustrate the theme. This presentation format follows Seidman's (2006) suggestion to doctoral students for sharing their research: “Each researcher would be able to make explicit what she has learned about the subjects the presentation of the profiles and also through connecting those profile to the experience of others in her sample” (p. 124).

Positionality

I have not worked as an advisor, and approached the question from a policy perspective. I view academic advising as a teaching and learning process as opposed to a student affairs process. I have no connections, either direct or in-direct, to any of the universities that the advisors work at and for one site was actually my first-time visiting that campus. None of these positionality points appeared to be a major issue during my interactions with the participants. All the interviews had a collegial feel and the participants welcomed me as a peer. A few participants might have viewed me as a bit of an outsider but most of that took the form of showcasing their university. This took the form of talking about a new building on campus or discussing a successful academic program (e.g. a recent win of a college forensics competition team). Most of the showcasing took place in pre-interview small-talk and was over by the time the interview formally began. It did not appear to me that any of these discussions effected the participants’ responses during the interview.

Limitations

There are three primary limitations of this study. The first is the site selection. The sites were selected based on sector and graduation rates. While it is a fair assumption to make that advisors at these universities might feel the pressures of the completion agenda more than advisors in other sectors or with higher graduation rates there is no data to confirm this assumption.

The second limitation is the recruitment and selection of participants. The intentional sampling of each university's central advising office is not a limitation in and of itself, however relying on the first advisor to respond to serve not only as the first subject but a recruiter for other participants within their office has the potential to limit the data collected. There is the potential that the participants referred and recruited by the first participant have similar experiences as the recruiter. This limitation could mean that all the participants from one of the cites are close work peers and share the similar thoughts on their work environment. This could limit the study by only providing one perspective within the office that might or might not be the perspective of all advisors in the office.

The third limitation is true for all qualitative studies of this size and that is lack of generalizability (Creswell, 2009). However, the narrative profile approach might not lend itself to generalizability to provides deep and rich context of first-person experience which is an addition to the literature. None of these limitations are fatal to the study but it is important to keep them in mind when considering the data presented.

Chapter 4

Introduction

This chapter and the following two chapters will focus on the experiences of academic advisors to the policy environment created by the completion agenda. Each chapter will begin with a narrative profile of one advisor that best exemplifies the experiences related to one of the three themes that emerged from the findings. These themes are (1) Advisors are disconnected from the policy process (2) Advisors are student focused, not policy goal focused (3) Tension between the advising office and other units on campus. The data collected from the three interviews will be presented in the advisors' own voice. Following the narrative profile format as recommended by Seidman (2006), this will be accomplished by connecting the responses to the interview questions into a narrative that explains each advisor's experiences. The text in each narrative profile will be the advisor's own words as recorded and transcribed, text in italics are the researcher's additions for topic transition and clarity. Following each of the narratives the theme will be discussed using examples from other interviews that further inform the issues related to the theme. Following these chapters, Chapter Seven will offer analysis of the data based on the frameworks outlined in Chapter One and discuss the study's implications for practice, theory, and research.

Advisors at Work – Disconnected from the Policy Process

"Okay, so I see the academic advising role as one of guiding students ideally from entry into the university to help support them in exploring appropriate majors for them. Learning about their interests, their skills and abilities as they go along, helping them develop their study skills. Transition skills. Transitioning skills into college. Helping coach them to be a successful student.

My dream come true is to shepherd someone from entering to retaining to graduating to becoming an involved and engaged alum. That’s my dream come true. Since I've just started here in August, I haven’t seen that full cycle yet, but the idea of cradle to grave, if you will, with this process. My role is in terms of roles, it’s like very individualized, very one student at a time as my lens. That is my primary lens.

In fact, on my desk at *my prior job*, I had a note that literally said ‘one at a time.’ It is about what the person sitting in that chair needs at that moment. If I can get it, great. If I can't, referral.

I actually think it’s (*academic advising*) a critical role at the institution because the primary mission of the institution is about supporting the education and development of the student. I feel like I’m at ground zero in attempting to help make that mission come to fruition, and I feel actually really honored to be part of that part of the experience.

I believe—I made a career change to do this, because I really believe in it. I took a gigantic pay cut to come do this. I really do believe in academic advising is a pivotal activity that happens at the institution.

I think that the institution knows of the importance of the role. I definitely think that the institution knows of the importance of the role. I don’t always think that they understand the mechanics of it and exactly how it works, and so I think that there are definitely unrealistic expectations of what can happen in this role with students.

(*On the institution not understanding the mechanics of the work*) Yeah. I actually have a really salient example. We have a brand-new degree auditing system called Degree Works that has just gone live, probably within the last month. It’s going to be a great tool. It really is.

It’s superior to the tool that existed before. People who have conceived or put this tool into action really are keen on this tool has the ability for students to create a four-year plan, to graduate in four years, based on major.

They’ve spent a lot of time promoting this plan, and this has happened at the very highest level, and promises have been made that when a student comes here for orientation, they're going to get handed a four-year plan. I think, in theory, that’s a great idea, but the plans were made for fictional students. They're not made for the students who are actually here.

For example, there would be an actuarial math major. The plan is built so that that student starts at a higher math level that many of our students are testing into, and so it’s a great tool and a great idea, but it’s not realistic for the student population.

The advisor from this office who was on the committee said over and over again, handing a student a four-year plan at orientation is not realistic. We have to have a conversation with them first to find out are they in the right major, do they see this as the path that they are going to follow.

The committee putting this into place was so marching off the cliff of the, ‘This is a retention tool. This is a retention tool. This is graduation tool. This is graduation tool.’ Those are the two buzzwords in higher-ed right now. Retention and graduation. The administration was so convinced that this tool was magic that they weren't listening to what the person who actually had experience with it was saying. The plan will be valuable after an advisor has met with and talked with a student. Creation of a plan on the advisor end takes a long, long time. Because we're still learning how to do it. The templates don't work, because, like I said, we might have students testing in at a much lower level, and so we have to create them by hand.

If you have 30 students coming to an orientation session and you're building 30 plans and each one takes you an hour, it's a tremendous amount of effort to then have that student show up at orientation and say, "Oh, I'm not doing that major."

That's part of retention, it's marching off the cliff because someone has been sold that this is a retention tool. It probably is. It needs to be tweaked for the reality of what the students need, and being sensitive to the advisor who said, "Let's not do it when they arrive. Do it mid-semester or at the beginning of their second semester when things have settled, and we can say, 'Is this the right major?'" Before we invest all this time in creating a document that's useless.

Oh, I think it's *(retention*) a top priority. I sincerely believe that there are so many people here who want and value as positive educational experience for the students as possible. As far as I can tell, there is tremendous disagreement about how to do that.

The chancellor came in a few years ago as new leadership always does, and shook things up, and brought in—got rid of a lot of people who have been here for a long time, and brought in a lot of new people, and so I feel like there's a lot of—I'm seeing a lot of instability at director and above levels.

I would say that it’s creating a lot of uncertainty at the lower level. From the time I arrived in August, it was this office might change any day now. Literally. I feel like that’s how that plays out, that there’s disagreement about how to do it. That there’s new people, new ideas, and there’s just a lot of shaking up involved, and until the staffing changes all get secured, there’s going to be instability. Top priority, but not a lot of follow-through yet.

I think that people above me think that they're communicating and are sharing information, but the reality is I think at my level, we don’t feel like we know it very much at all. It is, I think, that people think they're being collaborative.

Instead, it’s hierarchy. That would be one of those tensions. The being given assignments rather than having the group of advisors being told the goals of the office, and, ‘Hey, how do you think we can get there?’ We are given assignments. That’s, I think, a mistake, because I think that the advisors could help issue spot in a way that we’re not being—a skillset and knowledgebase is not being taken advantage of that exists. We get assignments.

Well, I think that the goal of retention and graduation are good ones. When you retain students, that is an indicator that students are feeling like they're succeeding, that they're meeting their goals. Students who are not retained. Sometimes, it’s good reasons that they're not retained.

They stop out for one reason or another. Graduation is a positive goal as well, because it can lead to opportunities in life. I think as barometers for how well the institution doing its job, it’s a good one. But I can't want it more than the student does.

There is a tension between retain, retain, retain, retain, but I can't be the one who gets the degree for them. In the end, they have to do it. I can set the conditions, they have to take advantage of them. I can help set the conditions, they have to take advantage of the opportunity.

In the moment with students, it's all good. That's really positive. The things that are, I think, there are impediments to the current structure of the office in the way that we're managed and the way the workload is managed that gets in the way of my doing a great job. I think I keep them *(students*) alive, rather than doing a great job and helping them thrive.

For example: Yep. I am a generalist advisor. I do not have a lot to offer a mechanical engineering student who has earned 114 credits and wants to come to me and find out what classes to take the next semester.

It really, for a quality advising experience, should be seen in their department. For convenience sake, the office welcomes them in here and they keep coming here because it's easy and it's convenient, rather than doing what's best for them, which is going to the department. I can rule at helping a freshman who's undecided, make a decision, and look at options, and help create strategies for, 'Let's try this. Okay, let's try this.' Provide resources for helping make that decision.

I have very little to offer in terms of a quality advising experience when someone with 100 credits comes in and is computer information systems major. They need to be seen in their department, and this office insists that we see any student at any time who wants to be seen here. That's a problem.

Further policy frustrations: I disagree with measurements of retention and graduation rates that are in place by government policies. For example, a student—as retention and graduation rates in published, reported to IPEDs and the Department of Education, if a student comes here for one year and then transfers to Michigan State, I don't think that's a failure. It gets treated like a failure. We take a hit on our retention rate because that student left.

We might not have the major that that student wanted, and so for them to go to another institution and graduate from that institution with another major is not a failure. I feel like that is something that's a silly rule. Redefining the way retention and graduation rates are measured would be good.

I agree that retention can, in general, be a good barometer for how an institution is doing, but not in all cases. I think that a 6-year graduation rate actually is meaning that you have six years from the time a student enters till the time they graduate to count them in your rates, but students come back later and graduate.

Those still get counted in. The student still gets the degree, but it doesn't impact your statistics. I think that's a problem as well, and so I feel like that could be fixed. There are things that make it—I think there's positive things there when it doesn't always appear so based on those kinds of numbers.

I think that's what happening right now. Our retention and graduation—our graduation rate is terrible. That people are freaking out because of policies, and it's making the problem more transparent, so I think that that is a good thing.

That our graduation rates are low compared to other institutions. That measuring exists has made people pay attention and go, “Whoa. You need to do better around there.” I think that’s a good thing, but I think what’s happening is right now it’s people freaking out because they're feeling pressured to increase those rates suddenly.

Definitely this freak out effects my work. I believe in intrusive advising, but I feel like my definition, the way that I learned it when in grad school is different from what I’m experiencing now in that hierarchical way I told you about. The way that I understand intrusive advising to be, it was about more than just sliding a student class schedule, but rather getting to know them.

Getting to know their goals, their interests, their ability at least. Their values. What they want to have happen at the other end. Making sure that they knew that they were being heard, and then having a discussion, and coming up with a plan that works for them.

That’s my understanding of intrusive advising, which was getting in and understanding the whole person, rather than just a class schedule. What I am feeling now with this current leadership is more of the—I’m feeling a pressure to do the—what do you call it? In locus parentis, in place of the parent, where we are being told if a student misses a tutoring appointment, we are meant to call them and remind them to go to tutoring. I just could not disagree with that more as a use of my time.

The problem if a student is missing class or is missing tutoring or is missing advising appointments, the problem goes much deeper than, “Don’t forget to go to your tutoring appointment." I have to have a much different conversation with them than just, "Go to tutoring. Go to tutoring. Go to tutoring."

That puts me in place of the parent. I don't think that's a good idea. What makes the dream come true is that they do it themselves - the motivation to complete is intrinsic, right? As long as I'm calling them to remind them to go to tutoring appointments, it's extrinsic. It's coming from the outside.

Now I believe there's an opportunity for developmental advising in there with the freshmen, to talk about ways of managing time and appropriate behaviors. If I've got a junior who's not going to a tutoring appointment, I just feel like that's a different problem. I'm trying to imagine what that conversation's going to look like.

Another critique I have is that this office is expected to—we have recently been told that we need to assume responsibility for helping coach them through their financial aid. That we need to get really intrusive about their ability to pay for this, and get into their financials. I'm very uncomfortable with that. I am not trained in financial aid, and while I know some basic things, I feel like those conversations should be happening over there, and I'm uncomfortable delving into somebody's financials.

In reacting to these frustrations, I feel like I only am allowed to react to what is told to me. I don't feel any agency in helping create at any level.

Despite all of that my allegiance is to what do they (*student)* need at that moment first. If you were a freshman sitting in that chair right now, and I had a reason to believe based on an assessment that you did that you would be thinking of transferring, I would say, "Hey, are you thinking of transferring?"

If they said yes, I would say, “Okay, tell me more about what the reasons are.” I would be looking to see are there ways that that could be satisfied here? I will always say to a student, “I won't be coy. We want you to graduate from here. We recruited you, we want you. We want you to graduate here. We’d be proud to have you.” Then I always make a joke. “I’m not going to be weird and tackle and make you stay. I want you to have what you want.” My number one priority is to make sure that they know that they are wanted. That if they are going to leave, I don’t want them badmouthing the place.

I want them to feel like they had a great experience here, because I also know from all the retention and graduation activities and outreach that I did at other institutions, people come back. My top priority is to make sure you're feeling heard, and understood, and if I can solve your problem, I will. If you're going to leave, then I want you to have the best experience possible. If you're going to stay, I still want you to have the best experience possible, because I want you to represent awesome when you go off.

In the end, I do want them to graduate, and if they graduate from here, that’s great, but I want them to feel good about the experience here. Because in the longer run, that’s going to help the institution, too.

I think that we’re never going to have a 100 percent retention and graduation rate. We know that’s not going to happen, right? In the end, if we’re doing enough things right, that should improve. I think that everybody would agree that that was the right thing in the moment to do with that individual.

Yeah. Even if it meant that they were going leave. Because I am not ever going to feel good about feeling like I strong-armed somebody into making a decision. I always want to feel like—that they were my top priority. Again, it's not just—it's not just going to be me that—I'm one part of this, and I think I'm an important part of it, but it's the experience in the classroom.

It's can they afford to be here. It's the goodness of fit. It's do we have the major. It's—did I already say can they afford it? Also, we have a really interesting mix of students here. We have some very high-achieving students who for one reason or another decided that they wanted to stay closer to home, and they commute.

They can get a really great education here. We also have this pretty significant chunk of students who are unprepared. Underprepared, rather for college. That's where I think we need to be focusing our efforts. At the entry level with those underprepared students in coaching them in success strategies. Not doing some of the other things that we do."

Theme Discussion

Advisor 1 provides numerous examples of being frustrated with the policy development process on their campus. Advisor 1 is outside of the process and feels disconnected from policies that are framing their work. This experience was expressed by every advisor interviewed for this paper. At some level, every advisor related an experience that placed them outside of the policy making process and every advisor also expressed how this experience frustrated them. The following chart provides some of the most frequently mentioned instances of these experiences.

Table 3: Frustrations for Advisors

	Yes	No
Feels part of or their voice is heard in the policy making process	1	8
Feels pressure to increase retention and completion	9	0
Experienced policy changes effecting how they worked with students	9	0
Has heard of the Completion Agenda	1	8

Advisor 1 discussed in great depth an experience that highlights the tension between policy creators and policy implementers in this study's theoretical framework (Cohen, Moffit, and Goldin, 2007). The advisors in the office know the new course planning tool will not work and be a great burden of additional work for the advisors. They raise these concerns and are met with deaf ears.

> "The committee putting this into place was so marching off the cliff of the, 'This is a retention tool. This is a retention tool. This is a graduation tool. This is a graduation tool.' Those are the two buzzwords in higher-ed right now. Retention and graduation. The administration was so convinced that this tool was magic that they weren't listening to what the person who actually had experience with it was saying."

The knowledge and experience of the practitioners was disregarded and the new tool was put into place creating more work for the advisors. Advisor 1 was not alone in experiencing this type of frustration. For Advisor 5 the role and structure of the office was the point of frustration, “Sometimes it feels like this office is just designed to push students in and out of doors. Our structure doesn’t allow me to get to really get know most of my students.” The inability to engage with students and create deeper connections because of the structure of the office and volume of students dealt with was a common theme. Advisor 8 discussed this and expressed frustration that serving so many students as the office tries to meet retention and graduation goals, “We have five professional advisors in our office, so to provide the amount of advising for 8,500 undergraduates it’s not a sustainable thing.” When asked if he thought the structure would change Advisor 8 expressed a view similar to Advisor 1’s frustrations “We know advising systems that work and have talked about them. But getting the administration and faculty to support them is a whole other thing. We’re just told to make it *(the present structure)* work.”

In describing their daily work routine and view of the role of academic advisors every participant expressed concern about the structure of their office limiting their ability to connect with students. Every advisor also expressed that in their view to best fulfill the role their institution expects of them in terms of retention and graduation they needed to be able to better connect with students and create more than functional relationships. No participants felt their office was properly staffed or supported and that the volume of students and numerous responsibilities of their office limited their ability to do much more than “drive-in advising” as Advisor 5 termed it. This experience was captured in the thoughts of Advisor 6 when they stated “it’s a double-edged sword really, they tell us what we do is important but then don’t give us the resources to do our jobs properly." Resource allocation and office structures are often the most frustrating institutional policies that the advisors have to deal with.

This frustration over involvement in the policy process is also identified by Advisor 1 when discussing the hierarchical nature of the policy change process.

> "The being given assignments rather than having the group of advisors being told the goals of the office, and, 'Hey, how do you think we can get there?' We are given assignments. That's, I think, a mistake, because I think that the advisors could help issue spot in a way that we're not being—a skillset and knowledgebase is not being taken advantage of that exists. We get assignments."

This is top down approach to making changes intended to improve retention and completion was felt by every participant in the study. Advisor 2 talked about receiving emails with new assignments and not knowing the reason for the change. When asked about the communication of new policies within the office Advisor 2 simply stated "We get emails. No chance to comment or offer thoughts. Just an email telling us what to do." Advisor 6 said the flow of work and fast pace of the office did not leave much time to be involved in larger discussions. "When I see 38 students in one day, I don't have much time to do much else." As Advisor 1 put it "I don't feel any agency in helping to create at any level."

Advisor 1 was not alone in experiencing the stress of having extra duties added to her role when she stated: "Another critique I have is that this office is expected to—we have recently been told that we need to assume responsibility for helping coach them through their financial aid. That we need to get really intrusive about their ability to pay for this, and get into their financials. I'm very uncomfortable with that. I am not trained in financial aid, and while I know some basic things, I feel like those conversations should be happening over there, and I'm uncomfortable delving into somebody's financials." Three other participants also talked about adding financial aid assistance responsibilities to their job duties. Advisor 5 was told this was to enhance retention but he was not sure how it would.

Another common experience within this theme was frustration with how retention and graduation numbers are measured. Again, Advisor 1 offers an example that is representative of this experience for most of the participants:

> "I disagree with measurements of retention and graduation rates that are in place by government policies. For example, a student—as retention and graduation rates in published, reported to IPEDs and the Department of Education, if a student comes here for one year and then transfers to Michigan State, I don't think that's a failure. It gets treated like a failure. We take a hit on our retention rate because that student left.
>
> We might not have the major that that student wanted, and so for them to go to another institution and graduate from that institution with another major is not a failure. I feel like that is something that's a silly rule. Redefining the way retention and graduation rates are measured would be good."

Advisor 3 also shared a common concern for how retention and graduation are calculated, "The real problem is whoever's making the decisions, is there a thoughtful and informed factual process?" When asked if that's how they felt the process worked now Advisor 3 responded "No, absolutely not. I don't think anybody would argue that it is. Do you?"

It is interesting to note that while the participants are all aware of the pressure on their institutions to increase retention and completion rates and that this pressure diffuses down to them through university policy changes, new systems, and overburden office structures they were not aware of the overarching policy change creating this environment. Only one of the participants had heard of the completion agenda and knew some of the details surrounding it. For the most part, the advisors knew retention and completion were priorities but did not concern themselves with public policy. The study participants did not think the overall goal of the completion agenda was negative and most welcomed increased attention to completion. "It's a good idea and I think there should be a level of public accountability" states Advisor 6. However, the most common response to learning about the completion agenda was ambivalence. This was expressed by Advisor 9 "I wouldn't say public policy plays a big part in how I do my job every day."

A few of the participants connected the focus on retention and completion to university funding. However, instead of focusing on retention and completion to increase state funding they viewed these as institutional needs to maintain tuition revenue. Advisor 8 provided the clearest statement on this topic, "We have declining rates of high school graduates and therefore a shrinking pool of potential students which increases the pressure to keep the students we already have enrolled. Our general fund is dependent on tuition. So really retaining students is about our university surviving."

All of the participants in the study understand the focus on retention and completion and agree it should be an institutional priority and priority for their role within the university. However, this did not lessen their concerns about not being part of the policy process within their universities and frustrations about the structure and scope of their offices' responsibility. The advisors are aware of what is shaping their jobs (even if they cannot specifically name the completion agenda) but do not feel empowered to change the policies and structures they must contend with in their roles as academic advisors. The next chapter will discuss how the participants navigate through these policies pressures to best serve their students.

Chapter 5

Advisors at Work – Student Focused, Not Policy Goal Focused

"Essentially, I help to guide students through understanding the requirements for their degree, the policies at the institution. I see my job as being an advocate for students, if they need help with having a difficult conversation or, 'I really thought that this class was going to fit there.' Helping them just navigate the system, really, is how I see my job as.

At *University A,* it is a lot of walk-in students. My typical day is mostly just—I have no idea what's going to happen. Whatever the student comes in with is what I'm doing that day, not necessarily scheduled appointments each day.

I think that the institution expects that we ensure that students are not taking classes that they don't need. It's more of a prescriptive expectation, in my opinion. I think that's everywhere too. I don't think that's unique to *University A*, but it might be just unique to my view of *University A*.

This does not necessarily *fit my view of advising*. I mean it fits with what's expected of me, and it fits with the walk-in environment. For me though, I prefer to build a relationship with students, and have them keep coming back to me, specifically, which is more of how I did things at *my prior campus*, because I was assigned to a specific major, and I could help students deal with not just academic issues but also social things that they're going through during college. I tend to do more of what is called an "appreciative" advising. It's such a buzzword now, trying to make people feel at home, have fun, and interesting things in my office. I don't think that everyone does that, you know?

If I think back to my undergrad career, I didn't have positive experiences with advising, so I think I always try to be a better advisor than maybe what I had experienced. So, personal development yeah, for me I think it's very important. I try to read NACDA journals and I pay for my own NACDA membership, because I think it's important for me to know what the newest research is. I will say, the conferences don't do a lot for me. I don't feel like I get a whole lot out of, basically, any conference anymore. I don't know if it's just me, but—there's only so many times I can sit through certain things. It's really more for me the research aspect, and maybe learning how to do things on the computer, different software programs, more so than, 'Here's how to be an advisor.'

For me a lot of the people here *are not helpful*. Some of them are either super student 'affairsy' and others are just more procedural and just 'here you go.' It's about finding the people that have similar thoughts about advising, I think. I do have that, or I can have if I want it, like I said. I do think that my connections with other advisors are primarily outside of *University A*. Yeah, that's not to say my colleagues here don't support each other. So, if we're having an issue with a certain student, we can definitely, 'Hey, how would you deal with this? What should I do?' Absolutely, but when it comes to more in-depth advising as a profession or things like that, not so much.

On institutional emphasis: I think they prioritize enrollment, but I don't know if that really has to do with undergraduate education. Specifically, about the education, I think they do prioritize general education. They have a very strong general education program, that I was pretty surprised about and liked when I started working here. They, I think, do a good job of making sure students have a breadth of knowledge. Let's see. I think their priorities really are more financially motivated.

Yeah, I think it's numbers. Obviously, they care about learning and they were the state normal college, right? We just had the beginning of the semester. One of the biggest frustrations from the advising side is that the Transfer Admissions Office will bring students over that were, literally, admitted today. They don't have any transcripts on file, and we're supposed to give them classes, and they shouldn't just walk over and register for them —you know, but it's *[claps hands]* get them in, get them into classes.

I understand, financially, you need to make money. I get that but, at the same time, are we setting those students up for failure? Then, as an advisor, all of us pretty much say we think that that's what's happening, but I don't have data to back that up, you know?

Right. I definitely think that the priority is on student retention and persistence, or helping them to achieve a goal, right. Sometimes that's not always a bachelor's degree. Sometimes it's just some credits or a certificate, or whatever. It doesn't necessarily have to be a full degree. It's obviously student dependent—and then just support the students along the way, whereas I think a lot of institutions espouse that, right? They say that that's a priority of theirs, but don't necessarily live that value, in the support and resources that they maybe give to first-line staff. I think, theoretically, I probably agree with what they say that they value, but not necessarily lived. They don't necessarily live those values.

And for me that's the hard part. If I have a student in my office that might need to transfer because of a personal situation or finds a better fit at another campus I will help that student. Even if it means we don't get that count for graduation but if it's what's best for the student it's what I'm going to do. The university says we should support students so that is what I do. I don't think that's what they mean when they say support students but it's how I handle it. I always put the student first – I think a lot of the advisors in this office do too, but we have the university saying support the student but they need to graduate here. I focus on what's best for that student.

I don't feel a part of that process *(in creating the institution values)* for whatever reasons, many reasons. I think that the priorities are communicated to us through actions, right. So, when a student complains, automatically advisors are looked at as, 'Oh, you miss-advised' or chastised, I guess. I don't want to sound negative. I don't want to be so negative.

I also think that expectations or priorities are set by the people in the office, so not necessarily my supervisor coming and saying, "I expect you see 30 people today," yet people in the office will say, 'Oh well, you know, so and so only saw three people, whereas this girl saw 15.' Okay, so is it quantity over quality? My supervisor doesn't say that, but that is the felt expectation or priorities in the offices, whereas what he says is, 'We just help whoever comes in. You help everyone,' and da, da, da, da. This sounds very good, right, but when it comes to actually playing out, I don't know.

This is actually something I was just talking about. There's a newer advisor here, and he and I saw 12 or 11 students yesterday, whereas the collective—everyone else in the office—saw three each. So, we feel pressured to keep taking the students. Then I don't think that I'm doing a good enough job advising. I'm definitely not doing developmental advising when I'm seeing— last November I saw 33 people in one day, one eight-hour day, while I was pregnant, by the way. To me, I feel pressured to do that, but I don't think I'm providing good advising at that point. It's a little frustrating. I do think it affects my work with students. I know NACDA talks about caseloads and 300 students per advisor. The way that we're set up here does not facilitate students coming back to the same person—or building those relationships, I guess, is what it is, which we all know is why—one of the most important reasons why students stay at a college, right? Yeah, it affects my work.

The institution is setting the priority more on volume and moving numbers, instead of quality of the interaction, of the experience.

On reasons why this might be happening: Yeah, so I think, definitely, over the years it's really shifted, right, from more of the states bear the stronger burden for students than the institution. It's really changed big time, like flipped on its head, pretty much, where the state is paying a lot less and the institution has to cover more. I think that obviously will play a role in how they decide what's happening. With all of these ideas about completion, right—and Obama had his vision to have more college graduates by 2020. I think that makes the institutions want to make their priority completion, but they still have this burden of having to take on more of the financial responsibility. So, I think it definitely plays a role, right? I think it's a tough role for higher-ed to negotiate, because they're competing, they're competing values. There's a tension there between completion and then also having to just get, for lack of a better term, 'bodies in the door,' to pay the rent kind of idea.

So yeah, I think it's important for public policy to influence higher-ed and our values and our priorities, but it's—yeah, it's hard, I think, when there's such competition, too—like so many different institutions. Then you have people, like certain presidential nominees, saying that we shouldn't be funding liberal arts degrees. Then you have other people who are like, 'Liberal arts is the way to go.' I think it's hard.

We see this with those students that are brought into us, in particular, that haven't been fully admitted—they're admitted for today, but we don't have all their paperwork, but we need to get them in classes—that's one way that we see it every single semester, which then causes ethical issues with the advisors because, like I said, you feel like they're being set up for failure.

I'm trying to think what else. I think also, along the lines of 'let's just get people degrees,' there's a particular program here that's similar to a BGS *(bachelor of general studies),* which they've now changed it to a BGS, a Bachelor of General Studies. It used to be called the Individualized Studies Program. Basically, if someone just has a ton of credits, but doesn't have anything toward anything, they say, go talk to the UACDC about an ISP, the Individualized Studies Program. Is that doing them a service when they actually graduate? Yeah, we're getting that degree done, but it's—in my opinion, it's only beneficial for people that maybe have a job and just need that piece of paper that says they have a bachelor's degree.

Many students though, that can't get into the education program, or they decide they want to do a different major or whatever, are being pushed into that program. I don't see that helping them in the long run, necessarily. Maybe it does and I just don't know.

The way advising has been on this campus, too, has really changed over the years. They had a centralized Advising Office. Everybody came there, right. Then they started doing a few decentralized offices: one in this college, one in this college. We'll still have the centralized one that has to know everything. Now there is an Advising Office, a decentralized office, in every college and this office, and yet—still, we are expected to *[snaps fingers]* go at it.

Anyways, I do think that it plays a role. It's an interesting dynamic because, like I said, I've worked at other institutions. For instance, at *College O*, it was a centralized model, and they were going away from that. They wanted to do the departmental advising. I worked in a departmental advising center at *University X*. Coming back then to this environment, it's—it is different and it definitely, I think, for me—and maybe advisors in other offices feel the priorities are different, right, because they're in a college. Maybe it's that I'm here in the centralized go, go, go. I do think, because this office used to be the only advising center, it's hard for people to adjust to a changing model and I hear it at every meeting, 'We don't want the vice presidents to walk by and see people just not seeing any students.' No, then we need to probably reevaluate our advising model and make sure that we're being used in the best way, because there are times when it's very busy—33 people for just one person—and there are times when there are 5 people total in a day. Yeah, it's an interesting dynamic. I'll just leave it at that, I guess.

I almost feel like an assembly-line worker. This is terrible. When you're in that kind of a role, you don't really necessarily get all of the information trickled down—trickled down, trickle-down economics. That's one of the things, when I was in grad school, right—live and lead with integrity which, I don't know, it's just a very interesting thing to me. I keep saying 'interesting.' I know I do, but I don't know how else to say it."

Theme Discussion

In the above profile, Advisor 4 articulates many of the same frustrations as were outlined in the previous chapter. She sees a structure that does not work and effects how she does her job. She also feels that she has little input into how to change the structure. She's also frustrated by the hierarchical nature of how the office works. Moreover, she recognizes the outside policy forces shaping the environment in which she works and is again frustrated by her influence over shaping these policy changes. However, the key takeaway from Advisor 4's profile is when she talks about going outside of the policy and priorities of her institution to do what's best for her student.

> "And for me that's the hard part. If I have a student in my office that might need to transfer because of a personal situation or finds a better fit at another campus I will help that student. Even if it means we don't get that count for graduation but if it's what's best for the student it's what

> I'm going to do. The university says we should support students so that is what I do. I don't think that's what they mean when they say support students but it's how I handle it. I always put the student first – I think a lot the advisors in this office do too but we have the university saying support the student but they need to graduate here. I focus on what's best for that student."

She might not feel empowered to make change within her office or university but she does feel empowered to help students make decisions that best serve them. And this response was universal amongst all of the participants. They were frustrated with the "system" but found a way to still help students and feel fulfilled as professionals.

The following chart provides the most common of these experiences for the participants:

Table 4: Professional Fulfillment

	Yes	No	Not discussed
Took extra time to help student with non-academic concerns	9		
Advised a student to transfer	7		2
Advised a student to stop-out	1		8

Each participant gave at least one example of how they view role as being student-centered and value helping the student above institutional and policy concerns. In the paragraphs that follow an example from each participant will be discussed.

Advisor 1 best conveyed this theme when she said: “I think that we’re never going to have a 100 percent retention and graduation rate. We know that’s not going to happen, right? In the end, if we’re doing enough things right, that should improve. I think that everybody would agree that that was the right thing in the moment to do with that individual…Even if it meant that they were going leave. Because I am not ever going to feel good about feeling like I strong-armed somebody into making a decision. I always want to feel like—that they were my top priority.” Advisor 1 places the need of the student over the policy and does so with the view that not only is it the right thing to do but it will also help the university. “I want them to have a great experience here, because I also know from the retention and graduation activities and outreach that I did at other institutions, people come back.”

Advisor 2 described her priorities as an advisor in the following manner: “I definitely want my students to meet their goals. Sometimes their goals aren’t to complete their degree here. Sometimes their goals are to transfer and if that’s what they desire then that’s what I want to do to help them meet their individual goals.” She went on to say this was her priority regardless of institutional policies. She gave an example of a recent meeting with a student that demonstrated this commitment to serve student’s goals: “I have this one student. She’s so undecided on so many different things but she’s so smart. I have to think that’s why she wants to transfer. So, if she decides to transfer I will help her figure out what that process looks like and help find the information that’s necessary to begin the transfer planning.” Advisor 2 knows this will count against her university graduation rate but that is not her priority in working with this student.

Being student-centered is the basis of everything that Advisor 3 does in her day to day work. “In order to be truly student-centered, you really have to know them as a person, like an individual person. I spend a lot of time doing that. When I talk with them at first, it’s more than just class scheduling. It’s helping the whole student have a great experience both in and out of the classroom.” Knowing the whole student helps Advisor 3 to know when they might need extra support or might have concerns beyond academics. It also means that Advisor 3 places the need of the individual student over policy considerations. “I always work to keep students here, keep them enrolled, but if it’s in the student’s best interest I will help them transfer. I try to exhaust all possibilities here but sometimes whether it’s fit, or program or financial a transfer is best for the student.”

Building relationships beyond the basic level is also important for Advisor 5. He sees himself as a mentor to his students and seeks to be a key point of contact throughout their career at the university. He builds these relationships through authenticity and outreach across campus. “I think students have a great eye for seeing if a professional truly identifies with where they’re coming from and feel understood. I think that’s one of the biggest things that students want to feel. If you don’t relate, at least understand it. For me students feel the best of both worlds because, when I look at them, I looked at myself at a younger age. So, they feel greatly connected. All that stems from me working beyond my office, and going out into those different departments, and meeting them where they are because some of—a lot of students don't come to this particular office a lot. I expose myself when I go out to them. Now they are aware of someone that is on campus that they can go to. They wouldn't otherwise experience that if I had not volunteered my services in a variety of different departments around campus and making myself exposed to them, basically—expose them to myself in their area and all of campus." Building a mentor relationship allows Advisor 5 to serve students despite the constraints of the system on his campus. Above all else, valuing authenticity in his relationships is what drives Advisor 5 and his approach to his work.

Advisor 6 views student success as his priority and defines success as "getting them to graduation whether it's here or somewhere else, another institution if it's a better fir then I'm all about that." As an early career professional Advisor 5 acknowledges he's still rather idealistic about serving students but feels it is the only way he can approach his work. He shared a recent experience that highlighted his placing of priority on the student's needs:

> "I mean, they'd prefer the tuition dollars to the end for sure here. However, when I'm meeting directly with a student, I would never ever—actually just yesterday, I met with a student and she was in a situation where—I'm trying to remember the specifics because I had eight appointments yesterday so there was a lot of blending together. Oh, okay, so we had transfer in a day. This student was a full-time nanny and she was interested in only taking a couple classes per semester. She wanted to do interior design and that's one of our very sequential

majors. Her first semester she has to take Interior Design 110, 111, and I think 131.

Without those, the rest of the major is not open to her. Those courses are only offered in the fall. There's only certain courses they offer in the spring, and I was explaining to her that you have to take these. She says, 'Well, can I just take them online or at night?' I said, 't's all at the mercy of when they offer them.' I said, 'There's probably only going to be one section offered for each of them, and it's probably not going to be at night or online.' We go and we look, and none of them are online or anything. I was like, 'You'll have to probably talk to your family that you nanny for and see if it's okay that you miss two days a week.' Then I had also stressed to her, I said, 'If you have to look online and find an interior design program—if that's your passion and you can't fit it in with your work schedule, you should do that.'

That's the kind of things I convey to students, but as far as I know university officials, we've had some not great times with budget, I've heard, would prefer to have students stay here till the end and do whatever it takes, but students have lives and school should not be—school should not necessarily trump the fact that she enjoys being a nanny for this family. Just because she wants to be an interior designer, if there's a better fit for her out there, if there's an online program she can

> do that's accredited, go ahead and do it. That's just my personal view. I'm sure higher ups would prefer that they'd stay here till the end."

As this vignette (Seidman, 2006) illustrates Advisor 5 places the need of the student over that of the institution. He knows this is counter to policy but his first concern is serving the needs of the individual student.

Advisor 7 is the most experienced of the participants but he takes a very similar approach to working students as Advisor 6. He places the priority of his work on serving the student and building relationships. He related an experience with a student that captured how he navigated around the constraints of the office and policies to best serve a student. "I had a student that she stayed here two semesters and she decided to transfer to *University Z*. Great kid. I think she would have added a lot to campus. I told her that. I said, 'You know, you got to do what's right for yourself. We're here, so if, after a semester or two at Central, you and your sister decide you want to come back, call me and let me know. If not, here's what I want you to do.' We went through that whole process. Here's the questions you need to ask when you go to *University Z*: your financial aid, your scholarship, your housing—which I don't know about scholarships, but housing, anyway—and your program. Again, those are relationships you build with people. I think that's what's important. Down the road, she may never come back, but if somebody asks her, 'What do you think about *University C*,' if her experience is good, she might say, 'You know what? They treated me good. Yeah, I recommend you go and check them out. If it's for you, great.'"

Building relationships and putting the interest of the student first is also how Advisor 8 approaches his work. In the view of Advisor 8 academic advising is more than just course scheduling and degree audits, it is about "helping to facilitate connections to faculty members, to engage opportunities on campus, helping students realize what they don't even know…helping students to navigate college and navigate the university. It's understanding how to make the most out of your education." This student-centered approach to advising allows Advisor 8 to concentrate on the core of his work not the "outside factors and stressors that we all feel. I know we have to maintain enrollment and improve graduation rates but I can only focus on what I can control and that is my interactions with my students." Advisor 8 understands the pressures on his university and his role within but does not let that deter him from placing students first.

Advisor 9 was clear that his first focus is on the needs of the students. He recognized that the university would frown on him supporting a student that needs to transfer as the need to retain students is the first priority for the office. However, "I have never felt like I would compromise my integrity for the sake of the budget." He went on to say "When I talk to students, no one in the administration, they don't know what I'm saying. It's not like if I talked to a student that I thought would be better fitted at a community college and I told them that, I wouldn't hear about that because they wouldn't know about it." In this brief example, Advisor 9 provides a key insight into how advisors are able to serve their students' interests even when there is pressure to retain students. Sometimes the what the boss does not know cannot hurt you.

Each participant focuses on their students as their first professional priority. As the above examples make clear each participants work is student centered and while they are aware of the policy environment that in-part shapes the scope and direction of their work it is not their focus. Nor do the policies effect how they work with individual students. Supporting a student that is best served by transferring will adversely impact the retention and completion rates of the university but in the interaction with the student that does not factor into how the study participants serve their students. This focus on the student allows the advisors to maintain their professional integrity and efficacy.

Chapter 6

Advisors at Work – Tensions with Other Campus Units

"I would describe my job as a person who is here to help students navigate higher education, mainly here at *University C*, but also, if their goals end up being better served by another institution. If we have students that want to follow a program that's more vo-tech or more specialized in programs that we don't have, I'll help them explore and identify where those programs are help them get there.

It's really working with the students and getting them to where they really want to be. If it's here that's great. We'd love to keep them here. If it's not, and they're better served somewhere else, then we explore that with them.

I think the university expects me to help explain degree requirements, policies and procedures. It expects me to help students in persistence, the numbers, as far as them persisting from semester to semester through graduation. It expects me to help them identify all of the resources and services available to them. Hopefully, they can then use them in a timely manner.

This expectation fits my view of what advising should be. It would be very difficult to be in a role for as long as I have and not believe that what I'm doing matters. There's always that part of a person: you want to do something that you feel matters, is important, in helping people achieve what it is that they're aiming for initially, but a lot of those students don't know what it is they want to do, obviously. They're undecided. In some cases, also, not very motivated. There's a lot of growth that goes on for students here, from freshmen through their years. It's great to be part of that.

If I had situations that were contrary to my principles and morals, then that would be unacceptable for me to continue working here. It's an easy product, if you want to call it a product. It's an easy product to sell. Is it for everyone? No, of course not. I mean can people make their way in other areas? Yes, and they have. They're successful and that's great.

I think, when you admit students that are not adequately prepared for the rigors of this institution, then that can cause you to be concerned, obviously, as to why are we allowing students that, historically, their numbers—well, I'll say their high school GPA, their ACT scores—would show that their persistence is going to be very low. It's putting together a schedule that you feel is going to be set up for them to succeed as best as possible.

Obviously, working at this place for as long as I have, and knowing the role of, say, a community college, at times you feel that these students would be better served at a more nurturing environment like a community college, that tend to have more beefed up remedial programs and tutoring services.

You worry about students like that. We do have tutoring, so it's not like we don't have tutoring. I think they do a very good job. We do have remedial coursework in reading, math, and writing. It's toward the latter part of the orientation sessions that it can become problematic for high-risk students, because those sections aren't always available, or the timing of them can be pretty checkered.

You start thinking about students, okay, well, they never had night classes? Well, that's what we have. Or they're not going to have very many academic credits because they have these remedial 080 courses, anything below the 100s, so it's not going to be college credit.

You wonder where their motivation is going to be? Are they going to be able to rise to the occasion? That can be challenging. We meet. We discuss things amongst ourselves. Our director is very proactive in terms of the higher-level meetings that he has with other department heads and directors and provosts, to look at those situations. There is a Humanities 191 course, which is for provisionally admitted students. It's one credit. It is credit so it does count.

We do put students in there that are on the fence. I've had a chance to talk to some of those students. I'm encouraged by what I hear from there, as far as the experiences they've gotten from this Humanities 191 course. I'm sure, like a lot of institutions, we've tried many things to try to reach out to these students. So far, this one has some good promise. I think it's because it's a mainstream effort from the university. It isn't an office trying to put together a mentoring or a leadership or a voluntary type of situation. This is a, 'Okay, you have to take this class if you want to come here.' It's structured. I think it's run by a former dean here in Arts and Social Sciences. The issue isn't ignored.

For the most part, our office is for the entire undergraduate population here. So that can be—it's challenging. It's interesting, because you're seeing all kinds of students. We also don't have mandatory advising for faculty. So, it's not like, okay, your first two years you're here, and then you are forced to—we have some of that.

We have some of our programs that they have to see their engineering advisor. In other cases, they still come to us as juniors and seniors. If it's just an audit, 'Where are you at,' that's fine. But when a student wants to know, 'Well, geez, I'm really interested in going into D&R work, or I want to go the FBI, or I want to apply for Homeland Security type positions, what kind of electives should I take from my CJ program? What kind of minor?' - those are questions better answered—best answered by the faculty. We work to educate them but, unfortunately, it doesn't always get to them in a timely manner, and they're just taking things on their own.

Or we get them here, we really should be focusing on those first- and second-year students about basic skills in Gen Ed and undecided situations that they're experiencing. We understand. We just can't be everything for everyone, so we're really trying to—we're working conservatively to narrow our focus to the first two years of a student here at the university as well as new transfers, and then try to get them to the right people.

We do get support for conferences and I think it helps motivate you. It helps you to see that there are others out there, that other campuses are experiencing similar challenges with students, not necessarily the same load. They might hear it, "Oh my God, that's crazy." In terms of the different approaches that they use with high-risk students, probational students, students that aren't decided, there's a lot of things there that having these opportunities to sit in at workshops and hear speakers, it charges you. It gets you a little rejuvenated at times, so it's not like you're alone in a shell here. It's nice to know that there are people and organizations out there that recognize the importance of academic advising and the advisors that do the job.

Now in terms of university priorities, I would say the programs that we have, so the academic quality has always been key since I can remember. We were never, and I don't think we've ever been known as an easy institution. I think a phrase that I like to use is maybe 'easy to get in but hard to get out.' I know a few institutions around the state have that same reputation. It's not difficult, necessarily, to get admitted here, but it's going to be a challenge to earn your degree.

The academic standards set by faculty are pretty high. It is something that I try to get the message across to students coming in, whether they're new transfers or freshmen, that there are no blow-off classes. It's a very academically-challenging environment. You will grow. You will do a lot of work if you plan to be here. If you're going to succeed and walk across that stage, it's going to be work. It'll be a lot of work.

Other priorities are I think they try to keep the cost down. My opinion is, in this sense, that's been accomplished by keeping personnel pretty minimal. This is not a fat institution. It's pretty lean, especially at this level. We don't have a battery of advisors or two tiers of advisors. I would assume that we're not on the higher end of the pay scale across the board.

It isn't known as a research institution. It's more of a teaching institution, which does attract faculty with that interest. Of course, we do have them also doing research out there as well. I think there's more of a push on that now from the upper administration that, 'Yes, yes, we are a teaching institution. Yes, we expect you to run your classes.' You're not going to have grad assistants or teacher assistants out there, but you're also expected—they're also expected to publish and do that, which is—that's great.

Students win out on that. I think a good example is we don't have graduate programs that in our science areas, so the undergrad students get to do the research for faculty, in effect. They get to use those nice machines and equipment that's in there, that a lot of faculty will say, when they were in their undergrad programs, they didn't get a chance to touch, because they had grad programs at their institutions and those students did the research. The research here, we have to tap into our undergrads, which is a definite advantage for them.

In the general sense, I support these priorities and in that sense, yes. I think what I wish we would probably take another look at is the resources, the people resources, to be able to provide more for students in terms of scholarship opportunities and, because I work here, to have more advisors available for students that have questions, have concerns, but also to be able to initiate some programs from the Advising Office to students that can help them if they're undecided or if they want to explore different majors, they want to—so know what to do as far as getting acclimated here, if we could do more in that regard. We're more in a reactionary phase of doing things because there's not much time to just sit and say, 'Well, let's think of some nice programming to do.' We just have student after student after student. Pretty much, before you know it, it's 5:00. It's like, 'Darn, I didn't get to this list of things.'

But the students are what's important and helping them is why I'm here. *(So how do you view what's important for students?)* I think the thing that influences me the most would be the match of them coming here. In other words, did they do their research as far as *University C* being the right place for them? We know, across the board, that doesn't happen with all students, okay. I'm really excited when students say, 'Oh yes, I've been to campus three or four times with my parents. We did the tour. We asked a lot of questions. We took advantage of different programs and we've gone to other institutions and have done the same thing.' That's great. You've done a good job and you feel that this is the right match for you. I think we have been, at times, from our admission standpoint, maybe a little overzealous in recruiting students that this probably was not the best option for them. It was a numbers situation and they're just trying to get the numbers up, whether they're incoming freshmen or transfer students. I think we compromised because of that, compromised some of the standards and possibly placed students in tough situations, where they were barely making it at a community college and their GPA, whether it's a 2.0 or even a sub-2.0, we still admitted them. In looking at their coursework, it wasn't based on really academically-rigorous type courses to begin with.

We have them here. It's not practical to assume that they're going to make that jump and do even that level, as far as the GPA, maintain that level, much less do better. When it doesn't pan out—obviously, in many cases, it doesn't—why would anybody be surprised? To have a real discussion with a student and say, you know what? I understand you want to come here, and it seems like we have the program, after many questions and going back and forth, but I'd really like to see you do another year or at least another semester of some academic work at your current school. Let's talk again. Let's see.

Concern: I see D's and F's. I see a lot of W's. I don't see a full-time schedule. You want to move here. You want to be on campus. You want to be full time. You want to go into engineering, and we're talking remedial math still.

I don't know that enough of those discussions happen. They get here. Of course, we have them and it's like we're recruiting our own attrition at times. Once they're here, the one side of the floor, the Admissions side—they got their own pressures, they have their own people they have to answer to—they're done.

We got them in. It's your job to keep them. We're not alchemists. We can't turn lead into gold. We'll have students that are interested in nursing, Allied Health, which is a very difficult and challenging program. It's like they've been at other institutions. On swirling transfers, they've been to multiple colleges and universities. They haven't done very well there. Actually, they're not even eligible anymore, if we scrutinize their transcripts.

We admitted them under the impression that yeah, they could continue pursuing nursing or something. We look at it. It says, you already are ineligible. That's tough. It came be devastating, especially if it's—if they get past us, so to speak, then register. They're taking anatomy and phys and micro and nutrition, and it's like they can't even apply, because they've failed and had to repeat prerequisite courses that the

College of Nursing or the Occupational Therapy or some program already—they will look and they'll say, You're not eligible. So those situations are very troublesome.

Admissions has that number push from probably on high— Get the numbers. *(How then do the Advisors respond?)* Oh sure, sure. We do have to set goals from year to year, on increasing our persistence rates, whether it's two percent, three percent. You try to influence what you can early on, obviously, in terms of more at-risk students coming in, of what their course schedules look like. Does it look like a bad schedule? In other words, you've got chemistry, you have physics, you have these things that just—math—you don't have to do that.

We can split it up a little bit, take some of those bullies out, put some others that can give you a more balanced schedule. There are some cases where there really isn't much you can do. There isn't much wiggle room. Either they don't have other cases they need to fill out their schedule or there's nothing else open. So, they're forced to take some courses that, normally, we'd say, you know, if you could put that off it would be a lot better, but everything's full or they need to be full time, or they came in late.

We don't help ourselves either by late admissions. Things that some of those students need are full. Now and then, you get lucky in the sense that a student—maybe it's a higher-achieving student—at the last minute, had to make some changes and move back home to this area for whatever reason, it's like, well, they're pretty solid academically, even though they're going to have a schedule that's sketchy in terms of checkered—they're still required courses. They'll be able to handle the transition, the acclimation, the new campus, and the rigors of that schedule. They should be okay.

When you have the others that are—maybe they left the other school because they lost their financial aid, they have nowhere else to go, and we were the only—one of the last-minute choices it might have been, and you're starting in the hole.

I think another stumbling block has always led back to faculty and that has been—the biggest challenge is course availability, sequencing of courses, and department chairs and faculty understanding that they don't have enough seats for certain programs, and doing something about it, whether it's, Okay, we're going to expand some sections. We're going to add some sections or we're going to do overloads. That's where things get bottlenecked.

We'll have some really good, solid students and they're shown a diagram, here's what you need to be done in four years, and they can't do it because something's full or we've had classes that—this is from the same department. There are courses that they want a student to take in the same semester, and more than a few of those courses conflict with each other.

It's like, okay, are you doing the scheduling for your convenience or for the student's success? In some cases, we feel it's the former. Well, some faculty didn't want to teach certain times of the day or some don't want to teach spring/summer or some do want to teach. These things come into play. It has nothing to do with helping our students get through in a timely manner. It has to do more with faculty's desire, or their lack of desire, to do classes or do things a certain way. Yeah, that's, I think, the stumbling point when we come to that discussion.

On our end, we try to fix these things, in terms of what we're trying to do. When it comes to the other side of the house, probably across the board we're frustrated with the current structure, I guess, of how Admissions is run. We, right now, have really three people that are out on the road. We have somewhere in the neighborhood of four, either directors or assistant directors—I mean associate directors—out there that try to do as much as they can to stay on campus, which is, obviously, counterproductive to recruitment. If you're here in the building and there seems to be every reason in the world why you shouldn't be—you should be out in the schools, you should be out making contacts and talking to students—you look at that and you wonder what's going on. Why don't we have more people out there?

It doesn't seem like the territories make a lot of sense. Of those three or four people on the road—well, it's really three—they're all over the place. That doesn't seem to make any sense. You've got people here on campus seemingly walking around, having a good time. It would be different if the numbers were great. It's like, well great. Last year, at this time, we had to lay off, gosh, 18 people—something like that— 9 from salary, 9 from hourly. It's because of a budget situation.

You feel some resentment, in the fact that that it is the office that is charged bringing in numbers. I would expect that to really hit hard there and say, you know what? We need to be out there. All hands-on deck. It doesn't seem to be of a critical situation for them. That's the first time I can recall, in my years here, that we had to lay off—well, permanently lay off people. That's though, because we had not had to do that.

I've heard of other institutions, whether it's *College Q* or even *University Z*, some others having to go through those. The years passed and we were okay. This time we were not. It hit home for a lot of people

(On outside influences) I think it is important for those entities, state and federal, to review the numbers. I guess what else can you do from that level, taking a macro view? What are the persistence rates of *University C*? Specifically, what are the graduation rates that we have? If we're in a place that—and I don't know what that number is, but if we're in a place that, okay, that's acceptable for whatever those entities feel is good in terms of it's in state, comparable to the other 14 colleges, or if we want to go with our size and the fact that we're not an open admission, but we're not highly selective either but that range of colleges in the state, how are we doing in comparison to those colleges? I think that's fair. I think it's fair to hold us up to the light and say, if we have other institutions with similar admission requirements, and they're performing at this level, then *University C* and all the other colleges should be at that same level as well, and aspiring to go higher because—we talk about numbers, but they're people, they're students. There's people with dreams and aspirations.

You can't help but think of those students that, whether they were placed in the wrong combination of courses or they were just started in the wrong institution, how many of them go away thinking that this is not for them, "this" being college in general. Had they either had started in a more nurturing environment how could things have changed?

Those students that aren't ready here, they know they're not ready or their parents know they're not ready, they go to community college for a year or two and then they come here and it's like, great. They worked some things out. They found out what they want to do. They understand it's not a continuation of high school. This isn't 13^{th} grade, 14^{th} grade. They're self-motivated. It's like great, they're asking questions, they're engaged. Fantastic.

When they're not, and it's like, okay, I'm talking to a high student here who's not motivated, who doesn't want to do anything, and who just wants to get by. They're going to take a wait-and-see attitude on their first test or exam, and I'll tell them, you know, that could be 33 percent of your grade, and if you bomb that first one you have to max out the next 2 just to get a C maybe.

Wow. It's like it doesn't register until they go through it. For some people, they could go off track for years. Then they come back, well yeah, I started back. When was out of high school I wasn't ready for it. Been out working. There's nothing there for me. I ready to come back." It's like, darn, it's a lot of years lost.

For some that walk away from higher-ed altogether, of any kind of post-secondary program, it's tragic because they're walking away thinking, this isn't for me. I should have listened to those people who said 'You're not college material. You're lucky to get out of high school or whatever. They just needed a better start. There's too much of that. There's a pile of discarded dreams and goals and aspirations in people. I can't help but feel that a good amount of those people shouldn't be there.

We have the responsibility to work with them. If we do all that we can, and they still do—they still drive their vehicle off a cliff in spite of what we can do, well, again, maybe it wasn't here that they should have been.

So, number targets and those things don't bother me in the sense that I know those issues exist and there isn't much I can do about some of those things that I can't control. What I can control is how I work with the students that come into my office. I'm always keeping their best interests as the focus of what I'm doing.

I had a student in this morning who has been dismissed three times. He's back. I don't think he should be back, but he's back. I sit on that committee. There was, we'll say, a loophole or whatever, so he's here. I gave him my best, as I always do, because he's here. If he holds up his end of the bargain and we do the best job we can, he can make it. There's some internal things he has to work on, maturity issues, being one of them. I can control that. I feel that I still have a chance, as an advisor, to make a positive impact on the students that we have. I've known others that were frustrated for some of things that we talked about, and they walked away. I don't know where else I can get the kind of rewards, the kinds of rewards that I get here to help students as they go through, and they do some self-discovery, maybe change majors and find something, this is what I wanted to do.

I had a student like that who was in the wrong program. We talked about what are the things he likes? What does he do for hobbies? It ended up he likes taking pictures and he has a camera. Bottom line: he's going to finish this summer, which just started yesterday, with his degree in Graphic Design, with a minor in Art, focus on

Photography. Before that, he was on probation. He may have gotten dismissed or close to it.

He didn't find what it was that he had a passion for. Once he did, and he found out, you mean I can really do something with this? I can make a living? You can. We talked and I said, you can talk to the department chair. We showed him what can you do with a major and the occupational handbook information, and to explore different careers, and say, look, you do these things are an undergraduate. Because you're an undergraduate, you can job shadow, you can do internships. You can do a variety of things to make yourself marketable. As an undergrad, he's taking pictures for weddings, graduations.

I talked to his parents. Yeah, he's just about done. He's really excited. It was great. He would sit there early on, he was dejected. I'm having trouble with these classes. Yeah, they didn't work for him. Once he found what he wanted, once he found his passion—and I told him, you'll fight through them. Even though you don't necessarily care for them, you'll understand, this is just on my way to my goal, because these other classes—those photography courses, the art classes—and he's had exhibits in our gallery as well. I said, that will help motivate you as well, because you know, man those are really great pictures.

I graduated from here twice, so I have great feelings for being here. I work here. I also know that this isn't the only place. For the right person, right circumstance, it can work out great. It isn't about me. It's about that person, where you're going to be successful. I would love it to be here and I tell them that. Great.

I had a student that she stayed here two semesters and she decided to transfer to *University Z*. Great kid. I think she would have added a lot to campus. I told her that. I said, you know, you got to do what's right for yourself. We're here, so if, after a semester or two at *University Z*, you and your sister decide you want to come back, call me and let me know. If not, here's what I want you to do. We went through that whole process. Here's the questions you need to ask when you go to *University Z*: your financial aid, your scholarship, your housing—which I don't know about scholarships, but housing, anyway—and your program.

Again, those are relationships you build with people. I think that's what's important. *University C*, if her experience is good, she might say, you know what? They treated me good. Yeah, I recommend you go and check them out. If it's for you, great."

Theme Discussion

Advisor 7 provides the best example of participants' frustration with other campus units that effect their work as advisors. It is clear from his narrative profile that Advisor 7 feels the admissions office on his campus puts his office in a difficult position with students that might not be best suited for the university. This makes the focus on retaining these students difficult as they require remedial non-credit courses and not able to enroll in their desired majors. "We're not alchemists, we can't turn lead into gold" is Advisor 7's response to what he sees as the "swirling transfer" practice of the admissions office. The frustration with other campus units was not unique to Advisor 9 as other participants also expressed concerns with departments that impacted their work. Most often these were the admissions and orientation offices.

Below is a chart that highlights the most common experiences within this theme:

Table 5: Interdepartmental Frustrations

	Yes	No	Not Discussed
Other unit adversely impacts advising office	4		5
Admissions Office	4		5
Orientation Office	3		6

Some of the participants expressed concerns that the admissions office was admitting students that were retainable. Advisor 7 put it this way "I think we have been, at times, from our admission standpoint, maybe a little overzealous in recruiting students that this probably was not the best option for them. It was a numbers situation and they're just trying to get the numbers up, whether they're incoming freshmen or transfer students. I think we compromised because of that, compromised some of the standards and possibly placed students in tough situations, where they were barely making it at a community college and their GPA, whether it's a 2.0 or even a sub-2.0, we still admitted them. In looking at their coursework, it wasn't based on really academically-rigorous type courses to begin with."

Advisor 9 also mentioned concern with students being admitted that struggle to succeed academically. Having previously worked in the admissions office he understood what the primary focus of the office and admissions policy was: "When I was in admissions, it was very clear, bring the students in." Advisor 9 now runs a cohort program that is focused on retention and involves regularly advising meetings, special programming, and an annual retreat. This cohort program is an attempt to assist students that received special consideration when admitted. The participants that mentioned a frustration with the admissions office expressed the concern in how it impacted the students. They knew why the students were admitted but were frustrated that it was often left to them to try and pick up the pieces. Advisor 7 mentions this a few times in his profile.

> "For some that walk away from higher-ed altogether, of any kind of post-secondary program, it's tragic because they're walking away thinking, this isn't for me. I should have listened to those people who said 'You're not college material. You're lucky to get out of high school or whatever. They just needed a better start. There's too much of that. There's a pile of discarded dreams and goals and aspirations in people. I can't help but feel that a good amount of those people shouldn't be there.
>
> We have the responsibility to work with them. If we do all that we can, and they still do—they still drive their vehicle off a cliff in spite of what we can do, well, again, maybe it wasn't here that they should have been. So, number targets and those things don't bother me in the sense that I know those issues exist and there isn't much I can do about some of those things that I can't control. What I can control is how I work with the students that come into my office. I'm always keeping their best interests as the focus of what I'm doing."

Advisor 3 expressed a similar view “It’s hard to be the voice that says maybe we need to re-think things. I want all of my students to succeed but that might look different for some students. It’s just tough to have be that voice and I wish they had never been put in that position to begin with.”

Preparedness was also a concern for some participants when discussing the orientation program on their campus. In particular, Advisor 6 expressed his experience with the orientation program “Student success is huge to me. I think transition is big to me as part of that. And that’s one thing that I think is lacking at this institution. Our orientation programs are not very good for transition. Our transfer in a day programs are not very good for transition. Life transitions are hard, hard, hard thing to get through sometimes. And you have to have your support network. I’m a big Schlossberg buff on that theory. That’s how I inform a lot of how I view transition, so I guess that all plays into student success. It’s one key aspect of student success is how they transition.”

Advisor 5 also finds the campus orientation program to be lacking and focuses much of his first meeting with new students on answering questions and providing support that was not included in their orientation. “Students come to that first meeting with so many questions, usually the first meeting is over an hour, most advising appointments here are 45 minutes. It’s like they didn’t tell them anything at orientation.”

The experiences of advisors in dealing with other campus units help us to further understand the value the participants place on serving their students. The concerns arise in this theme not because the participants are frustrated with more work but that they see students not being properly served and helped by other units on their campus. This illustrates how crucial the student-centered approach to their work is for many of the participants.

Chapter 7

Analysis and Implications for Practice, Theory, and Research

The completion agenda has pushed retention and graduation to the forefront of the public higher education policy environment. The goal of the completion agenda to reach 60% of the adult population with a completed level of post-secondary education has been driven by the Lumina and Gates Foundations, two of the most prominent foundations in the education world. This has resulted in numerous state policy changes, largely through budgetary efforts (e.g. performance funding), to refocus institutions on retention and completion. Higher education institutions have responded to this pressure through changes in internal policies and practices that are directed towards increasing retention and completion. On most campuses, the professional staff most directly connected to retention and completion are academic advisors. The onus of most of the new efforts geared toward retention and completion have fallen onto advisors' already full plates. However, academic advisors typically see themselves as student affairs professionals and rarely if ever as participants in the policy implementation process.

The goal of this study was to investigate the experiences of academic advisors as implementers of the completion agenda. Very little empirical research exists on this subject. The study was conducted at three, broad access regional public universities in the Midwest. Using narrative inquiry, I explored how the completion agenda and its increased focus on retention and completion influenced the professional experiences of the academic advisors at the three universities. Additionally, the interviews provided rich data on the overall experiences of academic advisors and demonstrated the role of institutional structures in their experiences.

The completion agenda and its focus on retention and completion certainly played a role in the experiences of the participants in this study. Some of the advisors were particularly aware of the influence that completion agenda driven policy changes had on their work and others knew there was a greater focus on retention and completion but did not connect that to the larger policy environment. This variation seemed to differ with experience as the mid-career participants were most aware of what was fueling the policy changes. While the early career and most experienced participants were less engaged with the policy environment. Regardless of their awareness of the source of changes all of the participants' experiences were in some way influenced by the completion agenda. This influence varied by participant but each advisor knew they were expected to increase retention and completion.

Analysis – The Dilemma

Cohen (1990) first gave policy scholars the theory of the dilemma in educational policy implementation – policy makers see a problem and create a new policy to address the problem however those charged with implementing the new policy were part of the initial problem the new policy seeks to remedy. The classic example of this from Cohen is the case of Mrs. Oublier, a California math teacher trying to implement a new math curriculum that requires a completely new approach to learning math. The implementation challenges of Mrs. Oublier give us insight into the challenges faced by the participants in this study. The tension between unseen policy makers and the everyday work of academic advisors is evident in the experiences the participants shared.

In almost every interview there was a moment when a participant acknowledged the tension inherent in the dilemma of policy implementation. Some advisors recognized it almost immediately, seeing that the renewed focus on retention and completion suggested that they had not done a good job or needed to improve their work. They felt this tension as a professional slight and made clear the efforts they put into helping students complete their degree programs. For these advisors, the focus on retention and completion did not change their jobs but in a sense made them more frustrating. In their view, they already were doing the things they needed to do for student success and were open to new ideas. But they did not see many new ideas in the push to retain and graduate students. It was more an annoyance than a new way of doing things. A meet the new boss, same as the old boss type scenario.

And often times it did not change their approach to their work. They continued to work within structures that they felt did not support them and thusly focused their energy on students not in trying to change structures as that seemed too large of a task given all their other responsibilities. This is not to say that the participants shunned the goals of student success. Every advisor agreed that student success was the goal of their position, often times it was the reason they choose to become an advisor. To a person, they viewed student success as their success. This made their work personal and focused their attention on the relationships, or often lack of relationships, that they had with students. The advisors felt it when a student failed a course or stopped out and they also celebrated the successes. For these advisors, the work was student-centered and it often felt to them that the focus on retention and completion was number-centered. To the advisor, the student sitting in their office trying to juggle work, home, and class schedules was more than a statistic and there was a level of resentment that the student would be reduced to just a statistic in a report sent to the state or entered into a database.

So, it became clear in talking to the participants that the focus on retention and completion and the resulting changes at their campus and in their office effected their work but not necessarily in the way that policy makers had hoped. The actual work with individual students did not change much, sure there was new course planning software and tracking systems to contend with, but the core of what the participants viewed as their job had not changed. What had changed for the advisors was an increasing frustration with the system – meetings telling them to do better, more job responsibilities in the name of retention and completion (e.g. financial aid counseling), and it seemed less support and in some cases even fewer co-workers to help serve students. It meant that for most of the advisors the completion agenda resulted in more stress and not better results.

And should this be a surprise? We know from the experience of Mrs. Oublier that big changes pushed from the top-down rarely get to the front-line actor as intended (Cohen, 1990). And just as Mrs. Oublier struggled to learn a new way of understanding math while trying to teach it, so too do the advisors in this study struggle to find ways to improve retention in a system without any new support or resources.

The focus is said to be on retention and completion but the advisors do not see anything new to help them. Sure, there are some changes, new software or mentor programs, but it is nothing that the experienced advisors have seen versions of in the past. And these new programs do not change anything that the advisors see as real impediments to increasing student success in their offices. It becomes more of the same and instead of actual improvements there is more stress and pressure. However, much like Mrs. Oublier the participants try to make the best of the situation – finding work arounds for the new software that is supposed to help but does not or working with staff in other units to actually make a mentoring program effective. The advisors do their best to make things work even when the system is more of hurdle than a help. The resilience of the advisors is clear as they contend with the tension of the policy implementation dilemma and try to help their students as best as possible. Policy makers in university administration buildings, state capitols, and foundation offices would do well to actually listen to and support the people they have charged with increasing retention and completion rates.

Analysis - Community of Practice

From the view of the dilemma the advisors are stuck in the tension of policy implementation and work to make the best of a situation they do not control. But what if we look at the data from the perspective of a theory which views the agency (as limited as it might be) of the advisors as a key to understanding their experience? To this end, the frame of communities of practice will provide another way to view the data offered by the study participants.

While all of the participants had heard of the concept of a community of practice only two could locate themselves within a community of practice and for each of them that community was not located at their current university. There was not a place in their office for them to talk with their colleagues and develop a deeper view of their work and better understand themselves as professionals. This lack of support for reflection and thinking with others about their work and how to improve it added a feeling of isolation to the experiences of the participants. They could consult a colleague about course sequencing or if there was still room in a section or other technical type questions but no participant reported having a sense of a community of practice with their colleagues in the office. This was true too for a broader community of practice within their institution. None of the participants were part of a community of practice with professionals in other units on their campuses.

Some of the participants clearly expressed missing the opportunity to reflect and improve upon their practice with the other advisors in their office. Other participants did not seem to mind the more cursory level of engagement with their colleagues. But no matter their feelings on the level of engagement with their colleagues all of the advisors sought out some form of connection to a larger community of practice. In many cases this was reading journal articles or participating in online forums with advisors at other institutions. For the few advisors that had connections to a community practice, both at campuses they used to work at, they felt constrained by time and distance in fully engaging with their former colleagues about their thoughts on the practice of advising. Most of the participants had attended academic advising conferences but none reported any lasting engagement with the field as a result of these experiences.

On the whole, the advisors in this study lacked any connection to a community of practice. This helps to understand the frustration and isolation they felt as they contended with the policy changes rooted in the completion agenda. They lacked a system of support for the even the most basic things like venting frustration or learning strategies of dealing with a student failing out of school. It was all on the individual to develop their own professional coping mechanisms for the stressors of their work. And much of the frustration with the systems and structures that they felt constrained their work can be seen as rooted in this lack of a community of practice. While the advisors all felt frustrated about the manner in which the office was structured or the new course planning program was implemented none of them talked with each other about. They were all feeling the same but did not have a network in place amongst themselves to discuss these concerns and possibly offer solutions that all of the professional staff would support. It also did not give them the opportunity to discuss the larger policies effecting their work. All but one of the advisors had never heard of the completion agenda, yet one wonders if the participants had been more fully engaged with a community of practice would they not have connected these larger forces to the changes and pressures within their office?

It’s interesting to note here that the larger community of practice in academic advising also does not seem to offer the participants much in the way of support. While all the advisors report attending either a NACADA or MIACADA conferences, most report getting little out of their attendance beyond some new strategies for advising or tips on using different enrollment systems. None of the participants left the conferences feeling more connected to the practice or academic advising or finding a network of colleagues to support their development within the profession. Additionally, the associations are largely mute on the topic of public policy and how it influences the work of advisors. A review of the last five years of NACADA's two active journals shows that of the 67 articles in the *NACADA Journal* none of them dealt with a public policy issue or question and only 1 of the 301 articles in *Academic Advising Today* explored the role of advisors and the increased policy focus on student success (Thomas, 2017). It is little wonder than that the participants were not engaged with policy implementation if the national association was also focused elsewhere.

The reasons for the participant's lack of a community of practice is not directly answered by the data. The advisors themselves do not seem to reflect much about their practice or a lack of a community to support it. This could be a function of the structure of their offices that leave them little time to do much but work with students. One advisor reported seeing thirty-three students in one day. There is not time to be reflective or tap into a network of your fellow professionals with that kind of workload. In each office, the student to advisor ratio is well above the recommended number from NACADA. The lack of a community of practice might also be rooted in how the advisors were trained. None of the advisors reported an in-depth training or on-boarding process in their office. They were given basic information and spent a few days with a current advisor and then started advising students. This lack of a real training process let the advisors know from the start they were on their own to figure things out. It is hard to build a community of practice when that is the first message that is received. This all leads to the feelings that most of the participants shared, which displayed a lack of agency and frustration with the structure of the office. There were no supports for establishing their agency as a professional – one of the benefits of a community of practice – and lacking a sense of agency advisors retreated from structure issues and focused on what they could control which was their work with individual students. A stronger sense of connection to a community of practice (either within their office, university, or the broader field of advising) would increase the participant's agency and this could lead to better results for the office and university, as an advisor more engaged with their professional practice is likely to produce better results.

Analysis – Agency and Structure

The dilemma and community of practice are both ways to approach the agency and structure questions within the data. In the dilemma, we see a structure that confounds and frustrates the advisors as they try to increase retention and completion. In the community of practice discussion, we see how the participants' do not have a network of support that would grow their agency to possible effect changes in the structures that frustrate them. The growing body of educational policy research that directly addresses the questions of agency and structure also helps to better inform us about the data in this study. In particular, the work of Bray and Russell (2016) that explored how the IEP document became a dominant script in the meetings of teachers, students, and parents provides a good comparison for the experiences of the participants in this study. The IEP was revised in 2004 with a goal of increasing student and parent participation in the planning process. However, the changes had the opposite result, further formalizing the process and making the planning process become a scripted exercise in legalese and box checking (Bray & Russell, 2016). This compares to the experiences of the participants at University B as they worked to implement a new degree planning software. The software was intended to provide a map for students from orientation to graduation based on major declaration at orientation. The plan became prescriptive and began to dominate meetings between advisors and students. The plan was intended to support retention and completion by clearly laying out a progression of courses and ensuring students took full course loads. However, while the intention was good the plan had major issues that often caused more work for the advisors and frustration for the students as even the slightest change in the plan required significant time and effort. The advisors shared these concerns and the overall concern that the plan was keeping them from developing meaningful relationships with their students. But the plan was not changed and advisors were left to find ways to work around it. Much like the IEP document the course plan began to become a script the advisors and students had to work from. This well intended structural change was adopted without input from the advisors and did not yield improved results but did further complicate the advisors' work.

Beyond this direct comparison, the work of Bray and Russell (2016) demonstrate how dominate structure can become in some settings. Time and time again in the interview data the role that structure plays in forming the experiences of the participants is clear. The advisors work in centralized advising offices that are open to students from all majors and at all points in their undergraduate careers. This idea of a one-stop shop has appeal in that it serves students as they need and ensures all students have access to an advisor. However, from the viewpoint of the advisors it becomes a hurdle in truly serving the students in the best manner possible. Some of this is due to volume as there as few as five advisors for 7,000+ students in one office and 11 advisors in one office for 21,000+ students. These ratios do not allow the advisors to build many meaningful relationships or connections with students. The offices are also all general advising offices which mean the advisors serve students in all majors and cannot hope to know specifics about each program of study. Often times when advising upper level students, the advisors are reviewing program details with the students as they view them for the first time. The office communications structures are also top-down and leave little opportunity for the advisors to engage with policy changes. One of the advisors described the feeling like that of a factory line-worker just plugging inputs and not having much control over anything. Another described the experience like a fast food drive-thru – quick service and not much substance. This was not how any of the participants wanted to work but it was what the structure dictated.

The experiences of the participants in this study are very similar to the special education teachers in Bray and Russell’s research (2016). They are locked into a system/structure that limits their ability to act as true professionals and when they move outside of the structure it is seen as a disruption. When the advisors at University B set aside the course plan and just talk with the student rather update the system it causes a disruption in the system. And when advisors step outside of the rush of their office to spend extra time with a student it's noted that they spent more than forty-five minutes with a student. They feel the consequences for that disruption not only from the office director but also from their colleagues that feel they had to rush through their meetings with their students to handle the overflow of students when one advisor meets with a student for over an hour. These disruptions are not welcomed by the system/structure and the advisors know they will not be well received.

In the study participants' three advising offices we see how structure effects the work of the advisors. It limits their agency and ability to create an environment that they think would best serve their students. The structure is focused on retention and completion but often does not provide the systems to increase success in these areas. The participants have come to view the structure as chasing a numbers game. Whether that is due to demands to maintain revenue from enrollment or to increase state support through improved completion rates the advisors view of the focus on retention and completion by their administrations has become cynical. This cynicism decreases their agency even further and locks the power of the structures in even tighter. Thus, much like Bray and Russell (2016) the data of this study shows the power that structure can have over agency.

Study Recap

In Chapter One, I introduce the study and the provide background on the completion agenda and the role of academic advisors. I also offer frameworks for viewing the data collected in the study. In the Second Chapter, I review the relevant literature in both academic advising and higher education public policy to provide the background and state of understanding in the fields of study. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methods and methodological approach undertaken in this study.

The next three chapters are centered around the narrative profiles of three participants, this is based on the approach to narrative inquiry offered by Seidman (2006). These chapters are organized by the three themes which emerged in the analysis of the narratives from all nine participants. Chapter Four focuses on the disconnect between the participants and the policy process. Following that, Chapter Five explores the ways in which the participants respond by focusing on students. And Chapter Six, looks at another way advisors handle the changes brought on by larger policies in their interactions with other units within their institution.

The final chapter discusses the data through the lens of the frameworks provided in Chapter One. This chapter also summarizes the study and offers thoughts on how the study might impact practice, theory and research.

Implications for Practice

The data and frameworks of analysis in this study provide insight into the experiences of academic advisors as they work in the policy environment of the completion agenda. These insights can help to improve the practice of academic advising as it relates to increasing retention and completion. The three main implications for practice involve advisor workload and responsibilities, decision-making and communications, and strengthening communities of practice. In the subsections that follow, I offer concrete ideas for improving practice based on the data in this study.

Advisor Workload and Responsibilities. Much of the tension felt by the participants in the study is rooted in the systems and structures in which they work. Most glaring of these was the basic structure of their offices. All of the participants worked in central advising offices that served all undergraduates students. While this organizational model appears to serve students well, the conveniences of availability and open access are offered at the sacrifice of quality insight and meaningful relationships between advisor and student. The data from the participants suggests that a centralized advising office is best configured when it serves lower division students (first, second, and new transfer students) that have not declared a major or are waiting to apply for a major. This would greatly reduce the advisor to student ratio and allow the advisors to develop a high level of expertise in the general education curriculum. An organizational shift like this would require the addition of department or college level advisors to serve upper division students that have declared a major. Some of the universities in the study already have college and/or departmental advisors but do not require upper division students to only work with these advisors. This would be a simple policy change which result in better advising for all students.

While a shift to lower division general advising would lower the advisor to student ratio it would not lower it far enough to allow for advisors to develop more meaningful relationships with their students. This would be accomplished by hiring additional advisors for each office. The universities would be well served to strive to reach an advisor to student ratio in the range of 1 to 300. This would allow advisors to develop relationships with their students and be able to practice the type of engaged advising that the study participants all report is difficult for them to do given the present structure. Of course, all of these changes will increase spending on advising but if the universities are serious about improving retention and completion having an advising structure that best supports these efforts will improve outcomes.

Decision-Making Processes and Communications. Another aspect of the structure which almost every advisor reported as a source of frustration was how decisions were made and the university administration communicated with them. The advisors all felt as though they had little say in how their offices operated or the systems that they used were selected. This was clear at University B and the change to the new course planning program which advisors shared unheeded concerns about from the beginning. Universities would be better served by engaged and creative staff members that not only help students but use innovative and new approaches to improve results. The current working environment for the participants in this study does not foster that kind of activity from its advisors. The advisors feel left out of the process and that they just receive orders when a change in made in the office. Opening lines of communication and implementing even a few of the advisors' most basic organizational requests could go a long way towards improving working conditions in the office. Time and time again, participants conveyed a sense of cynicism and frustration with the numbers game that they viewed as the push towards retention and completion. When their offices are run in a top-down manner it is not hard to see why the participants would become cynical. The more benevolent goals of the completion agenda and notions of the public good rooted in the ideas behind the completion agenda are mostly lost to the advisors. They just see a push for more money – money their office is unlikely to reap any benefits from as they're often told to do more with less (or more with the same). This fuels the distrust of the administration that was just below the surface for many of the participants. Opening the office to a more collaborative management approach that encourages open communication would help ease the tensions brought on by strong structures in place in these offices. It would also increase the agency of advisors and engage them in innovating their offices to better serve students.

Creating Communities of Practice. The lack of a strong community of practice was evident on each campus visited in this study. The participants did not have a network of professional support to help shape their professional practice and deal with the tensions of their position. This has left the participants isolated and without resources for their development as professionals. Creating a community of practice will not be easy in these offices as the cultures of each office seem entrenched. However, the advisors need a social system of support beyond just asking their colleagues basic questions. There is a role for the professional organizations of academic advising to help facilitate the creation of these networks. Going beyond the conferences and journals to build communities of practice would be a welcome new role for NACADA and its state affiliates. The need for a strong community of practice was clear from the participants and any step forward in creating this support would be a welcome help for academic advisors.

Implications for Theory

As this was an exploratory study with a narrative approach to the data it has minimal impact on theory. However, it is worth noting that the data fit well with the growing body of literature that examines educational policy implementation questions from the perspective of agency and structure. The data shows that the structure of the advising offices influences how the advisors approach their work and the agency they feel as professionals. The limitations that structure places on the advisors resembles the effects of structure that Bray and Russell (2016) discovered in the IEP planning process for secondary special education students.

Implications for Research

This study focused on the experiences of academic advisors in centralized advising offices at broad access regional public universities. This is a narrow sample which leaves the experiences of many other post-secondary educational professionals open for study as the impact of the completion agenda is explored.

Therefore, the populations studied in this area can be greatly expanded to include advisors in other sectors, particularly community colleges, and in non-centralized advising offices. Additionally, the impact of the completion agenda on other professionals in post-secondary education that research shows impact retention and completion should also be studied. Of particular interest in this regard would be faculty experiences regarding the completion agenda. As the completion agenda is a complex policy program it also calls for study at the many different levels of policy implementation. Exploring the issue at the macro, meso, and micro levels will help to further enlighten the data in the field.

As this was a qualitative study, additional research that employed quantitative methods would also add the literature. The expanded use of other qualitative methods would also be a contribution to the understanding of the issues related to the topic – in particular case studies that also used observation of advising sessions and document analysis. Further, studies that fully approached this topic from the agency and structure viewpoint would add not only to that growing body of literature but the understanding of higher education policy implementation.

Implications for Policy

This study can help inform the creation of policy at both the institutional and state government levels. The most important takeaway for policy-makers at all levels is to the listen to the student-facing professionals. Policies informed by the experiences of those working in the field everyday will become better policies. Engaging service providers like the participants in this study when considering new policies, practices, or programs will not only improve the quality of the policy but also ensure the implementation process goes much smoother. By opening lines of communication and finding solutions that work for both policy-makers and policy-implementers there is the possibility of breaking down the inherent conflict that Cohen (1990) theorized in the dilemma. It is possible (but not easy) to harmonize the goals of everyone in the process. This will lead to better systems and outcomes.

Additionally, as the completion agenda morphs into the student success movement it is helpful to understand the cycle of policy reform. As one change leads to another it is vital the lessons learned in the prior change are not lost as the focus shifts to the next change. So, while the completion agenda becomes an item history from the previous administration we can still learn from its implementation process. These lessons include: the value of listening to front-line service providers, how policy goals diffuse over the many levels of higher education policy-makers, and evaluating the effectiveness of policy incentives (mixed results of performance funding).

The Next Mrs. Oublier

Cohen's (1990) seminal work has stood the test of time and the dilemma has grown into a theory of educational policy implementation that has been cited over 1,300 times. Cohen's observations on and deep understanding of the experiences of one math teacher as she worked to implement a new curriculum are as relevant today as they were nearly thirty years ago. Research in higher education policy should build upon the legacy of Cohen and Mrs. Oublier to find the next context rich story to tell. The field is ripe with opportunities to capture the current state of the dilemma and how it effects the daily work of educators on campuses across the country. The higher education policy literature is heavy on macro-level views of policy implementation that focus on state legislatures, governing boards, and university presidents (and top-level administration) what is missing is a deep Oublier-esqe dive into the working life and experiences of a front-line professional that works with students. This need not be a study of an advisor, although that would help to better understand retention and completion at the micro-level, but any professional in higher education in the midst of a complex policy change. Cohen taught us the value of understanding educational policy implementation from the bottom-up and it is beyond time the higher education research caught up.

Study Summary

I interviewed nine academic advisors at three broad access regional public universities to better understand how the completion agenda was being implemented at the ground level. The data offered insight into the experiences of the participants which fit concepts from the literature and also offered new themes for consideration. Further, the data confirmed that the theory offered by Cohen (1990) regarding the inherent dilemma in educational policy implementation is a valid framework for this research. Additionally, the data also showed that the emerging body of literature on the role of agency and structure in education policy research is a suitable guide for this type of study. The dilemma as manifested in frustrations with structure and a lack of agency impacted all nine participants in the study. The degree to which the structure and lack of agency impacted the participant differed based on experience and setting but for all participants the data confirmed the relevance of the frameworks.

Conclusion

The structure and organization of the advising office does impact the way the participants do their work. The degree of this impact varies and its full impact is beyond the scope of this study. However, the data does provide key insights into the experiences of academic advisors as they work in the policy environment of the completion agenda. We can see that advisors feel disconnected from the policy process and the processes that shape the structure of their work environments. This left almost all of the participants frustrated and disengaged from the functions of their office. They responded to this lack of agency in two ways. All the advisors reported a focus on working with students and being student-centered rather than policy-centered in the approach to their work. Some participants also directed this frustration towards staff in other campus units that they felt adversely effected their ability to be successful.

The frameworks of Cohen's (1990) dilemma and the community of practice help to better understand the advisors' experiences. As they provide a lens to see the limits placed on advisors by the structures of their office and the lack resulting lack of agency. Additionally, the growing literature on agency and structure in educational policy implementation helps to support the understanding offered by the study's frameworks. The participants are focused on student success and agree that retention and completion are important. However, the structure of their offices that is directed towards improving retention and completion limits their abilities to best serve their students. To help address the tension created by this dilemma, I offer suggestions for improving practice that are based on the data collected from the participants.

Improving completion and retention is a win for students and universities. And the goals of the completion agenda are worthwhile not only for the future of the American economy and the individual student's success but also for the public good of our communities, states, and nation. A more educated population will be a more engaged and civically minded population and this can have long term benefits for the entire world. This might all seem lofty, but increasing the number of post-secondary graduates will also help restore the notion of higher education as a public good. This, along with the economic benefits made clear in the completion agenda's goals, is an admirable goal and one that everyone in higher education should seek to support. It is my hope that this study helps to inform that effort and might improve practice in a way that hastens the goals of the completion agenda.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR STUDY
Post-Secondary Policy in Action: The Case of the Completion Agenda at Three Midwestern Broad Access Public Universities

This study seeks to better understand how public policy in higher education is implemented at the ground level. By exploring the process of academic advising from the view of public policy the study seeks to better understand the policy implementation process within higher education and the structures that influence this process. The study will also serve to inform the professional practice of academic advising by connecting your regular work and the institutional policies and goals that guide it to the public policy goals that shape the university's internal policies and practices. The study involves a 60-minute interviewer with the researcher. Data analysis will follow standard qualitative procedures and will be conducted by Nate Smith-Tyge a doctoral student in the College of Education Department of Educational Administration's Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education (HALE) program. Participants will be anonymous throughout the study.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time, with no penalty for doing so. You may also choose not to answer individual questions but to answer others. The researchers, in a secure location, will maintain the interview data until the end of the study, when it will be destroyed. This study is being conducted as part of the researcher's doctoral dissertation.

Your identity will remain confidential in all transcribing, analyzing, and reporting of data and your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

It is possible that you may become uncomfortable answering questions related to your experiences. We remind you that you may, at any time and without penalty, elect not to answer a question or terminate the survey.

At the end of the interview please indicate if you would like us to provide you with a copy of the findings of the study, a bibliography of resources for further reading on the topic, or both. If you have any questions about this study or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Steven Weiland, 410 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, (517) 355-2395. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this study.

____ _______________
Signature of Participant Date

____
Name of Participant (please print)

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol
Post-Secondary Policy in Action: The Case of the Completion Agenda at Three Midwestern Broad Access Public Universities

Name:
Date:
Location:
Interviewer:

Documents Collected:

<u>Consent Protocol (to be read verbatim):</u>

"Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. It is my primary concern that you are participating freely and of your own consent. You have been provided a copy of the consent form, which I will now ask you to read and sign. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Additionally, I will be recording our conversation so that an accurate record of the interview can be created. If you would like I can make available the transcript for your review."

"This interview should last about an hour. If at any point, you want to conclude the interview please let me know and we will stop."

<u>Overview of the study:</u>

This study seeks to better understand how public policy in higher education is implemented at the ground level. By exploring the process of academic advising from the view of public policy the study seeks to better understand the policy implementation process within higher education and the structures that influence this process. The study will also serve to inform the professional practice of academic advising by connecting your regular work and the institutional policies and goals that guide it to the public policy goals that shape the university's internal policies and practices.

The study is seeking to add the experiences of advisors to the policy discussion. As such I will ask you some open-ended questions, please feel free to discuss whatever the question prompts you to think about. To start I have a few basic background questions.

<u>Subject Background:</u>

Time in position:
Time at Institution:
Time as an advisor:
Academic Background (institution / degrees / major):

<u>Interview Questions:</u>

1. Describe your job:
Probe: what does your typical day look like? What does a typical advising session entail?

2. How do you view your role within the university? What do you think the institution expects from your position?

3. Does this fit with what you think academic advising should be?

4. How did you learn to become an academic advisor?
Probe: Was anyone/thing an early influence on your professional practice?

5. How does professional development and/or continuing education influence your work as an advisor?

6. Do you have connections with colleagues to discuss your work?
Probe: Is this formal or informal – would you describe it as a community of practice?

7. In your view what are your institution's priorities for undergraduate education?

8. Are these priorities you share? What influences your view of what's important for your students?

9. How has your university communicated its priorities to you? Do/did you feel part of the process in developing priorities?

10. Do the institutional priorities affect your work with students?

11. What in your view is the role of public policy in setting the university's priorities? What do you view as public policy's role in higher education in general?

<u>Specific Follow-ups (if needed):</u>

How do you view your work as it relates to student completion goals set by the institution? The state?
Probe: is this important to your everyday work?

Do you actively work with these policy goals in mind?

Do these larger policies drive your approach to dealing with students?

Do you use any metrics based on the larger policies to gauge the effectiveness of your work?

Is time to degree an important consideration of your work?
Probe: are you aware of the funding incentives the state has employed?

Do you think your department does a good job in terms of completion and time to degree?

Do you feel connected to the policy-making process – in your department? The university? The State?

APPENDIX C: IRB Exempt Letter

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

Initial IRB Application Determination *Exempt*

May 11, 2016

To: Steven Weiland
410 Erickson Hall

Re: **IRB# x16-639e** Category: Exempt 2
Approval Date: May 10, 2016

Title: Post-Secondary Policy in Action: The Case of the Completion Agenda at Three Midwestern Broad Access Public Universities

The Institutional Review Board has completed their review of your project. I am pleased to advise you that **your project has been deemed as exempt** in accordance with federal regulations.

The IRB has found that your research project meets the criteria for exempt status and the criteria for the protection of human subjects in exempt research. **Under our exempt policy the Principal Investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects** in this project as outlined in the assurance letter and exempt educational material. The IRB office has received your signed assurance for exempt research. A copy of this signed agreement is appended for your information and records.

Renewals: Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. If the project is completed, please submit an ***Application for Permanent Closure***.

Revisions: Exempt protocols do not require revisions. However, if changes are made to a protocol that may no longer meet the exempt criteria, a new initial application will be required.

Problems: If issues should arise during the conduct of the research, such as unanticipated problems, adverse events, or any problem that may increase the risk to the human subjects and change the category of review, notify the IRB office promptly. Any complaints from participants regarding the risk and benefits of the project must be reported to the IRB.

Follow-up: If your exempt project is not completed and closed after three years, the IRB office will contact you regarding the status of the project and to verify that no changes have occurred that may affect exempt status.

Please use the IRB number listed above on any forms submitted which relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the IRB office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 517-355-2180 or via email at IRB@msu.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

H. McGee

Harry McGee, MPH
SIRB Chair

c: Nathaniel Smith-Tyge

Office of Regulatory Affairs
Human Research Protection Programs

Biomedical & Health Institutional Review Board (BIRB)

Community Research Institutional Review Board (CRIRB)

Social Science Behavioral/Education Institutional Review Board (SIRB)

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