

ADOPTING IDENTITY-CONSCIOUS STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGIES: A VERTICAL
AND TRANSVERSAL CASE STUDY OF ONE INSTITUTION ADDRESSING
OPPORTUNITY GAPS

By

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ABSTRACT

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The number of high school graduates will decline over the next decade. The pool of potential applicants will also become the most racially diverse group in the history of American postsecondary education. Historically, students from minoritized social groups have not persisted and graduated at the same rates as their counterparts from dominant social groups. These disparities do not exist because of some deficiency or problem with students. Rather, institutions have failed to dismantle their own hegemonic systems of power resulting in inequitable distribution of opportunities. The phrase *opportunity gaps* directs attention to institutions' roles in maintaining and perpetuating inequity rather than blaming the students themselves. Colleges and universities must address opportunity gaps if they are to fulfill their moral obligations to the students whom they admit.

Identity-conscious student success strategies have shown promising results in closing opportunity gaps. Historically, student success practitioners implement programs and educational interventions designed with dominant groups in mind. These programs and educational interventions are then administered to all students. Student affairs practitioners engaged in multicultural affairs and identity-development work create opportunities for students to learn about and develop their own identities in community with others. On most campuses, this work produces valuable outcomes, but it is rarely tied to specific, measurable educational outcomes like persistence and graduation rates. Identity-conscious student success strategies draw upon

both areas calling for practitioners to identify specific groups of students harmed by the institution's inequitable distribution of opportunities.

The purpose of this study was to better understand how an institution adopted identity-conscious student success strategies. I examined Michigan State University (MSU) and specifically the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC) unit because of their explicit utilization of identity-conscious student success strategies. Employing the vertical and transversal axes of Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach, I conducted qualitative interviews with nine participants and analyzed multiple documents, websites, and other media. I chose participants with direct, extensive knowledge of the NSSC. Using what I called a vertical and transversal case study (VTCS) approach, I examined the historic, political, economic, and cultural factors that influenced MSU's adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies.

Data analysis produced an historical narrative and three groups of findings important in understanding how MSU and the NSSC adopted identity-conscious student success strategies. First, piecing the data together, I created a narrative that traces the concept of identity-conscious student success strategies through space, time, culture, politics, and economics. MSU had to create an environment amenable to adopting identity-conscious student success strategies by changing the community's attitudes and approaches to student success work. Key actors skillfully navigated the institutional context with their deep understanding of the organizational structure, deploying their own credibility, and building and activating networks. Also, campus leaders galvanized organizational change through shifting the culture around data and supporting the work of empowerment agents. This document concludes with a discussion of implications for organizations, student success practitioners, and higher education researchers.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mom and dad, Sherri and Jeff Secrist. Thank you for everything you've done in getting me here.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities have increasingly prioritized student success, or “increasing the number of students who attain their postsecondary educational goals” (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017, p. 20). However, institutions of higher education face multiple headwinds impeding their goals of bolstering student success. Bransberger (2017) and Grawe (2018) showed college and university enrollment will decline through 2025. The primary reason for this decline is related to birth rate. Fewer students in high school means fewer individuals seeking access to higher education. The same scholars also showed the pool of potential college-going high school students will be the most racially diverse in the history of the United States (Bransberger, 2017; Grawe, 2018). Unfortunately, to date, colleges and universities have failed to ensure that minoritized students have the same opportunities to persist and graduate at comparable rates as their peers from dominant social groups. Scholars have called the disparities in student success outcomes between various groups, or opportunity gaps, a national crisis (Harper, 2016; Pendakur, 2016b). Pendakur (2016b) urged institutions to innovate and rely on identity-conscious retention and student success strategies to close these opportunity gaps.

Harper (2016) wrote, “Without serious commitments to understanding and strategically redressing historical inequities within and among institutions, the opportunity gap will continue to be persistent and pervasive” (p. x). To close opportunity gaps, colleges, universities, and student success practitioners must adopt new approaches. Pendakur (2016b) asserted an identity-conscious framework works best to address opportunity gaps. The author explained identity-conscious approaches by describing the current state of student success work and identity-centered student engagement work. According to Pendakur, most student success work aims to improve educational outcomes for all students. Identity-centered engagement work focuses on

identity development and community building without any explicit ties to educational outcomes. Identity-conscious student success approaches, according to Pendakur, are efforts designed by identifying groups of students based on their identity and then building programs and educational interventions tailored to their needs. This approach aims to increase the rate a specific group achieves educational outcomes. Taking up identity-conscious student success strategies represents a fundamental shift in how institutions approach both identity and success work. My primary concern in this study is how an institution and a specific unit adopted identity-conscious student success approaches.

Through this study, I examined an institution committed to closing opportunity gaps through identity-conscious student success strategies. I chose Michigan State University (MSU) as my site of investigation. More specifically, I chose the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC) as the unit of analysis because the NSSC currently employs identity-conscious student success strategies to close opportunity gaps for marginalized students. I analyzed how the NSSC came to identity-conscious student success approaches. To be clear, I did not examine the efficacy of identity-conscious student success work. Instead, I studied how a department, and ultimately an institution, adopted identity-conscious student success approaches. I wanted to know how a paradigm shift can happen in an organization specifically around the idea of closing opportunity gaps. I wanted to know how a unit made a philosophical shift requiring participation from individuals and entities from across the organizational structure. To study this phenomenon, I used the vertical and transversal axes of Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study (CCS) approach.¹ Specifically, I employed both vertical and transversal

analysis to this case to illuminate the factors that led to the uptake of identity-conscious student success approaches.¹

Using this design, I developed a study best suited to explore how the NSSC and MSU adopted identity-conscious student success strategies. First, I identified multiple individuals who have direct knowledge of the NSSC and its previous iterations. I invited these individuals to participate in semi-structured interviews. Through these interviews, I collected data relevant to the historic, cultural, political, and economic contexts that either enabled or impeded the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. I had each interview transcribed. I also collected documents, media items, and other available textual artifacts that spoke to how the unit adopted identity-conscious student success strategies.

First, I analyzed the transcripts to create a narrative of the unit using data from all participants. In creating this narrative, I looked to Ahmed's (2012) work on racism in institutional life and Rhoads's (1998) study of student activism. Ahmed (2012) described her method as following the idea of diversity through space and time. Rhoads (1998) phenomenologically examined multiple cases of student activism and described his approach as an "interrogation of human behavior, the situating of human activity not simply as a means to some higher-level ends, but as a part of a process of creating meaning" (p. x). I followed the idea of identity-conscious student success strategies around an institution through various lenses. The resulting narrative provided a robust, data-rich description of the many factors that affected the uptake of identity-conscious student success strategies and how individuals made sense of the process.

¹ While Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach was proposed for international comparisons, using only the vertical and transversal axes provides an appropriate framework for studying a single case.

Next, I further analyzed the data and identified emerging themes. After an initial read of the transcripts of the interviews, three themes emerged, each with their own findings. The first theme, attitudes and approaches to student success, included two findings: (a) Building on precursors to identity-conscious student success approaches and (b) changing rhetoric and mindsets. The second theme, navigating the institution, included three findings: (a) Organizational considerations, (b) credibility, and (c) building and activating networks. The third theme, galvanizing organizational change, included two findings: (a) Changing the culture around data and (b) empowerment agents create necessary change. Finally, I used these themes and findings to provide implications for organizations interested in adopting identity-conscious student success strategies, student success practitioners, and future research.

To further introduce this study, I briefly discuss contextual factors that frame my examination. This study is situated in the middle of the constellation of three major terms and concepts. First, I discuss deficit thinking in relation to student success work in higher education. Following the discussion of deficit thinking, I describe opportunity gaps, or the disparities in outcomes for students from marginalized social groups. Further, I discuss identity-conscious student success strategies, and how those strategies can address opportunity gaps. Next, I outline the purpose of this study and provide the research question guiding my project. I discuss the significant contributions this study makes to higher education scholarship. Before I conclude the chapter, I briefly discuss the design I employed to carry out my study and answer my research question.

Major Terms and Concepts: Deficit Thinking, Opportunity Gaps, and Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies

This study revolved around three primary terms and concepts. First, the mindset student success practitioners bring with them to their work can enhance or impede their efforts. One particularly harmful mindset is deficit thinking. Second, when student success practitioners work from an asset-minded approach, they can reframe the way they think about the disparities seen in persistence rates, graduation rates, and other educational markers. From an asset-minded approach, these disparities arise from the inequitable distribution of opportunities and are thus referred to as opportunity gaps. Third, to address opportunity gaps, identity-conscious student success strategies provide an identity-centered, asset-minded approach to removing institutional and systemic barriers to marginalized students' success in higher education.

While student success remains important to policy makers, students, and other constituents (see Mangan, 2013), and because higher education institutions are dedicating significant resources to increasing student success (see Kuh et al., 2010), student success practitioners and college campus leaders need to understand how student success units adopt new strategies like identity-conscious student success approaches. Most student success units are entrenched in historically hegemonic institutional cultures and adopting new strategies that fundamentally shift how the entire organization approaches student success work can be a difficult undertaking. To date, student success work has failed to adequately address opportunity gaps experienced by marginalized students. Colleges and universities have utilized traditional approaches that fail Black, Latinx, Native and Indigenous students, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds. With the changing demographics of students entering higher education (Bransberger, 2017; Grawe, 2018), continuing to use these strategies will

exacerbate the existing opportunity gaps (Harper, 2016). Given their charge, student success practitioners have the unique opportunity to lead their organizations in a new direction, one that serves minoritized students rather than continuing to impede their success.

As the population of students entering higher education diversifies (Bransberger, 2017; Grawe, 2018), educators must examine their assumptions about the students with whom they work. Smit (2012) described how common discourses on college campuses frame certain groups of “students and their families of origin as *lacking* the academic, cultural, and moral resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society” (p. 317). From this perspective, educators see certain groups of students as unable to succeed because of something inherent in them, some deficiency. Menchaca (1997) asserted deficit mindsets are firmly rooted in racism and classism. Valencia (1997) traced deficit thinking throughout history and showed how deficit thinking has taken different forms while carrying racism and classism with it. Further, the author asserted deficit thinking continues to affect educational practice, and students from minoritized social groups continue to bear the ramifications.

Valencia (1997) also described how deficit thinking permeates our language and discourse. Educators often talk about minoritized groups of students not in terms of who and what they are, but rather in terms of who and what they are not: “*not* traditional, *not* prepared for higher education, *not* in a position of privilege or advantage” (p. 370). Pellegrini (1991) discussed how the term ‘at-risk’ replaced the term ‘culturally deprived’ to refer to minoritized groups of students. This discourse assumes minoritized students are unable or lack skills and capital and therefore they cannot achieve certain educational outcomes at the same rates as their peers from dominant social groups. Said another way, from a deficit perspective minoritized students are at a higher risk for failing because of who and what they are not. Deficit thinking

has permeated educational discourses for decades, while language has adapted to deflect attention away from its racist and classist roots. Educators evolve language but operating from a deficit mindset reinforces harmful approaches when working with students.

Pitre (2014) identified the phrase *achievement gap* as another example of how deficit thinking influences educational discourse. In the glossary of *The Condition of Education: 2013*, the authors defined *achievement gap*: “the achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant” (Aud et al., 2013, p. 210). Scholars have tried to draw attention to assumptions of student deficiency by shifting focus to the inequitable distributions of resources and opportunities. For example, Pitre (2014) described how critical scholars and educators adopted the phrase *opportunity gap* to refer to disparities in outcomes for marginalized students. This phrase draws attention to the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities impeding minoritized students’ success in higher and postsecondary education.

Shifting away from deficit thinking and language leads educators to change their practice. To close the opportunity gaps, Pendakur (2016a, 2016b) argued student success practitioners should take up identity-conscious student success strategies. To define identity-conscious student success strategies, Pendakur pointed to the differences between student success work and identity-centered engagement work. Student success work has historically utilized approaches and programs designed around dominant cultural norms. These interventions have generally been directed toward all students. Identity-centered engagement work aims to assist students in their own identity development, but the interventions rarely bear explicit ties to educational outcomes. With this distinction, Pendakur (2016b) described identity-conscious student success approaches as those educational interventions and programs “designed from the ground up with the students’

racial and gender identities in mind, but the intended outcomes are tied to student success, such as term-to-term credit completion, yearly persistence, engagement in high-impact practices, or timely graduation” (p. 7). But shifting thinking, language and practice poses many challenges because it requires organizational and institutional change. To better understand how colleges and universities can adopt these approaches and strategies, student success practitioners and campus leaders need scholarship that shows how other institutions have adopted identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps. In the following section, I outline the purpose of this study.

Purpose of the Study and Overarching Research Question

The objective of this study is to understand how identity-conscious student success strategies are taken up in an organization. I selected one institution, Michigan State University (MSU), that has invested significant resources in a unit, the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC), committed to closing opportunity gaps through identity-conscious student success strategies. I utilized two axes of Bartlett and Vavrus’s (2017) comparative case study approach. More specifically, I employed vertical and transversal case study approaches to examine the historic, political, cultural, and economic factors that affected the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches at MSU. After interviewing nine participants with direct, extensive experience with the Neighborhoods Initiative, the predecessor of the NSSC, I created a narrative of the unit. In this narrative, I followed the concept of identity-conscious student success work through the lenses of history, culture, politics, and economics. Then, I analyzed the qualitative data for emergent themes. These themes consist of seven findings. Through this study, I tried to understand what it takes to shift an organization away from deficit thinking, language, and practice toward asset-minded thinking and identity-conscious student

success strategies. The following research question guided my study: *How did an institution, and more specifically the Neighborhoods Student Success Collaborative, adopt identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps?*

Significance of the Study

Student success remains central in increasing calls for institutions of higher learning to be more accountable and transparent (Lee et al., 2011). With increasing pressure from external constituencies to produce more qualified graduates prepared for the workforce, many colleges and universities have reorganized in ways that place student success at the center of their work (Pitcher et al., 2015). Such reorganization efforts require significant capital, human resources, and knowledge of organizational theory and logics. With increasing external pressure and the weight of investing in student success efforts, institutions need models showing the successful adoption of new paradigms and practice. This study provides educators and researchers with one example of how an institution changed their approach and adopted identity-conscious student success strategies.

The perfect approach to enhancing student success eludes educators in part because the term *student success* remains contested. For example, many colleges, universities, policymakers, and higher education scholars define student success in college as persistence (i.e., a student persists from one academic year to the next) and/or degree attainment (Brock, 2010; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Definitions of student success might include a number of different indicators (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Perna & Thomas, 2008). For example, Perna and Thomas (2008) included in their definition of student success readiness for college as measured by educational expectations and preparation, enrollment in college, college achievement as measured by persistence in a program through to degree completion, and post-college attainment as measured

by enrollment in graduate or professional schools or employment. For the purposes of this study, I used the definition of student success as defined by the site I selected. According to their website, the NSSC specifically focuses on rates at which students earn academic probationary status, first- to second-year persistence rates, closing opportunity gaps as evidenced in graduation rates of Black, Latinx, and Native and Indigenous students, and graduation rates of first-time, full-time students (<https://nssc.msu.edu/about/index.html>).

Colleges and universities have dedicated time, energy, and valuable resources to optimizing students' success during college (Kuh, et al., 2010). With the changing demographics of incoming college student populations, institutions of higher education need to proactively change their approaches to ensure equitable distribution educational opportunities. However, as with any complex organization, creating institutional change remains a difficult process. This study's significance comes from a deep, rich understanding of how a large, complex organization like MSU shifted away from deficit thinking, language, and practice toward identity-conscious student success approaches. The results provide higher education researchers and student success practitioners with two important tools. First, this study shows how one large organization successfully adopted asset-minded approaches and identity-conscious student success strategies. Second, this study also provides researchers and educators with a roadmap for understanding their own institutions and how they might lead their organizations through changing mindsets and adopting identity-conscious student success approaches.

In this section, I have highlighted multiple ways in which this study will provide significant contributions to the field. First, student success is a topic that is important to many stakeholders. University leaders and higher education researchers need an example of how a

large, complex institution change their approach to student success work. Second, as Harper (2016) asserted, persistent opportunity gaps represent a national crisis, and they must be closed. In order to close them, higher education researchers, student success practitioners, and campus leaders need an example for better understanding and facilitating the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies that can close opportunity gaps. In the next section, I provide more detailed discussions of the various components of my theoretical framework.

Vertical and Transversal Case Study Approaches

Throughout this study, I employed the vertical and transversal axes of a comparative case study approach. In *Rethinking Case Study Research: A Comparative Approach*, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) asserted, “Comparative case studies are an effective qualitative tool for researching the impact of policy and practice in various fields of social research, including education” (“Rethinking Case Study Research” section). In this section, I provide a brief description of the three different axes of comparative case study (CCS) approaches. Then, I give a more detailed discussion of both the vertical and transversal case study axes. I end this section with a brief description of how I applied this approach to my study.

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) defined and described three different axes of CCS approaches. First, the authors described the horizontal axes. Horizontal case study approaches seek to compare two discreet, bounded entities or cases. In describing horizontal case study approaches, the authors wrote, “[I]t shows how one can compare the way that similar phenomena unfold in distinct, socially-produced locations that are connected in multiple and complex ways” (p. 51). Then, the authors described vertical case study approaches as the second axis of CCSs. A vertical case study approach examines a singular case comparing the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. Finally, the authors provided a description of the third axis, the transversal axis, of a CCS

approach. They wrote, “The transversal comparison *historically* situates the process or relations under consideration” (p. 3). The authors asserted CCS approaches should include all three axes. However, given the limited scope of this study, I employed only the vertical and transversal axes, leaving the horizontal comparison for future studies.

The Vertical Axis

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) began their discussion of the vertical axes of CCS approaches with a warning. They wrote, “The use of the term *vertical* in the CCS approach opens up analytical opportunities but also risks conceptual constriction if one sees it as a study of levels rather than networks” (p. 73). With this warning, the authors argued studying a case along the vertical axis using pre-determined, socially constructed, hierarchical levels “does not allow for the study of interactions among” actors with different social positions in the entity (p. 73). The authors urged researchers to acknowledge the complexity of social relations; to not try to confine discourse to discrete, arbitrary groupings or levels; and to examine broader relations of power. “The vertical axis reminds us to follow the phenomenon itself, be it a practice or a policy, as it enlists and engages actors whom one might otherwise assume operate in bounded spaces” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 74).

In this study, I collected data through qualitative interviews from nine participants spanning the hierarchical organization of the site. I focused on the relationships these participants had with each other and with identity-conscious student success strategies. This approach allowed me to understand the complex social connections each participant had embedded in the organization and the meaning they made of the political, cultural, and economic aspects of the adoption identity-conscious student success strategies. Further, I was not limited to arbitrary hierarchical constructs because I was able to examine the micro-, meso-, and macro-level

contextual factors from the perspective of participants stratified throughout the organizational structure.

The Transversal Axis

The transversal axis of the CCS approach historically situates a case study in time. This approach allows the researcher to compare the case to itself throughout history. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) explained the interaction between the vertical and transversal axes. They wrote, “[T]he transversal axis connects... the vertical scales to study across and through a phenomenon as a way of exploring how it has changed over time” (p. 92). The authors emphasized the importance of transversal considerations by outlining four key assumptions.

First, social phenomena are historically rooted in systems and structures of power. Second, the authors wrote, “Such historical comparison reveals important insights about the flexible cultural, social, political, and economic systems humans have developed and sustained over time” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 93). Third, space and time are closely linked. The authors provided the example of funding for schools: “When funding for schooling is tied to local property taxes, schools in wealthier—and typically white—districts have more resources” (p. 93). This example closely relates to the opportunity gaps experienced by minoritized students at institutions of higher education that center dominant, hegemonic norms. Historically, opportunities have been afforded to students from majoritized social groups, while institutions have afforded fewer opportunities to students from minoritized backgrounds. Fourth, “The study of history allows us to assess evidence and conflicting interpretations of a phenomenon, heightening our ability to question assumptions about the shape and form it has taken in the contemporary era” (p. 94).

Vertical and Transversal Analysis of the Adoption of Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies

In this study, I used two of the three axes Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) outlined as part of a comparative case study approach. In other words, I made use of what I call a vertical and transversal comparative study (VTCS). Given the scope of this study, the project only required the use of the vertical and transversal axes. The horizontal axes would have required the comparison of multiple sites. However, the vertical and transversal axes provided a framework that supported a fruitful exploration aimed at answering my previously stated research question.

In using both the vertical and transversal axes to explain how an institution adopted identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps for students from minoritized social groups, I examined the case from multiple levels. Drawing from the transversal axes, I followed the phenomenon, the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies, through time and place to create a narrative of the NSSC. Throughout this analysis, I also drew from the vertical axis by examining the case from micro-, meso-, and macro-levels and through the lenses of politics, culture, and economics. I tried to elucidate how politics, culture, and economics affected the NSSC's adoption of identity-conscious student success work over time.

Summary and Conclusion

This first chapter serves as an introduction to my dissertation study. Through this study, I examined how an institution adopted identity-conscious student success strategies. In this chapter, I first discussed three major terms and concepts: (a) Deficit thinking in relation to student success work, (b) opportunity gaps, and (c) identity-conscious student success strategies. Then, I provided a discussion of the purpose of this study and the overarching research question

that guided this project. The purpose of this study is to better understand how an institution of higher education adopted identity-conscious student success strategies. Finally, I provided a description of the design I used to carry out this study. Looking to Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) work on comparative case study approaches, I used both the vertical and transversal approaches to examine how an institution adopted new student success strategies.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTS FOR STUDYING THE ADOPTION OF IDENTITY- CONSCIOUS STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGIES

In this chapter, I provide the scholarly contexts for studying the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. I review literature related to undergraduate student success in higher education, opportunity gaps, and identity-conscious student success strategies. In reviewing this literature, I argue that institutions and student success practitioners can use VTCS to study how institutions have adopted identity-conscious student success strategies if they intend to effectively address the timely, pertinent topic of opportunity gaps.

Following my review of literature related to student success in higher education, I focus on scholarship regarding opportunity gaps. The phrase *opportunity gaps* refers to the lack of opportunities institutions of higher education extend to certain groups of students based on race and other marginalized identities, ultimately resulting in stark differences in student success outcomes (Harper, 2016; Milner, 2012; Pendakur, 2016b; Pitre, 2014). The review of this literature provides a definition of opportunity gaps, a differentiation between opportunity gaps and achievement gaps, and an overview of the context of opportunity gaps in higher education.

After discussing the literature related to opportunity gaps, I consider literature related to identity-conscious student success strategies (Pendakur, 2016b). Pendakur argued identity-conscious student success strategies constitute a promising approach to closing opportunity gaps because they “are specifically designed to promote student success in the populations that are lagging behind” (p. 5). This section identifies multiple successful implementations of identity-conscious student success interventions.

The scholarship covered in this chapter substantiates my argument that colleges, universities, and student success practitioners intent on addressing the significant issue of

opportunities gaps should derive benefit from using comparative case study approaches to understand how to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies if they intend to effectively address the timely, pertinent topic of opportunity gaps.

Undergraduate Student Success in Higher Education

Kinzie and Kuh (2017) described the phrase “student success” as generally referring to “students reaping the promised benefits of the postsecondary experience and a combination of institutional and student actions to realize the desired outcomes” (p. 19). While this broad understanding of student success provides a conceptual baseline for this discussion, the authors also noted that many other, more specific, understandings of student success also drive the discourse around the topic. For instance, some see student success work as the efforts of institutions to assist students in attaining their degree. Others understand student success in terms of specific outcomes for various groups of students based on social identities. Kinzie and Kuh (2017) wrote, “State and federal policymakers typically use the term [student success] to mean access to affordable postsecondary education, metrics of degree completion in a reasonable time frame, and post-college employment and earnings” (p. 19). Student success practitioners often refer to first- to second-year persistence rates, degree completion, learning, and engagement in educational activities. Yet another conceptualization of student success ties the term to “equity-minded policies and practices” aimed at closing opportunity gaps (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017, p. 19).

Given these different understandings of student success, it is important to understand why the larger discourse is so robust in today’s socio-political context. Kinzie and Kuh (2017) asserted,

[I]ncreasing the number of students who attain their postsecondary educational goals—however measured—is a priority for nearly all colleges and universities, accreditors, and

higher education associations as well as most states, higher education associations, and regional and local community leaders. (p. 20)

Humphreys (2012) described the increasing interest in student success as tied to success in the global economy. Over the past several decades, policymakers have aimed to “incentivize increased graduation rates and improve the efficiency of degree production” (p. 8). External pressure from policymakers is compounded when state and federal funds are being. Reduction in state and federal subsidies in addition to rising tuition costs and fees for higher education mean the actual costs of going to college or university have risen dramatically for students.

As Bransberger (2017) demonstrated, the number of high school students who are prepared to matriculate to a college or university has been and will continue to decrease for the next 15 years. Further, the pool of high school graduates will become more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Given the current context, the discourse around student success will continue to drive the work of institutions of higher education for the foreseeable future. This work will focus on closing the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities harming students from minoritized social groups. This inequitable distribution of opportunities manifests in outcomes such as access to postsecondary institutions, debt incurred, graduation rates, and employment earnings.

Opportunity Gaps

Institutions of higher education measure student success in various ways. Most frequently though, institutions look at retention rates and graduation rates. Harper (2016) noted that leaders of institutions often use quantitative assessment and statistical analysis to make sense of disparities between different groups of students. Harper went on to explain that institutions often refer to these disparities as *achievement gaps*. As the thinking goes, some groups of students

achieve educational outcomes at higher rates than others. The implication of this language and mindset, though, “connotes that some groups more strongly prefer or perhaps are more genetically predisposed to succeed than others” (p. ix). Approaching student success work from the perspective of achievement gaps fails to consider the “structural racism, sexism, and classism that cyclically reproduce inequities in education and society” (Harper, 2016, p. ix). Bensimon (2007) wrote,

I suggest that the dilemma is one of institutional capacity to effectively address racial patterns of inequality discernible in the educational outcomes of African Americans and Latinas/os in all institutions of higher education, from the most to the least selective. (p. 446)

Further, Pendakur (2016b) asserted that changing the way educators think about student success affects practice. The author stated,

This is not simply a semantic shift but a strategic attempt to shift the locus of the problem from individual students and their collegiate achievement to institutions of higher education and their administrators’ willingness to capitalize on the enormous opportunity they have to empower every student they admit to thrive in college and to graduate in a timely manner (p. 6).

Taken together, these scholars highlighted the systemic nature of the problems facing students from marginalized social groups.

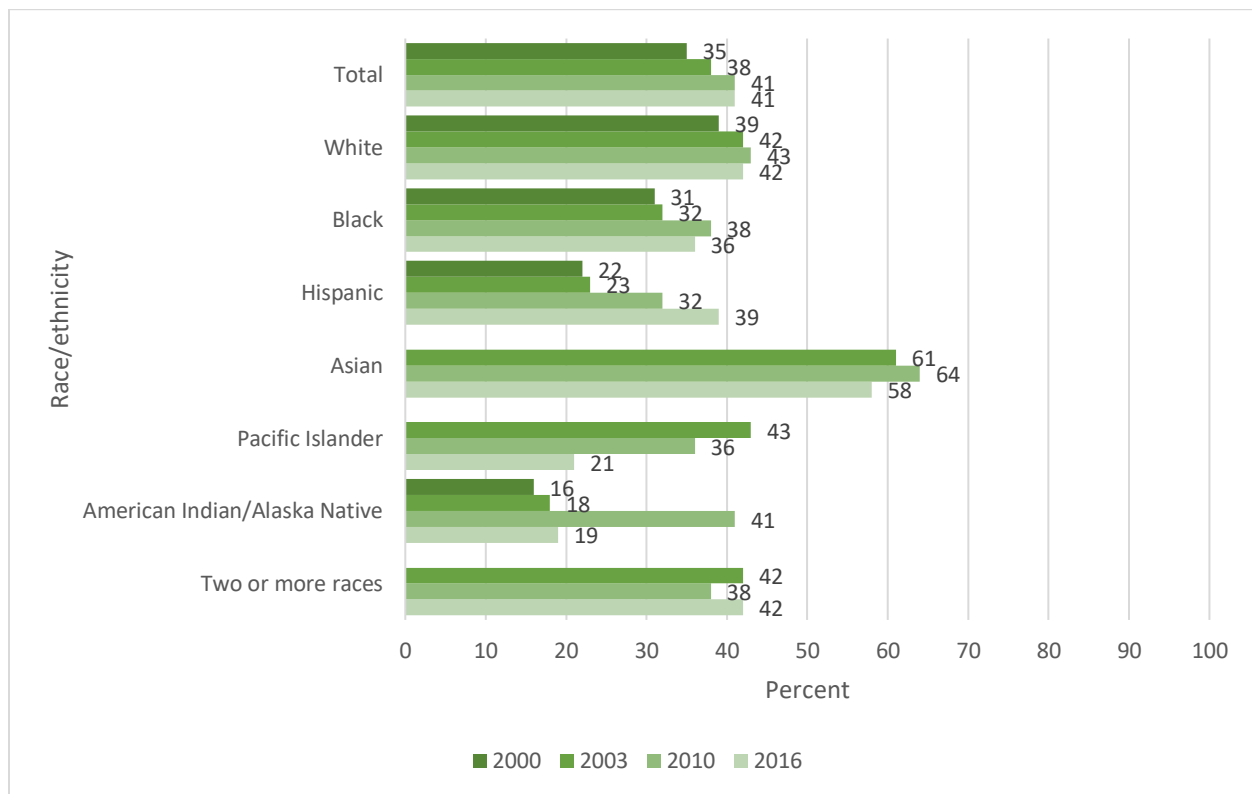
Milner (2012) asserted that “opportunity gaps, especially those related to diversity, exist at all levels in education and are present in the lives of both educators and students” (p. 695). Said another way, the opportunities to attend a postsecondary institution is stratified by race. Completing and attaining a degree is also stratified by race. Patton et al. (2015) wrote,

[Critical Race Theory] scholars would argue that this lack of representation is not merely accidental but instead by design; institutions, states, federal policies, and policymakers—most of whom are white—all play a role in who gains access to higher education and who is afforded prime opportunities to thrive in these environments. Given the preponderance of postracial rhetoric, higher education as an entity has been complicit in submitting to the ideals of colorblindness and race neutrality. (p. 196).

In terms of access to higher education, de Brey (2019) pointed to the “total college enrollment rate ... defined as the percentage of all 18- to 24-year-olds... enrolled as undergraduate or graduate students in 2- or 4-year colleges and universities” (p. 116). The gaps experienced by Black, Latin(x), and Native and Indigenous students are decreasing. The authors noted that from 2000 to 2016 enrollment in college increased for “White (from 39 to 42 percent), Black (from 31 to 36 percent), and Hispanic young adults (from 22 to 39 percent)” whereas the enrollment rate for American Indian/Alaskan Native students was not significantly different (p. 116). Even with these gains, Black, Latin(x), and Native and Indigenous students still enroll at postsecondary institutions at lower rates than their White and Asian counterparts. Figure 1 below shows the percent of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college by race.

Figure 1

Percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college by race/ethnicity: 2000, 2003, 2010, 2016



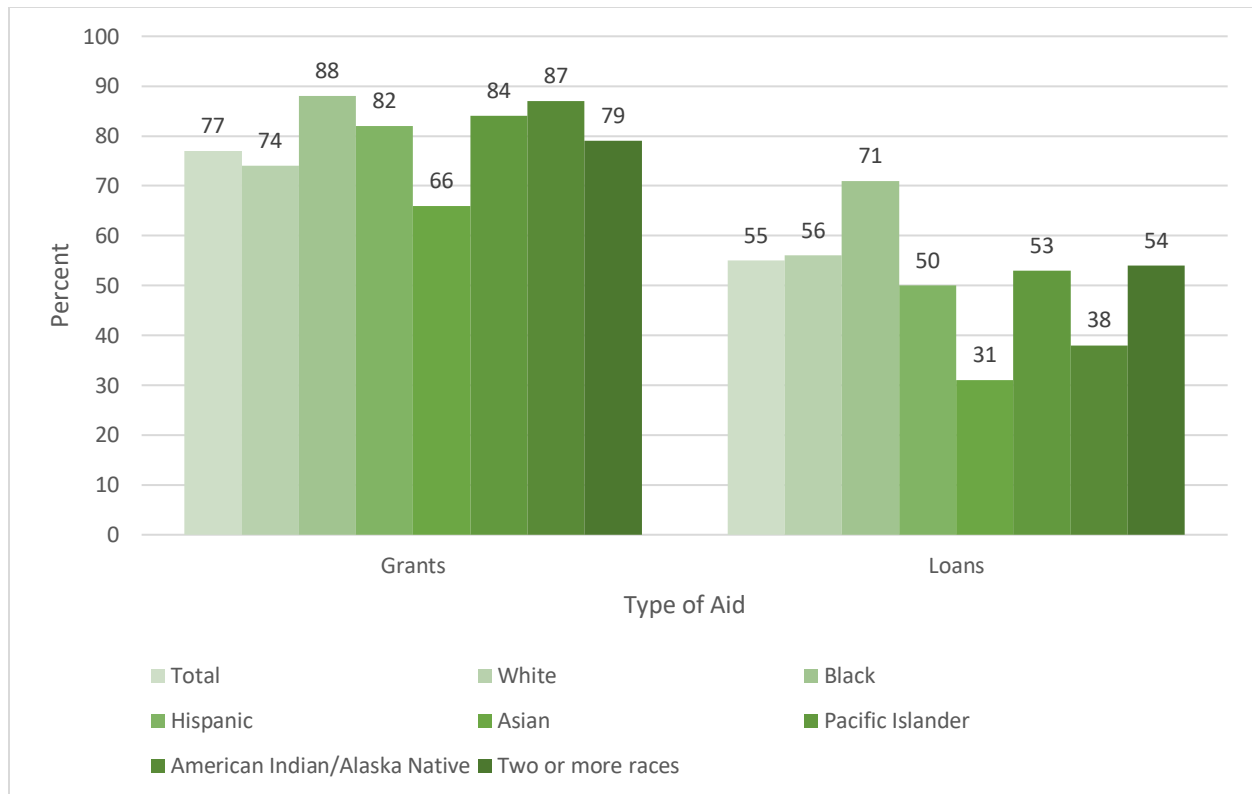
Note. Adapted from “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018” by de Brey et al., 2019, *National Center for Education Statistics, 2019-038*, p. 116. Copyright 2019 by the U.S. Department of Education.

There are also significant disparities between groups in terms of opportunities to pay for college. “Higher percentages of Black (88 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native (87 percent) students received grants than students who were of Two or more races (79 percent), white (74 percent), and Asian (66 percent)” (de Brey et al., 2019, p. 134). However, in terms of loans, “A higher percentage of Black students (71 percent) received loans than students who were White (56 percent), of Two or more races (54 percent), Pacific Islander (53 percent), Hispanic (50 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native (38 percent), and Asian (31 percent)” (de

Brey et al., 2019, pp. 134-135). Figure 2 shows the percentages of undergraduates who received financial aid by race and ethnicity.

Figure 2

Percentage of full-time, full-year undergraduates who received financial aid from any source, by type of aid and race/ethnicity: 2015-16



Note. Adapted from “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018” by de Brey et al., 2019, *National Center for Education Statistics, 2019-038*, p. 134. Copyright 2019 by the U.S. Department of Education.

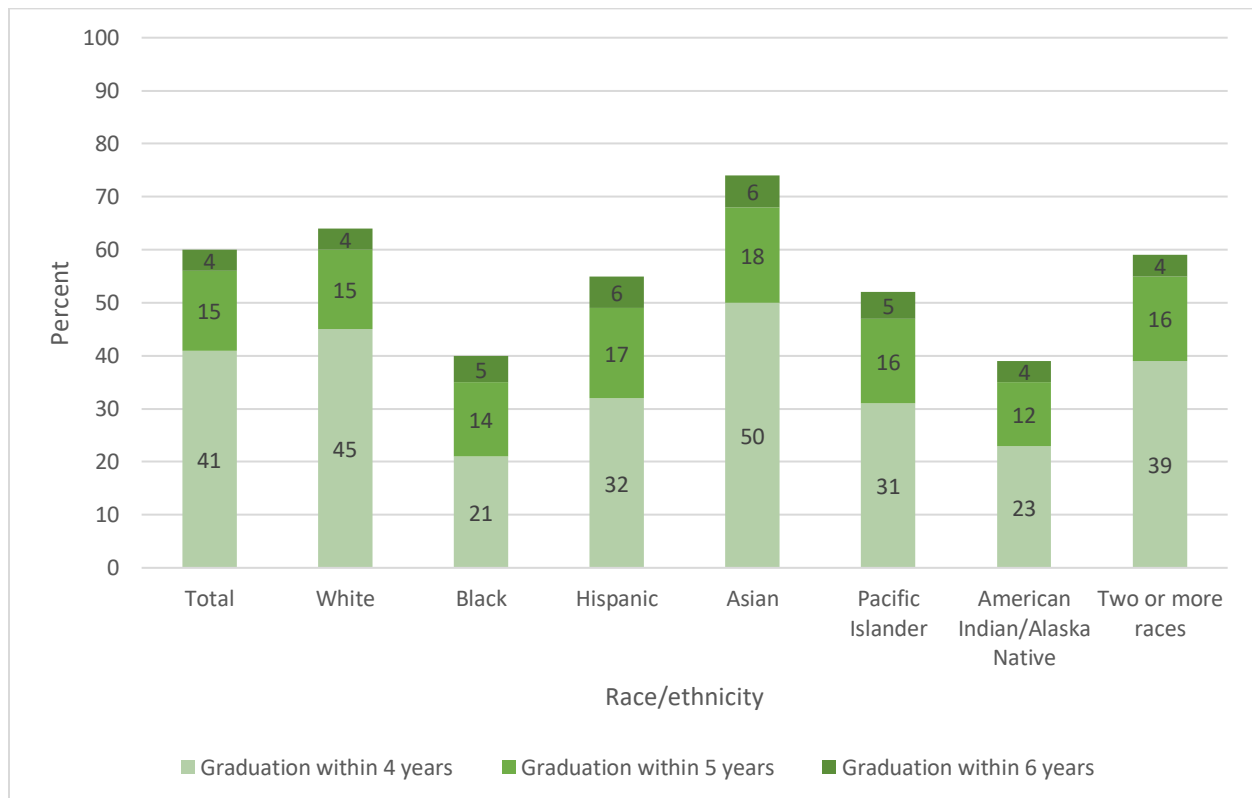
Once Black, Latinx, and Native and Indigenous students have to access higher education, they still face systems that disproportionately provide opportunities to White students, while refusing opportunities to students of color. Patton (2015) argued, “Despite the growth and change in U.S. demographics, the academy is an overwhelmingly White terrain in terms of

physical representation of White students and symbolically in terms of curriculum, campus policies, and campus spaces” (p. 320). Such inequities in physical representation and symbolism result in significant differences in terms of outcomes. With regards to graduation rates, significant differences between different racial groups persists. de Brey et al. (2019) found that graduation rates at four-year postsecondary institutions were highest for “Asian students (74 percent), followed by White students (64 percent), students of Two or more races (60 percent), Hispanic students (54 percent), Pacific Islander students (51 percent), Black students (40 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (39 percent)” (p. 138). Figure 3 shows the graduation rates for first-time, full-time students attending four-year postsecondary institutions in the United States.

Figure 3

Graduation rates from first institutions attended for first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions by race/ethnicity and time to completion:

Cohort entry year 2010



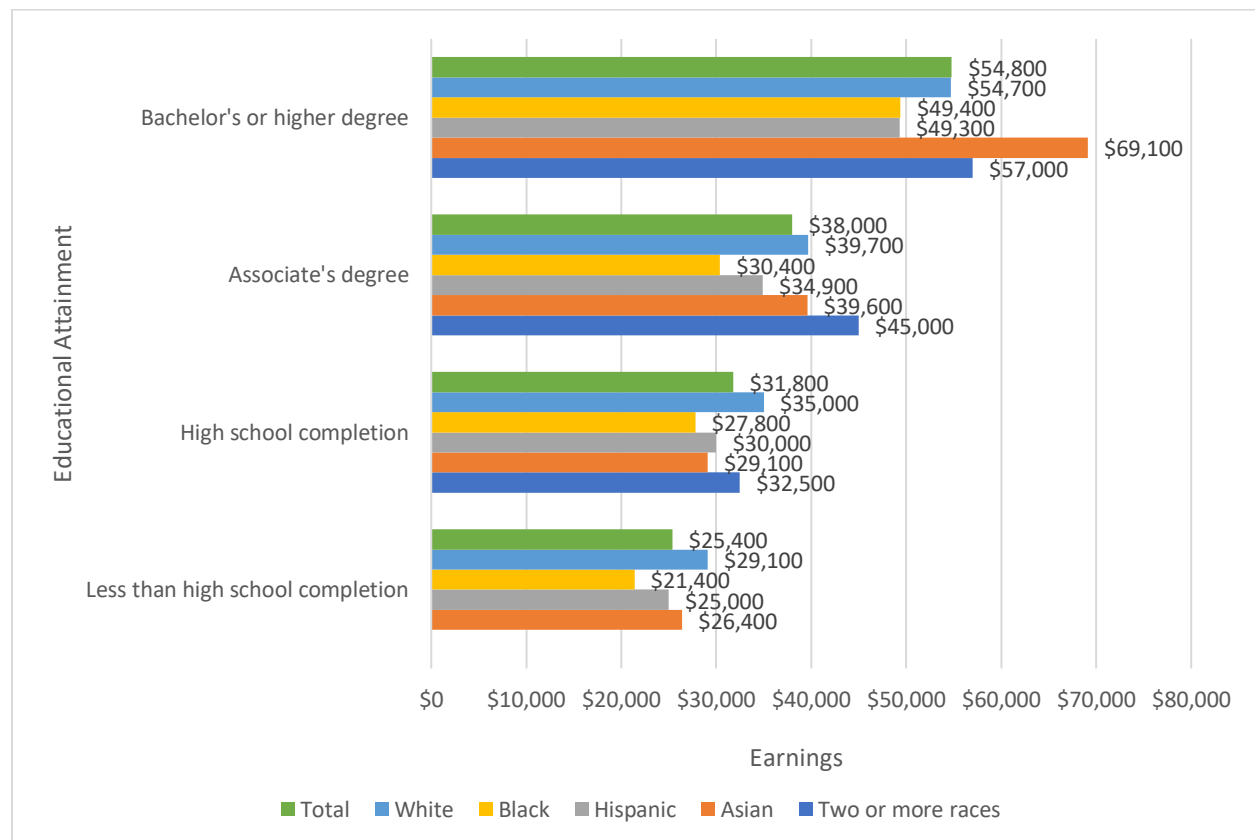
Note. Adapted from “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018” by de Brey et al., 2019, *National Center for Education Statistics, 2019-038*, p. 138. Copyright 2019 by the U.S. Department of Education.

The return on investment for higher education also varies by race. Figure 4 shows the median annual earnings of workers ages 25 to 34 years old by educational attainment and race. As shown below, Asian full-time workers with a bachelor's degree or higher earn the most (\$69,100.00) followed by those of two or more races (\$57,000.00), White full-time workers (\$54,700.00), Black full-time workers (\$49,400.00), and Hispanic full-time workers

(\$49,300.00) (de Brey et al., 2019). These disparities speak to Patton’s (2015) assertion, “The functioning of U.S. higher education is intricately linked to imperialistic and capitalistic efforts that fuel the intersections of race, property, and oppression” (p. 317).

Figure 4

Median annual earnings of full-time year-round workers 25 to 34 years old, by educational attainment and race/ethnicity: 2016



Note. Adapted from “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018” by de Brey et al., 2019, *National Center for Education Statistics, 2019-038*, p. 171. Copyright 2019 by the U.S. Department of Education.

The disparities in the numbers, though, do not reflect an individual’s or group’s innate ability to achieve educational outcomes. Some groups of students are not inherently more able to succeed than other groups of students. Harper (2016) argued the gaps do not reflect ability to

achieve. Rather, the gaps come about as a result of the inequitable distribution of opportunities. Some groups of students have access to more opportunities to succeed in higher education than other groups. When colleges and universities acknowledge the institutionalized, systemic oppression that prevents some groups of students from succeeding, they see the disparities in terms of *opportunity gaps*.

Both Harper (2016) and Pendakur (2016b) noted opportunity gaps have a significant historical context, are perpetuated through institutional power structures, and are overlooked because of deficit views of minoritized groups of students. Opportunity gaps have been around since the beginning of higher education in the United States. Thelin (2019) provided an historical analysis of higher education in the United States. The author clearly outlines how higher education in the United States started out as exclusive institutions for white, wealthy, land-owning men. Over time, different groups of people were granted access to colleges and universities. However, as Harper (2016) wrote, “Several groups have been categorically excluded from particular sectors of higher education far longer than they have been allowed to enroll” (p. x). This long-standing inequitable distribution of opportunities has produced negative results for students from marginalized social groups while at the same time affording students from dominant social groups opportunity to accumulate and amass capital over many generations. As a result, students with dominant social identities (male, White, wealthy, Christian, heterosexual, etc.) have more opportunities to succeed in college and students from minoritized social groups have fewer opportunities. Harper (2016) wrote,

Given this, students of color and their low-income peers are continually behind in a race in which others benefit from a multigenerational head start. They face the challenge of trying to make institutions not built for them adapt to their needs and expectations;

redress long-standing cultural and curricular assaults on their humanity; and afford them equitable access to resources that will ultimately enable them to thrive personally, educationally, and professionally. (p. x)

This long history of inequitably distributed opportunities reifies the structural and paradigmatic factors that perpetuate the gaps.

Opportunity gaps between different groups of students in higher education also persist because of pervasive deficit views of those students (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Harper, 2014, 2016; Harper et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2018; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Pendakur, 2016a; Pendakur, 2016b; Sayani, 2014; Smit, 2012; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006; Yosso, 2002). As noted earlier, the language and perspective of achievement gaps places the onus for success and failure on the student without consideration of systematic and institutionalized oppression. Bensimon (2007) points to Tinto's (1975, 1987) widely accepted model of college departure that pervades much of the research on student success. Rendón et al. (2000) wrote,

Researchers and practitioners alike tend to view issues related to the retention of minority students as similar, if not identical, to those of majority students. What transpires is an almost universally entrenched view that Tinto's departure model, with all of its assumptions, is complete, appropriate, and valid for all students regardless of their varied ethnic, racial, economic, and social backgrounds. (p. 130)

Deficit-minded views of students prevent student success and harm them in the process. These same deficit-centric mindsets cause institutions to fail their students. Institutions, researchers, and practitioners need new asset-minded strategies and frameworks for closing the opportunity gaps.

Identity-Conscious Student Success Work

As noted above, student success work has largely focused on strategies undergirded by deficit-minded assumptions (Bensimon, 2007; Harper, 2016; Harper et al., 2016; Pendakur, 2016b; Rendón et al., 2000). In order to address persistent, pervasive opportunity gaps and move the numbers in a significant way, higher education institutions, scholars, and student success practitioners must invest in new asset-minded ideas and strategies. Pendakur (2016a; 2016b) asserted that the best approach for addressing opportunity gaps is identity-conscious student success strategies focused on student success of specific populations of students.

Pendakur (2016b) described identity-conscious student success strategies as beginning with a holistic understanding of the students from minoritized social groups. Scholars have distinguished identity-conscious work from identity-centered engagement work. Identity-centered engagement work is not necessarily tied to success metrics like persistence or graduation (Mata & Bobb, 2016; Pendakur, 2016b). While many campuses offer identity-centered engagement opportunities that help students develop their own sense of self and understanding of sociopolitical contexts, these opportunities are not identity-conscious student success strategies. They could become identity-conscious student success programs if they are “designed from the ground up with the students’ racial and gender identities in mind, but the intended outcomes are tied to student success, such as term-to-term credit completion, yearly persistence, engagement in high-impact practices, or timely graduation” (Pendakur, 2016b, p. 7).

Similarly, Harris and Wood (2016) wrote about the promises of the Socio-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model for affecting the success of men of color in community colleges. This model focuses on “interactions between societal, environmental, intrapersonal, and campus-based factors that influence student success outcomes for these men” (Harris & Wood, 2016, pp.

35-36). The SEO Model comes from scholarship that is specific to Black men at community colleges. However, it is more expansive and “accounts for the experiences and outcomes of men of color (e.g., Black, Latino, Native American, and Southeast Asian)” (Harris & Wood, 2016, p. 36). This model has been empirically field tested and data were collected from nearly 4,000 male community college students. The authors concluded that using a model based on the relevant experiences of students of color situated in the socio-cultural context of higher education institutions (specifically, community colleges) is useful in shaping the educational outcomes for these men.

Pendakur (2016b) recalled that in response to the national conversations around student success and closing opportunity gaps, several colleges and universities joined together in 2007 to “accomplish two goals: increase the total number of college graduates in the country and ensure that the diversity of those graduates more accurately reflects the current demographics of the country’s high school graduates” (p. 4). This collection of college and university leaders branded themselves the Access to Success (A2S) Initiative. The initiative is made up of 24 public higher education systems, or 378 two-year and four-year campuses with more than three million students (Engle & Lynch, 2009). They received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation to implement innovative approaches to student success. According to Engle and Lynch, “By 2015, they have pledged that their systems will halve the gaps in college-going and college success that separate African-American, Latino, and American-Indian students from white and Asian-American students—and low-income students from more affluent students” (p. 1).

The results from the A2S Initiative have been relatively positive. For example, there have been positive gains in terms of access. Pendakur (2016b) noted the admissions rates of students

of color and low-income students are higher than before the initiative. In terms of student success outcomes, California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) serves as a prime example of how identity-conscious student success strategies can create positive results. CSUF laid out four goals:

- Increase the overall six-year graduation rate so the fall 2012 cohort of first-time full-time freshman is at least 10 percentage points higher than that of the fall 2006 cohort.
- Increase the four-year transfer graduation rate so the fall 2014 cohort is at least 10 percentage points higher than that of the fall 2008 cohort.
- Reduce by at least half the current 12% achievement gap between underrepresented and non-underrepresented students.
- Increase participation in high-impact practices (HIPs) and ensure that 75% of CSUF students participate in at least two HIPs by graduation (“Strategic Planning: Goal 2,” n.d.)

According to Pendakur (2016a), “As of July 2015, our institutional research and analytical studies office reported that CSFU is on target to meet and exceed these objectives” (p. 147).

Identity-conscious student success strategies represent promising approaches for closing opportunity gaps. By focusing on the social identity of particular students, educational interventions and programs can more effectively meet those students’ needs. As a result of implementing identity-conscious student success strategies, institutions and student success practitioners can reasonably expect gains in educational outcomes for specific groups of students. However, this study is not concerned with the efficacy of identity-conscious student success strategies. This study seeks to understand how institutions, departments charged with doing student success work, and student success practitioners can adopt identity-conscious student success approaches to close opportunity gaps.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed literature related to undergraduate student success in higher education, opportunity gaps, identity-conscious student success strategies, the comparative case study approach. In this review, I have shown how this project is situated in the relevant scholarship. Taken together, this chapter substantiates my argument that institutions and student success practitioners need to understand, through a vertical and transversal case study approach, how to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies if they intend to close opportunity gaps. In the next chapter, I discuss my chosen methods.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

As outlined in earlier chapters, conversations around student success are driving institutions of higher education to focus on outcomes and metrics like year-to-year retention and graduation rates (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Of particular concern are the opportunity gaps experienced by students from marginalized social groups (Harper, 2016; Pendakur, 2016b.). These opportunity gaps have been dubbed a national concern by scholars (Harper, 2016; Pendakur, 2016b). Pendakur (2016b) asserted that identity-conscious student success strategies, described in detail in Chapter 2, are promising approaches for closing opportunity gaps. This study examined how one institution of higher education, Michigan State University, adopted identity-conscious student success strategies.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the pragmatic philosophical grounding that underpins this study. Second, I discuss Bartlett & Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach. Specifically, I discuss the vertical and transversal axes of their approach. Then, I provide a discussion of the methods I employed to collect and analyze data. Next, I provide relevant information regarding my own positionality. Following this positionality statement, I discuss the measures I took to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of this project. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the limitations of this study.

Philosophical Grounding

This study is philosophically grounded in pragmatism. As Parvaiz et al. (2016) described, "Pragmatism is an American methodological approach originating from the work of William James (1842-1910), John Dewey (1859-1952), Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and Herbert Mead (1863-1931)" (p. 68). Pragmatism directs researchers to choose methods that best lend themselves to finding solutions to problems, and such a philosophical grounded me to a research

design that included the VTCS adaption of Bartlett and Vavrus's (2014, 2017) CCS approach. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) asserted, "Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy or reality. Pragmatist researchers focus on the 'what' and 'how' of the research problem (Cresswell, 2003, p.11)" (p. 5). According to scholars, pragmatism focuses on research questions aimed at providing solutions to practical concerns (Parvaiz et al., 2016). According to Powell (2001), "To a pragmatist, the mandate of science is not to find truth or reality, the existence of which are perpetually in dispute, but to facilitate human problem-solving" (p. 884).

Philosophical stances (e.g., epistemology, ontology) ought to dictate methodology and choices of methods. How a researcher thinks about exploring, experimenting, and answering research questions should be based on their understanding of being, knowledge, truth, and morality. From that vantage point, a researcher then chooses specific methods that will result in collecting the best and most appropriate data to answer questions. Pragmatism urges the use of any method and analytical tools available to answer the research question, especially when doing so can produce solutions to social problems (Creswell, 2009). This study examined how a university department/unit adopted identity-conscious student success strategies to close extant opportunity gaps. Pragmatism allowed me to use multiple methods to answer the research question.

Study Design: A Vertical and Transversal Comparative Study (VTCS) Approach

This study relies on a vertical and transversal comparative study (VTCS) approach to understand how institutions and student success practitioners can adopt identity-conscious student success strategies to close opportunity gaps. The VTCS approach is adapted from the comparative case study (CCS) approach which comes from many years of research and theorization in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and education (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014,

2017; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2006). In describing the CCS approach as a heuristic, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) wrote,

It is not a recipe or a set of rules. Rather, the CCS approach is, first and foremost, a reminder of how much we might achieve through comparison” (p. 7). As such, the CCS approach represents a method that assists “in the process of discovery or problem-solving. (p. 7)

The authors highlighted the utility of the CCS approach in examining policy, practice, and other phenomena situated in educational contexts. When referring to practice, the authors clarified,

We mean to signal studies that consider how social actors with diverse motives, intentions, and levels of influence, work in tandem with and/or in response to social forces to routinely produce the social and cultural worlds in which they live. (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 1)

From this perspective, practices occur in political, cultural, economic, and historical contexts. In relation to this study, I employed a VTCS approach adapted from the CCS approach to examine the practices associated with adopting identity-conscious student success strategies.

In their book, *Rethinking Case Study Research: A Comparative Approach* (2017), Bartlett and Vavrus discussed case study methodologies that dominate many disciplines and fields. In these traditionally accepted approaches to case study research, Ragin (1992) noted that cases are both “similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon” (p. 1). Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) argue that defining case study research depends on the researcher’s epistemological and methodological stances. They described and critiqued Maxwell’s (2013) three categories of case study research to formulate

their CCS approach: variance-oriented case studies, interpretivist case studies, and process-oriented case study approaches.

Variance-Oriented Case Studies

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) asserted that variance-oriented approaches dominate case study research in most disciplines and fields. Maxwell (2004) wrote, “Variance theory tends to be associated with research that employs experimental or correlational designs, quantitative measurement, and statistical analysis” (p. 5). Such approaches tend to rely on neo-positivism, “the view that the world operates by laws of cause and effect and that these laws can be discovered through scientific methods like observations” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 28). Similarly, Robert Yin’s work has greatly influenced case study methods. Yin (2014) wrote, “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in-depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16).

In their approach to case study research, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) provided six critiques of Yin’s (2014) conceptualization of the methodology. First, Bartlett and Vavrus critiqued Yin’s focus on contemporary phenomena. Yin (2014) warned of examining “events extending back to the ‘dead’ past, where no direct observations can be made, and no people are alive to be interviewed” (p. 24). Bartlett and Vavrus’s (2017) transversal approach, discussed later in this chapter, provides a researcher a way to compare a case to itself throughout time.

Second, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) took issue with Yin’s (2014) conflation of case and context. They write, “[It] runs the risk of promoting a ‘context as container’ notion, where the immediate temporal and geographic/place-based elements of the study are the only ones seen as relevant” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 29). The authors noted the importance of the temporal

dimensions of a case. They also pointed to the possibilities of the rich understandings that emerge when examining the inextricable links between the case and the context. Rather than seeing these links as problematic and of little value, Bartlett and Vavrus urge researchers to view them as sites of possibility.

Third, Yin (2014) wrote, “Having more variables of interest than data points arises from the complexity of the case and its context (hence, many variables), with the case being the only ‘data point’” (p. 24). Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) argued that Yin’s (2014) approach requires the researcher to take the context as a whole, leading to mere description rather than meaningful analysis. A more meaningful analysis might consider the multiple ways the phenomenon of interest works on the context of the case, and the ways the context of the case works on the phenomenon.

Fourth, Yin (2014) essentialized the step of bounding the case in case study research. Similarly, Creswell (2013) and Stake (1995) suggested bounding a case by time and activity, where as Miles and Huberman (1994) instructed researchers to bound a case by definition and context. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), however, problematized the notion of bounding, arguing the concepts aligns with neo-positivist understandings that predefine variables and hypothesize relationships. Ultimately, such approaches fail due to a limited conceptualization of both context and comparison. A new approach would consider the many ways in which a case cannot be distinguished from its context not as a limitation, but as a site for possible new ways of knowing.

Fifth, Yin’s (2014) approach to case study research “emphasizes variance and a neo-positivist epistemology” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 31). Yin urged researchers to take up notions of validity, generalizability, and replication. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) argued that Yin’s emphasis on variance and the grounding in neo-positivist epistemologies limits the possibilities

of learning through case study research. They argued that instead of focusing on variables and variance, validity, and generalizability, case study research can focus on process and practice to better understand social phenomena.

Sixth, Yin's (2014) work generally devalues case study research in the social sciences. Yin described three different types of case studies: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. The social sciences generally acknowledge the significance of explanatory studies, but not exploratory and descriptive studies. However, because of Yin's insistence on variance-oriented case study endeavors, most social science case studies do not move beyond the exploratory or descriptive categories. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) wrote, "Yin's view that case study research is often exploratory or descriptive denigrates it as an approach to meaningful scholarship" (p. 30). A process-oriented understanding of case study research, would prove more fruitful for research in the social sciences, including education.

Interpretivist Case Studies

Maxwell (2013) described a second type of case study research as interpretivist case studies. Through interpretivist case studies, researchers aim to understand how people make sense of events or social phenomena. These types of case studies are rooted in social constructivist epistemologies. They focus on symbols, and researchers often ask participants how and why they act in certain ways. Robert Stake's work has been highly influential in interpretivist case study approaches. In contrast to Yin's (2014) structured approach to case study research, Stake (1995) advocated for flexibility in research design so that it may change during the course of a project. Stake (1995) wrote,

We cannot know at the outset what the issues, the perceptions, the theory will be. Case researchers enter the scene expecting, even knowing, that certain events, problems,

relationships will be important, yet discover that some actually are of little consequence. (pp. 240-241).

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) found Stake's (1995) interpretivist approach more agreeable than Yin's (2014) variance-oriented approach. However, they provided multiple critiques. First, Stake's interpretivist approach fails to adequately emphasize power relations and social structures through which individuals make meaning. In this way, interpretivist case studies often fail to acknowledge systemic racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Power, privilege, and oppression serve as mechanism through which some individual's meaning-making processes are more valued than others. Such an examination would further instantiate dominate discourses and ways of knowing.

Second, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) diverge from Stake's (1995) conceptualization of interpretivist case studies, specifically as it relates to generalizability. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) asserted that Stake's (1995) conceptualization of interpretivist case study approaches completely forsakes the notion of generalizability. Instead, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) encourage a middle way. They wrote, "We would argue that, beyond falsification, cases generate rich theoretical insights that transfer to other times and places" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 34). From this perspective, the goal of comparative case studies, then, is not generalizability, but the researchers do welcome findings that can be applied to other cases.

Third, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) take issue with Stake's (1995) idea that a case is a bounded system. Stake (1995) wrote, "Its behavior is patterned. Coherence and sequence are prominent. It is common to recognize that certain features are within the system... and other features outside... are significant as context" (p. 237). Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) asserted that Stake's (1995) insistence on boundaries and coherence has the same shortcomings as Yin's

(2014) understanding of context and comparison. According to Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), “Boundaries are not found; they are made by social actors, including by researchers, whose demarcations can often seem quite arbitrary and can have the effect of sealing off the case hermetically from other places, times, and influences” (p. 34). These critiques lead Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) to a discussion of the third type of case study approaches: Process-oriented approaches.

Process-Oriented Approaches

According to Maxwell (2013), process approaches “tend to see the world in terms of people, situations, events, and the processes that connect these; explanation is based on an analysis of how some situations and events influence others” (p. 29). According to Bartlett and Vavrus (2017), a process-oriented approach insists on an emergent design. In their reimagined CCS approach, the authors contended that the

effort to ‘bound’ a case relies on a problematic notion of culture, place, and community; it also, quite inappropriately, defines out of the realm of study factors that may well be very relevant, such as historical circumstances that date back decades or more. (pp. 38-39)

Their CCS approach “features an iterative and contingent tracing of relevant factors, actors, and features” (p. 39). Further, process-oriented case study approaches, like Bartlett and Vavrus’s (2017) CCS approach, take up critical theoretical stances. Drawing on the works of Marx, feminist theories, and critical race theory, process-oriented approaches consider the “cultural production of structures, processes, and practices of power, exploitation, and agency” (p. 39). In relying on critical theories, process-oriented approaches, and the CCS approach, can disrupt

normative, hegemonic mechanisms that recreate and maintain inequity and disparities in opportunities.

The comparative case study approach generally aims to critically compare cases along the horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014, 2017). I briefly described these three axes in Chapter 1. As noted earlier, since this study examined only one case, I did not employ the horizontal analysis. In this section, I provide a more detailed review of the vertical and transversal axes of CCS approaches.

The Vertical Axis

The vertical axis of the comparative case study approach insists on the examination of a case across multiple scales, like politics, culture, and economics (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014, 2017). Such an analysis compares a case across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (see also Bray & Thomas, 1995). In reviewing the vertical axis, I first summarize the central assumptions underpinning Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) vertical axis. Then, discuss how Latour's (2005) actor-network theory (ANT) influenced Bartlett and Vavrus's (2014, 2017) conceptualization of vertical comparisons. Then, I turn to the concept of assemblages, or "temporary, shifting alliances or networks of people, objects, and ideas" (2014, p. 141). Finally, I explicate how these concepts specifically relate to my examination of how MSU adopted identity-conscious student success strategies.

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) outlined three central assumptions underpinning the vertical axis of the comparative case study approach. These assumptions substantiate the relevance of the vertical axis in CCS examinations of education. The first assumption accounts for actors' variable responses to phenomena across the same scale. Actors who are assumed to be situated in the same cultural, political, and economic scales may engage with a phenomena differently. They

write, “[This] is often due to different histories of racial, ethnic, or gender politics in their communities that appropriately complicate the notion of a single cultural group” (p. 75). In describing the second assumption central to the vertical axis, the authors write, “We assume that [comparative case studies] would benefit by tracing the processes by which actors and actants come into relationship with one another and form non-permanent assemblages” (p. 76). The third assumption central to the vertical axis requires researchers to understand interactions in the context of political and economic power structures.

Bartlett and Vavrus (2014, 2017) drew on Latour’s (2005) introduction to ANT to develop their conceptualization of the vertical axis. They wrote, “ANT considers how, within networks, people and objects get invited, excluded, and enrolled; how linkages are established (or fail to ‘take’), shift, and dissolve; and how social acts curtail or facilitate future actions” (p. 133). Said another way, an ANT-influenced vertical analysis follows “the specific materializing processes through which policymaking actually works to animate educational knowledge, identities, and practices” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011, p. 710). This study examined the NSSC as an assemblage situated in the larger institutional context of Michigan State University. I sought to understand “the specific materializing process” through which identity-conscious student success strategies animated “educational knowledge, identities, and practices (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011, p. 710).

ANT focuses on actors within fluid assemblages. According to Latour (2005), the term actors includes humans and nonhumans. From this perspective, assemblages are networks of actors which include people, objects, texts, and concepts. Koyoma (2011) wrote, “ANT focuses not on what an object means, but rather on what it does, with human investment” (p. 705). Similar to Ahmed (2012) and Rhoads’s (1998) methodology, the ANT-influenced vertical axis

provides a framework for following ideas, concepts, people, texts, policies, and other factors through space and time. Tracing the many possible actors in an assemblage results in a rich understanding of how actors influence, support, and even work against each other creating the social reality of a given case.

In this study, I interviewed nine participants who were part of the assemblages responsible for MSU's adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. Through qualitative interviews, I collected data that allowed me to trace the concept of identity-conscious student success strategies through and across multiple scales, including the political, cultural, and economic. The micro-level in this study includes the personal relationships built and maintained by my interview participants. The Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative organizationally situated in Michigan State University represents the meso-level unit of analysis. At the macro-level, I examined state and national contexts that affected the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies.

The Transversal Axis

The transversal axis of the comparative case study approach provides a mechanism to study how a phenomenon changes over time (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The authors connected the vertical axis to the transversal axis primarily through the notion of assemblages. Because assemblages as defined by Latour (2005) are fluid, fleeting, and everchanging, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) asserted comparative case studies ought to include a "temporal study of these changing assemblages across sites and scales" (p. 92). Below, I discuss the four assumptions central to the transversal axis. I conclude this section with a description of how I applied the transversal axis to my dissertation study.

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) provide four central assumptions informing the transversal axis. The first assumption requires researchers to understand the historical roots of social phenomena. The wrote, “We believe that the study of any contemporary issue needs to go back in time to understand how it came to be in the first place” (p. 93). The second assumption locates importance in understanding how a case has changed over time. “Such historical comparison reveals important insights about the flexible cultural, social, political, and economic systems humans have developed and sustained over time” (p. 93). Their third assumption asserts that time and space are closely related. The transversal axis requires researchers to trace how social phenomena reproduce themselves or change over the course of a case. The fourth assumption central to the transversal axis employs history to resolve conflicting interpretations of a phenomenon. “Thus, the study of change and constancy over time opens up alternative explanations for phenomena that may seem self-evident if examined only from a contemporary perspective” (p. 94).

To better understand the process of how Michigan State University and the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative adopted identity-conscious student success strategies, I employed the transversal axis of the CCS approach. An adoption process is inherently a temporal concept. At one point in time, MSU and the NSSC did not employ identity-conscious student success approaches. Now, they do. For this study to achieve its purpose of providing other institutional leaders and student success practitioners with an example of how a complex organization adopted identity-conscious student success strategies, the analysis had to include a temporal component. Through my interviews, I garnered data that illuminated multiple participants’ perception of the process.

Methods

With pragmatism as the philosophical grounding for this study in combination with Bartlett and Vavrus's (2014, 2017) comparative case study approach, I conducted semistructured, qualitative interviews with nine participants. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, I conducted these interviews virtually. Borrowing from the tradition of narrative inquiry, I designed my interview protocol to elicit data from participants regarding their experiences with the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative and the process of adopting identity-conscious student success strategies (Glesne, 2016).

Site Selection: Michigan State University and the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative

For this study, I examined one site, Michigan State University. I focused my data collection efforts on the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative because that is the unit at the institution that explicitly employs identity-conscious student success strategies to close opportunity gaps. MSU is a large, public research institution in the Midwest. Michigan State University espouses a land-grant mission. It is a predominately white institution with 39,175 undergraduate students (MSUOPB, 2020). Of the first-time students seeking a bachelor's degree starting in the fall of 2018, 92% returned to Michigan State University in the Fall of 2019 (NCES, 2020). Of the first-time, full-time students who began in their studies at Michigan State University in the fall of 2012, 80% graduated within six years (NCES, 2020). However, there are still substantial differences in student success outcomes for various groups. In considering the students who started their studies at Michigan State University in the fall of 2012, white students graduated at 83% and Asian students graduated at 84%, while Black, Latinx, and Indigenous

students graduated at rates of 66%, 66%, and 71% respectively (NCES, 2020). The disparities of graduation rates represent opportunity gaps described in earlier chapters.

In 2010, executive-level leaders from academic, student, and auxiliary affairs piloted a cross-campus student success effort called the Neighborhoods Initiative. (Pitcher, Cantwell, & Renn, 2015). This initiative aimed to provide “support for learning and engagement, personal development, healthy living, leadership and the opportunity to participate as a member of an inclusive community” (MSU, 2010). As the Neighborhoods Initiative developed and evolved, the unit found a home in the office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education (APUE). APUE “oversees undergraduate academic policies and facilitates institutional wide initiatives focused on enhancing undergraduate learning. [They] are involved in everything from the orientation and welcome of first-year students to the enhancement and oversight of selected academic programs and co-curricular initiatives” (APUE, 2020). At the time of data collection, APUE programs and services included academic advising, Educational Talent Search, first-year seminars, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), Global and Intercultural Learning at MSU, Migrant Student Services, New Student Orientation, the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities, undergraduate research, and Upward Bound.

Sampling

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Michigan State University approved this study as exempt on June 22, 2020 (See Appendix A). I employed purposeful sampling techniques to select and invite participants. As Patton (2002) explained, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling... lead to selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 46). The participants I invited to interview all have deep, extensive

knowledge about the Neighborhoods Initiative, the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies, and the historic, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the case.

Summary of study participants. Because of the nature of this study, the site and the identities of the participants could not be masked. The nine individuals who participated in this study agreed to have their names disclosed in the final write-up and publication of this document. Table 1 below provides a list of the participants, the positions they held relevant to the Neighborhoods Initiative, and a brief description of the rationale for inviting them to participate.

Table 1. Research Participant Summary

Participant Name	Position(s) Held	Rationale for Invitation
Kelley Bishop	Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs & Services & Director of the Neighborhoods	Early leader of the Neighborhoods Initiative; extensive knowledge of initial iterations of the projects work and reception
Tom Fritz	Neighborhoods Engagement Director	Several years of experience working with the Neighborhoods Initiative during the early and middle years; Convener of the health and wellness pillar
Vennie Gore	Assistant Vice President of Auxiliary Enterprises; Vice President of Auxiliary Enterprises; Senior Vice President for Residential & Hospitality Services & Auxiliary Enterprises	One of the three Architects; has been involved with all iterations of the Neighborhoods Initiative; Currently supports the project; Executive-level perspective
Larry Long	Management Analyst for Student Success Initiatives	Direct knowledge of the culture around data; Coordinated assessment of the Neighborhoods Initiative for reaccreditation with the Higher Learning Commission
Reggie Noto	Neighborhoods Engagement Director	Several years of experience working with the Neighborhoods Initiative during the early and middle years; Convener of the academic pillar
Kristen Renn	Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies & Director for Student Success Initiatives	Leader of the Neighborhoods Initiative during the middle years; Extensive knowledge of the institution; Responsible for many expansion efforts; Research focuses on identity and student success

Table 1 (cont'd)

		identity-conscious student success initiatives for Black students; Responsible for building out the NSSC's identity-conscious student success efforts
Philip Strong	Director of the East Neighborhood Engagement Center	Led the pilot of the Neighborhoods Initiative
June Youatt	Senior Associate Provost & Dean of Undergraduate Studies; Provost	One of the three Architects; has been involved with early, middle, and recent iterations of the Neighborhoods Initiative; Executive-level perspective

Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant completed one virtual interview. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes resulting in nine hours of interview data. The interviews were semistructured which allowed participants to share their unique experiences, perceptions, recollections, and understandings related to the Neighborhoods Initiative and the NSSC (Glesne, 2016). All participants agreed to me both audio and video recording our virtual call. I employed Rev, a company that provides transcription services, to transcribe each interview verbatim.

With regards to the interviews, I used the interview protocol provided in Appendix D. I opened each interview session by asking participants about their background and how they came to MSU. This provided a moment that allowed participants to recall simple facts about their history related to MSU. I also asked each participant about the context in which they first heard about the Neighborhoods Initiative and how they thought different factions of the MSU community perceived the project. Further, I asked all participants about their recollections of when and how identity-conscious student success strategies were adopted by the Neighborhoods Initiative and the NSSC. I followed up with participants specifically regarding political, cultural,

and economic factors that either impeded or aided the implementation and evolution of the Neighborhoods Initiative. These questions often included the topics of presidential and executive leadership; local, state, and federal policies that affected the Neighborhoods Initiative; and the organizational culture that aided or impeded the work of the Neighborhoods Initiative.

During the first three interviews, participants mentioned two major topics that necessitated further consideration. First, early participants mentioned the use of coded language to describe specific groups of students. Specifically, they mentioned the College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP), and how a CAAP designation was often used to refer to Black students. Throughout the later interviews, I asked specifically if participants recalled this practice what their thoughts were about it. Second, early participants recalled the many frustrations that arose from the culture around data management and sharing. Because of this, I invited Larry Long to participate in the study. Long was able to speak directly to the culture around data management and sharing at very high levels of the MSU hierarchy. While I asked Long most of the questions in the original protocol, I also asked more specific questions about the culture around data. I also asked later participants more pointed questions about the culture around data management and sharing.

Throughout the interviews, participants often referred me to documents that aided in my understanding of the case. I also searched for other relevant documents, statements, press releases, and media that informed my understanding of the case. In analyzing these documents, websites, and media items, I first looked for information that I could use to triangulate data points that emerged from the interviews. Then, I analyzed the relevant documents to triangulate other findings from the interviews. Specifically, I looked for key words that arose from participants' responses, ideas that related either directly or indirectly to identity-conscious

student success strategies, and information that related to the organizational structure and culture.

Below, Table 2 shows a description of the documents, websites, and media I also analyzed as part of this VTCS project.

Table 2. Document, Website, and Media Summary

Item Name	Item Type/Description	Source	Rationale for Inclusion
College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP)	Program description found in website archives	Appendix E	Multiple participants mentioned the CAAP program. To get a better understanding of the program and its goals, I included this document for analysis.
Directors named for MSU Neighborhoods	Press release in MSU Today archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2011/directors-named-for-msu-neighborhoods/	This item provided information about the individuals named as directors the year after the pilot.
Genyne Royal Appointed Interim Assistant Dean of Student Success Initiatives & Director of the NSSC	Story from the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education	https://undergrad.msu.edu/news/viaw/id/178	This item provided information about Genyne Royal's initial appointment to the role of assistant dean for student success initiatives and director of the NSSC.
Identity Conscious	Page on the NSSC website	https://nssc.msu.edu/identity-conscious/index.html	This item outlined the current identity-conscious student success efforts of the NSSC.

Table 2 (cont'd)

Joanna Young recommended as new MSU IT vice president	Press release in MSU Today archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2014/joanna-young-recommended-as-new-msu-it-vice-president/	This item provided information about Joanna Young's appointment at MSU.
Keeping students off academic probation	Press release in MSU Today archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2016/keeping-students-off-academic-probation/#:~:text=This%20past%20year%2C%20the%20percentage,roughly%20200%20first%2Dtime%20freshmen	This item provided information about Estrzy's approach to student success.
Lee June to step down...	Press release in MSU Today archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/lee-june-to-step-down-as-vice-president-for-student-affairs	This item provided information about Vice President Lee June's transition out of student affairs and services. June was vice president during the conceptualization and launch of the Neighborhoods Initiative.
Maybank accepts senior position at Michigan State	Press release in University of Nebraska Medical Center Newsroom	https://www.unmc.edu/news.cfm?match=2258#:~:text=Denise%20Maybank%2C%20associate%20to%20the,Michigan%20State%20University%20(MSU)%20in	This item provided information about Maybank's work prior to starting at MSU
Maybank named MSU interim vice president for student affairs	Press release in MSU Today archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/maybank-named-msu-interim-vice-president-for-student-affairs	Maybank was one of the Architects. This item provided relevant information about her place in the organization during the implementation of the Neighborhoods Initiative.

Table 2 (cont'd)

MSU Neighborhoods pilot program promotes student success	Press release in MSU Today archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/msu-neighborhoods-pilot-program-promotes-student-success	This item provided communication to the University community about the Neighborhoods Initiative pilot.
Minutes of the Meeting of the Michigan State University Board of Trustees	Meeting minutes	https://trustees.msu.edu/assets/meeting-pdfs/bot-minutes-06-21-2013.pdf	This item provided information regarding Maybank's official appointment to the position of vice president of student affairs and services.
NSSC Student Success Model	Page on the NSSC website	https://nssc.msu.edu/about/student-successmodel.html	This item provided information relevant to how the Neighborhoods Initiative and the NSSC approach student success work.
Staff profiles: Terry Walsh	Press release in MSU Today Archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/staff-profiles-terry-walsh/	This item provided information about Terry Walsh, one of the first directors of the Neighborhoods Initiative after the pilot.
Student Success Staffing for the early 21 st Century	White paper	From the work files of P. Strong	This item was authored by Philip Strong, the leader of the Neighborhoods Initiative pilot and a participant in this study.

Table 2 (cont'd)

Residential & Hospitality Strategic Plan Update	Publication	https://issuu.com/hanburyevans/docs/michigan state university	This item provided information about the organizational restructuring that occurred before and during the implementation of the Neighborhoods Initiative.
Rising Tides and Closing Gaps	Letter from the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education	https://undergrad.msu.edu/news/view/id/215	This item provided information about opportunity gaps and identity-conscious student success work at MSU.
Shaping the Future of Student Support Services	Memorandum from Wilcox, Poston, and June to Youatt, Gore, and Maybank	http://shapingthefuture.msu.edu/documents/SupportServices11_25_09.pdf	This item showed the communication to the three Architects of the Neighborhoods Initiative. This document was also released to the University community and outlined the charge of those working on the Neighborhoods Initiative.
Student success is not just academic	Letter from the Associate Provost	https://undergrad.msu.edu/news/view/id/258	This item provided statements combatting deficit thinking.
University Innovation Alliance	Facebook page	https://www.facebook.com/uiainnovation	This item provided information about the mission of the UIA.

Table 2 (cont'd)

Youatt recommended as new MSU provost	Press release in MSU Today archives	https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2014/youatt-recommended-as-new-msu-provost/	This item provided information regarding the recommendation of June Youatt to the position of Provost. This occurred during the implementation of the Neighborhoods Initiative.
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Data analysis: Narrative creation and the constant comparative method. I analyzed the data in two ways to answer my research question. I uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative research platform, to assist me in my two-pronged analysis. First, to ascertain a rich, detailed understanding of how MSU and the NSSC adopted identity-conscious strategies, I created a narrative interpretation of the data. According to Hatch (2002), “Humans make sense of their lives through story” (p. 28) I analyzed the transcripts for “what they say about the social life and cultures of which the narrators are a part” (Glesne, 2016, p. 288). Using the VTCS approach, I read through each transcript and identified evidence that historically situated the case. I repeated this process three more times to obtain evidence that spoke to the political, cultural, and economic factors that affected the adoption of identity-conscious student success at MSU. Throughout each of these readings, I also identified and coded each data unit as related to the micro-, meso-, or macro-level of the case. I then pieced the data units together and created a narrative following the concept of identity-conscious student success strategies through time, politics, culture, and economic contexts. This method allowed me to compare the case across multiple scales and vertical levels (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014, 2017). This narrative is presented in Chapter 4.

I then analyzed the data again using the constant comparative method. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the constant comparative method includes at least three distinct stages. In the first stage of the constant comparative method, researchers unitize the data set by identifying the smallest pieces of meaningful information. I read through each transcript and used the excerpt function in Dedoose to unitize the data. The second stage of the constant comparative method requires the researcher to gather similar units into unnamed groupings or categories. When new categories no longer emerge, the researcher names each category and creates provisional rules for the inclusion of data units in each group. In my initial unit categorization, I had 17 different groupings. After naming the 17 groupings and creating provisional rules for unit inclusion for each, I realized significant overlap existed between several of them. I then merged groupings and renamed some of them accordingly. This review resulted in seven unique, meaningful categories. These categories represented the findings presented in Chapter 5. Upon further review of the categories, I identified meaningful relationships between some of the categories. I used these relationships to create the theme names that encompassed the findings.

Reflexivity and Statement of Positionality

Hay (2005) defined positionality as the researcher's "social, locational, and ideological placement relative to the research project or to other participants in it" (p. 290). In describing the related process of reflexivity, Schwandt (2007) explained that it includes examining one's personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways... and for developing particular interpretations" (p. 260). In this section, I describe both my positionality and my practice of reflexivity to situate myself in relation to this research project.

Throughout this project, I frequently checked my assumptions about the site and the participants. In the fall of 2013, I began the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education doctoral program at Michigan State University. In 2014, I started working as a graduate assistant for the Neighborhoods at MSU. At this time, the original creators of the Neighborhoods Initiative were still on campus and overseeing the Neighborhoods Initiative. I worked with Tom Fritz, Larry Long, Reggie Noto, Kris Renn, and Genyne Royal. I left my graduate assistantship in 2018 when I took a full-time position at Manchester University as the Director of First-Year Experience and Transitions. I returned to work as a Neighborhood Director for Student Success in the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative at MSU in December of 2019. Renn is also chairing my dissertation committee. While these experiences and relationships provided me with a strong foundational knowledge of the site and most of the participants, I actively attempted to prevent this information from influencing my interpretations of the data. I created a list of assumptions that I brought with me to this project, and frequently checked it against my analyses and interpretations.

This study is intrinsically tied to the experiences of students who hold minoritized identities. Throughout this project, I continuously and critically reflected on my dominant and minoritized identities. I am 34 years old. I was born and raised in Rochester, Indiana, a rural, predominately white community. I was raised in a mid-range income household. My parents have always been able to provide me with food, water, clothing, shelter, and access to healthcare. I have a Bachelor of Science in biochemistry from Purdue University. I have a Master of Education from Loyola University Chicago, and I am currently pursuing a doctoral degree at Michigan State University. Most people read me as a cis-gender, able-bodied, gay man. While I have claimed these identities in the past, I have come to subscribe to a queer epistemology and

theoretical politic. As such, I actively resist the rigidity of social identifiers like cis-, gay, and man. I also try to identify and resist heteronormative, racist, patriarchal assumptions that undergird modern ways of knowing. Throughout this study, I have intentionally attempted to ensure that my privileged, dominant identities and positions do no harm to participants or to the marginalized students who may benefit from identity-conscious student success strategies.

Limitations

Three limitations potentially affected the quality of this study. First, my privileged identities (i.e., White, seemingly cisgender male, temporarily able-bodied, college graduate, doctoral student, university administrator) influence how I interact with the social world. Specifically, as a White person interested in closing opportunity gaps experienced by racially minoritized students, I potentially frame this research through a “White savior” lens. As a university administrator, I tried to approach this study in ways that would have positive material effects for minoritized students, rather than in ways that resulted in my own profit and social mobility. I have constantly grappled with these possibilities by reflecting on my own privileged identities, intentionally citing authors with marginalized social identities, clearly understanding and stating the import of addressing opportunity gaps, and making research decisions that allowed me to more fully analyze systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

Using the transversal axes to historically situate this case, a second limitation of the study is presentism. Presentism refers to approaches to historiography that privilege present understandings, epistemologies, and contemporary values that researchers sometimes impose on examinations of past phenomena. Fendler (2008) provided a description of the problems with presentism and provided a strategic approach to ethically dealing with presentism. First, presentism can “impose a priori interpretations on historical phenomena,” revealing the

researcher's assumption that either the present is the same as the past, or that the present is different than that past (Fendler, 2008, p. 677). Second, presentism can manifest as researchers assumption that progress is inevitable. Third, researchers may "construe the present as if it were caused or determined by the past" (p. 678). Acknowledging the inevitability of presentism, Fendler provided an alternative framework to ethically deal with the matter. The strategic use of presentism can "allow for the possibility that the present may be similar and/or different from the past," "allow for both discontinuity and continuity in history," and "recognize multiple interpretations of things both in the past and present" (p. 678). Throughout this study, I constantly considered the participants' and my own understandings of the present and the past. I diligently aimed to uncover multiple interpretations of how the Neighborhoods Initiative was historically situated, and I tried to check my own assumptions about and privileging of the present through triangulating multiple data points throughout time.

The third limitation of this study deals with my professional experiences with the site. As noted earlier, I began the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education doctoral program in 2013. In 2014, I accepted a graduate assistantship with the Neighborhoods Initiative, which I held until early 2018. During most of this time, Kristen Renn, a participant in this study and the chair of my dissertation committee, led the Neighborhoods Initiative as the director. Further, in December of 2019, I accepted a position as a Neighborhood Director for Student Success in the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative. My supervisor, Genyne Royal, was also a participant in this study. My associations with participants, the Neighborhoods Initiative, and the NSSC all could have created issues with how participants responded in the interviews. Throughout this study, I relied on multiple forms and sources of data to triangulate and more deeply understand how the MSU adopted identity-conscious student success strategies.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

I engaged in multiple processes to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. The concept of trustworthiness generally refers to the quality of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as concepts that speak to the trustworthiness of a study. Credibility refers to the degree of truthfulness of the data and the researcher's interpretations of those data. Transferability refers to how applicable findings are to other contexts. Dependability refers to the likelihood of finding similar data in similar conditions. Confirmability shows the data represents the participant's responses and not just the researcher's interpretations. To establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, I first engaged in member-checking (Glesne, 2016). When I received the transcripts of the interviews, I sent them to participants so that they could provide feedback. Through this process of member checking, participants rephrased some of their statements, corrected or clarified portions of the transcript, and generally ensured the transcript was an accurate representation of our interview.

I also achieved rigor and trustworthiness through triangulation. Glesne (2016) described triangulation by writing, "Although the most common form of triangulation in qualitative research is through using multiple methods of data collection, triangulation may also refer to incorporation of multiple kinds of data sources..., multiple investigators, or multiple theoretical perspectives" (p. 301). Schwandt (1997) described triangulation as "a means of checking the integrity of the inferences one draws" (p. 163). Throughout my data analysis, I ensured the trustworthiness of my interpretations and inferences by ensuring that all findings were supported by multiple units of data from at least three participants. I also searched for and cited public documents that supported the confirmability of this study.

Finally, I asked Kelly High McCord to engage in a process of debriefing. I originally considered inviting High McCord to participate through an interview. However, after further consideration, I decided she was the ideal person to provide critical feedback of the narrative provided in Chapter 4. High McCord served in the Neighborhood Engagement Director role during the early, middle, and recent years of the Neighborhoods Initiative. She read through the narrative and provided her own recollections and interpretations of the case. She identified inconsistencies and inaccuracies which ensured dependability, rigor, and trustworthiness. I took this step because High McCord was able to provide checks to my insider assumptions.

Summary and Conclusion

I began this chapter with a discussion of pragmatism, the philosophical grounding supporting this study. Then I discussed the methods I employed. Specifically, I discussed how I selected Michigan State University and the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative as the site for examination. Then I provided a description of my sampling process, which included a description of the participants. Next, I provided a discussion of how I analyzed the data using both narrative analysis and the constant comparative method. Following this, I described how I engaged in the process of reflexivity and provided a statement of my positionality. I ended this chapter by explaining how I ensured high levels of rigor and trustworthiness throughout the study. The following chapter presents the results of the narrative analysis I described earlier.

CHAPTER 4: THE STORY OF THE NEIGHBORHOODS

After analyzing the participant interview data and the documents, websites, and other media items, multiple findings emerged. I have separated the findings from this study into two chapters. This chapter describes the context in which Michigan State University has taken up identity-conscious student success approaches. The next chapter describes emergent themes relevant to how people at Michigan State University worked to institutionalize identity-conscious student success strategies.

To ensure trustworthiness, I need to provide a few disclaimers before I continue with this historical analysis. First, this is the first attempt of writing this particular story of the Neighborhoods. Therefore, this account will be limited by my own positionality and my abilities as a researcher. While I remained loyal to the data I collected, I will have inevitably missed some components. Further, my interpretations of the data are limited by my own epistemological and ontological understandings and stances. Second, this study focuses on one unit at a very large institution. Student success efforts are generally centralized in the office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education and the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative. However, these are not the only sites of student success work at MSU. Further, the data I collected from participants and various documents represent limited portions of this entire story. There are certainly many other truths, understandings, interpretations, and recollections.

At the time I conducted this study and wrote this dissertation, the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC) explicitly names opportunity gaps experienced by Black, Latinx, Native and Indigenous, first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds. Five people hold Neighborhood Director (ND) of Student Success positions in the NSSC. Each ND oversaw a specific focus area related to student success initiatives. One ND focuses

specifically on identity-conscious student success approaches. This ND brings together partners from across campus to address various populations of students' needs based on their identities. According to the NSSC website, the "goals include... increasing graduation rates, shorten time to degree, and close opportunity gaps" (<https://nssc.msu.edu/identity-conscious/index.html>). At the time of data collection, the NSSC supports and convenes the Latinx Student Success Committee, the Black Strategic Outreach Committee, the Veteran Student Success Committee, the LGBT Student Success Committee, and the AAPIDA Student Success Committee. In the future, the NSSC will support the Native American/Indigenous Student Success Committee, the First-Generation Student Success Committee, a committee for students with various abilities, the International Student Success Committee, and the Rural Student Success Committee (<https://nssc.msu.edu/identity-conscious/index.html>). While this seems like a list of committees, they actually represent a concerted effort backed by institutional resources to close existing opportunity gaps.

But how did MSU get to this point? The research question guiding this study is, "How does an institution adopt identity-conscious student success approaches aimed at closing opportunity gaps?" To answer this question, I used vertical case study methods to inform data collection and the examination qualitative interviews. I looked to Sara Ahmed's (2012) work on racism in higher education institutional life and Robert Rhoads's (1998) examination of student activism to make sense of the interview data. These two scholars followed notions of diversity and activism through time and place while using cultural, political, and economic lenses to create narratives that illuminated findings to answer their questions. In this way, they made use of case study methods to answer their guiding research questions.

In creating the narrative in this chapter, I followed Ahmed and Rhoads's lead. I followed the idea, or notion, of identity-conscious student success approaches. The interview and document data tell the story of how the notion of identity-conscious student success approaches emerge, circulate, evolve, and are taken up at the institution. Specifically, I followed identity-conscious student success approaches through time and organizational, political, cultural, and economic contexts.

“So that’s how the Neighborhoods started.”

Participants credited three people with conceiving the idea for the Neighborhoods Initiative in 2009 and 2010. At this time, the nation faced a significant economic recession. Institutions of higher education were critically examining their budgets, and MSU was no exception. June Youatt was the senior associate provost and dean of undergraduate studies. Denise Maybank, who did not respond to invitations to participate in this study, served in the associate vice president for student affairs and services role. Vennie Gore served as the assistant vice president for Michigan State University's Division of Residential and Hospitality Services. These three conceptualized the Neighborhoods Initiative and the MSU community affectionately referred to them as the “Architects.” They all brought to the Neighborhoods Initiative experiences and perspectives of student success and identity.

June Youatt came to Michigan State University in the early 1980s as an assistant professor in the department of Human Development and Family Studies. Her research focused on “family studies” and “adolescence.” By the late 1990s, her department promoted Youatt to full professor. During the later years of her full professorship, she “began a program for first-year students... a freshman matriculation project.” She recalled,

[B]ecause in our department, we had compared to the rest of the institution, a disproportionate number of women students of color. We also had male students of color, but we had many women. And it became clear to me over my many years of teaching that the differences in their academic preparation really made a difference in the ways in which they acclimated to the institution, the information they came in with and what their expectations were.

She also described her engagement in research aimed at understanding the relationship between family support and academic success. Given her experience with undergraduate education and her research interests, she applied for a position as the assistant provost for undergraduate education. She continued to advance in the organizational hierarchy and by 2009, Youatt was the senior associate provost reporting to Kim Wilcox, the provost.

Denise Maybank began in her position as the associate vice president for student affairs and services at Michigan State University in 2005. Prior to this, Maybank served as the director of multicultural affairs and later as an associate to the president at the University of Nebraska. In a press release from the University of Nebraska announcing her departure for MSU, the authors describe her work as “ensuring that the university continues to be a diverse and equitable environment, and for formulating and implementing policies and strategies that enhance the gender and racial/ethnic diversity of the university”

([https://www.unmc.edu/news.cfm?match=2258#:~:text=Denise%20Maybank%2C%20associate%20to%20the,Michigan%20State%20University%20\(MSU\)%20in](https://www.unmc.edu/news.cfm?match=2258#:~:text=Denise%20Maybank%2C%20associate%20to%20the,Michigan%20State%20University%20(MSU)%20in)). In 2008, Lee June, the vice president for student affairs and services, promoted Maybank to senior associate vice president (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/maybank-named-msu-interim-vice-president-for-student-affairs>).

Before coming to Michigan State University, Vennie Gore served as the associate director of housing and food services at the University of Washington. A search firm recruited Vennie Gore to come to Michigan State University in 2007 to serve as the assistant vice president for housing and food services. Gore reported to Fred Poston, the vice president for finance and operations and treasurer. In the nascent stages of the Neighborhoods Initiative, housing and food services at MSU was “university housing, auxiliary services, golf, tennis, Breslin [campus arena], and Kellogg [hotel and conference center].” In our interview, Gore told me at that time, MSU was “bifurcated,” or in other words, “the housing side came up through” Gore and the “resident education side came up through student affairs.” This meant that he worked closely with those in student affairs around students’ housing and their educational experiences in the residence halls, but this bifurcation sometimes made coordination more difficult.

Gore recounted a time in 2009 when he led MSU’s participation in a strategic planning process. He and his team hired a team of consulting architects and engineers who assisted in charting a plan for the next 10 years (https://issuu.com/hanburyevans/docs/michigan_state_university). Gore noted the three major themes that emerged from the process. “The first theme was the first-year experience was critical.” This theme likely emerged because a vast majority of first-time, first-year students at MSU lived in residence halls. The second major theme emerging from this strategic planning process was that food should be centered to develop strong communities. “We wanted to ensure that within a ten-minute walk there was some level of food service available for the campus community.” The third theme that emerged “was all about the Spartan experience.” Gore and his team knew they had to provide students, staff, faculty, and guests from the larger East Lansing

community with an excellent experience when they were on campus. As part of this strategic planning process, Gore convened an advisory group. Youatt and Maybank both served on this group. Gore recalled,

As we started going through it [the strategic planning process], I think we all sort of had this coming together that we had the three parts of the institution that touched undergraduates thinking that this could be a good opportunity for us to really change how we provide service and education to undergraduate students, and taking advantage of each other's strengths and being very collaborative. So that's how the Neighborhoods started.

At this time, MSU housed three degree-granting residential colleges. Youatt recalled early conversations about the Neighborhoods Initiative noting,

One of the things that I have talked about for years as a faculty member working with my first-year program was the real resource that we had in residence halls. I just believed that it was such an under-utilized resource... you have all of these students coming together from all over the world and forming, maybe not forming community but coming to live for approximately 32 weeks together. And I just believed that in those 32 weeks, something amazing could happen, because we could create this environment. We had so much 'control' or influence or capacity to do things in that environment."

According to Gore, in the late 1960s "President Hannah built classrooms in the residence halls." Philip Strong, a participant introduced later in this chapter, provided a similar perspective. Strong said, "Well, we've got these residential colleges that work so well. Why can't we do this for more students?" Gore said the residential colleges created an academic feel in the residence halls. The Architects looked to the residential colleges for inspiration. The Architects saw

students who belonged to the degree-granting residential colleges had unique interactions with their faculty. Gore said, “They’re in the halls... they’re going to class downstairs...they could be walking around [in their residence hall] and see their faculty or their advisors.” The Architects wanted to continue with the unique physical spaces that they inherited and expand the positive aspects of the residential colleges to more students.

Conversations amongst the Architects, though, were also happening in specific a political context. Youatt provided her recollections of initial conversations about the idea of collaborating. “We spent more time together than we spent with our significant others because it took a lot of buy-in and trust.” She noted trust was easily built between the residential and academic sides of the house. She told me trust was slightly more difficult to build with student affairs. As she perceived, many feared the loss of identity. Faculty would never worry because of the University’s educational mission. People would also always recognize the residential units. Some feared, though, that if this collaboration went forward, some of the work of student affairs might blend into the work of other units and departments. Youatt sensed a fear that coming out of silos might change people’s work in uncomfortable or inconvenient ways.

The political terrain beyond the Architects at MSU is also important to consider. Youatt described a particular aspect of the landscape as “both controversial and sensitive.” At the time, MSU had many identity-based support programs. People dedicated to supporting students with marginalized identities ran these programs. Program coordinators worked hard, and their work often went unrecognized. The issue, though, from an organizational standpoint was that these programs were disconnected from faculty, student life, and residence education. According to Youatt, these identity-based programs had no organizational home. MSU did not provide an infrastructure to support these programs. The initial conversations about the Neighborhood

Initiative often focused on this reality. Youatt described some perceptions of the Neighborhoods Initiative as a threat to “people’s success, professional success or failure.” While this was Youatt’s perception, there were many identity-based programs that did have an organizational home. One example includes the Office of Academic and Cultural Transitions (OCAT) in the division of Student Affairs and Services. Youatt expressed her view that there were many identity-based programs that did not have an organizational home, but it was also the case that there were identity-based programs and services operating out of institutional homes with, for example, OCAT within the division of student affairs.

Youatt further described the initial conversations about the Neighborhoods Initiative and the disparate identity-based programs. The Architects convened the people who coordinated these programs. She painted a picture of these meetings and conversations. If there were 20 people in the room listening to someone describe their work and program, 10 people would say, “Well, I do that too.” The other 10 people would say, “Well, I didn’t know you did that.” It became clear to the Architects that in this organizational and political context, most students would have significant challenges navigating the many disconnected programs. Youatt also noted, “There was no evidence that they [the identity-based programs] were doing what it was that they needed to do.” Some of the programs had persisted for quite some time, “sometimes out of tradition, out of passion, out of respect,” but with very little substantive assessment and evaluation efforts. “There wasn’t anything that was really data driven. It was all from the heart.” Youatt made another observation about the difference between identity-based programs and identity-conscious student success work. She said, “If you throw two smart people in a room with 500 kids, no data, no resources, no connections, no agency, they really don’t do very well.

They make great mentors and they have good relationships, but you don't see the outcomes that I think you're working toward."

An important political factor that contributed to the culture resulting in disconnected identity-based program was Michigan's Proposition 2, the ban on affirmative action. Voters initiated this constitutional amendment on the November 7, 2006 ballot in Michigan. According to ballotpedia.org, the amendment banned "affirmative action programs in education and public sector job hiring" (Ballotpedia, n.d.). The 6th United States Circuit Court of Appeals later overturned the amendment July 1, 2011. Attorney General Bill Schuette requested that the full 6th Circuit panel rehear the case. On November 15, 2012, the full panel deemed that Proposal 2 was unconstitutional. However, on April 22, 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the lower court's decision and upheld the law.

Proposition 2 affected how professionals at MSU did student success work. The way the MSU community interpreted the amendment likely stifled the progress toward the institution adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Tom Fritz, a participant in this study, provided his recollection of how people at MSU reacted to Proposition 2. He said, "In the beginning everyone was so afraid of Prop. 2... Prop. 2 just made everybody like, 'You can't talk about race. You have got to find somewhere else to talk about it.'"

Proposition 2 loomed over those coordinating identity-based programs and the foundational work of identity-conscious student success. However, many at the University still broadly acknowledged something had to be done for groups of students disproportionately affected by institutional barriers to their success. People found ways to talk about race without talking about race. The College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP), for example, became a proxy for talking about race, specifically Black students. CAAP was a program that

enrolled first-generation and low-income students “and students who meet other participant criteria” (see Appendix E). The Office of Supportive Services (OSS) supported CAAP students. OSS aimed to increase the retention rates, facilitate academic success and enhance graduation rates among the program participants. While race was not explicitly named in the participant selection criteria, several participants in this study recalled that a student’s CAAP designation generally denoted that they were Black. Tom Fritz said, “CAAP was what people used as kind of a code for Black Students. CAAP, TRIO, and Upward Bound meant that we were talking about Black students without actually saying ‘Black students’ because Prop. 2 happened.”

Meanwhile, the Architects decided to move forward with the Neighborhoods concept. However, as Youatt told me, they expected significant resistance from campus constituents. Youatt recalled a conversation with Kim Wilcox, the provost at the time. She told Wilcox, “The only way we can get this done is if you... charge us to do this. If you charge Vennie, Denise, and myself to do this, you’re going to have to” publicly support this. According to Youatt, Wilcox asked her to write a memorandum outlining the initiative (http://shapingthefuture.msu.edu/documents/SupportServices11_25_09.pdf). She did. The memorandum was dated November 25, 2009. It was addressed to Senior Associate Provost June Youatt, Assistant Vice President Vennie Gore, and Senior Associate Vice President Denise Maybank. The memorandum was from Provost Kim Wilcox, Vice President Fred Poston, and Vice President Lee June. The subject of the memorandum read, “Shaping the Future of Student Support Services.” The University Community was copied on the distribution of the memorandum. The memorandum urged the Architects “to move forward with a plan which [would] lead to” achieving five outcomes over the course of two phases.

The first outcome identified by Wilcox, Poston, and Lee in the November 25, 2009, memorandum was, “An integrated and maximized system for residents’ support.” The memorandum acknowledged the connectedness of the living environment and the standards for living in that environment. Specifically, the memorandum noted “building community, keeping that community safe, caring for ‘place and space’, and learning to live as a community, are not separate functions.”

The second outcome in the November 25, 2009 memorandum read, “A unified set of academic success and engagement services.” The memorandum called for providing students with support around “setting academic goals, exploring choices of major and career, out-of-class engagement, improving academic skills, making course choices and scheduling, and tutorial assistance...” This recommendation implied “re-configuration of the University Undergraduate Division and consideration of the roles and services offered by units such as the Office of Supportive Services, the Writing Center, the Math Learning center and college-level services.”

The third outcome identified in the memorandum read, “A system for the local delivery of integrated services to promote health and wellness of students.” The Neighborhoods services were meant to include “some medical care and programs that promote fitness and physical and emotional well-being...” This recommendation also had implications for reconfiguring some services. For example, identified in the memorandum, possible re-configurations included “services currently offered at Olin Health Center and the Counseling Center, working with programs and services of the Intramural Sports & Recreative Services Department.” Here, the memorandum conveyed the expectation that silos be broken and people work across organizational lines.

The fourth outcome identified in the memorandum begins to speak to student success efforts aimed at specific populations. The fourth outcome reads, “Integrated services to promote academic success and engagement for academically at-risk students.” The phrase “academically at-risk students” acknowledged some groups of students were achieving academic outcomes at lower rates than others. However, this is as far as the memorandum goes in naming opportunity gaps. The description for this outcome reads, “Learning enhancement, supplemental instruction, structured study opportunities, intensive academic mentoring, and tutorial services should be linked to the support services provided for all students.” This description retreats to the rhetoric of “all students,” a move away from specifically naming opportunity gaps experienced by minoritized groups of students. The memorandum identifies an implication of this recommendation as “some re-alignment of specialized student support services with the re-configured academic success and engagement services.” This broad description also allowed the Architects to build on identity-conscious student success precursors.

The fifth outcome identified in the memorandum focuses on inclusion, globalization, and internationalization. The outcome statement reads, “Integrated services to promote inclusion, globalization and internationalization should be part of each neighborhood.” The description of this outcome calls for each neighborhood to provide “an opportunity for students to assume leadership roles as they come to appreciate the diversity within the community...” Vaguely, the memorandum asserts an implication of this outcome recommendation “is some re-alignment of relevant programs and services.” The imprecision of language was strategic, and provides another example of how the Architects created the opportunity to address the lack of coordination amongst the disparate identity-based programs.

The memorandum went on to endorse the proposed two-phase process. The first phase called for garnering feedback from the MSU community on the five outcomes. The feedback was to be collected from constituents including individuals from student affairs, academic affairs, support services staff, faculty, undergraduate deans, student support services participants, residence hall students, undergraduate students living off campus, resident assistants, Office of Cultural and Academic (OCAT) aides, student leaders, graduate students, potential students and young alumnx. The second phase was titled, “Integration of Vision and Reality.” The description of the second phase reads,

The task of integrating the vision articulated with the reality of our fiscal [constraints] will be complex. While ultimately any decisions must reflect sound stewardship and cost-savings, they must also be tested against our core values and our design principles. As part of this phase, financial and human resources analyses should be conducted. Selected consultants may assist in the analysis and planning.

The memorandum also insisted the Architects’ planning reflect several principles. First, the Neighborhoods Initiative should reflect the university values of quality, connectivity and inclusivity. The Neighborhoods were meant to be “places where students live and learn in community and maintain a connection throughout undergraduate matriculation.” The Neighborhoods should provide undergraduate students a place to “find the resources to support learning and engagement, personal development, healthy living and the opportunity to participate as a member of an inclusive community.” Mentioning inclusion might also have provided precursor or foundational concept that ultimately led to identity-conscious approaches.

Other principles the planning process should have encompassed included programs that work toward a standard set of outcomes. “The messages and purposes are coherent.” Services,

both student services and academic support services, were to be horizontally integrated. The support students received should have been student-centered, “rather than issue or service-centered.” Further, the memorandum charged the Architects with ensuring “programs, activities and services within the neighborhoods, centralized services, and college-based services are coordinated and articulated,” while highly specialized services would remain centralized. The rhetoric here provided more latitude for the Architects to address disparate, uncoordinated identity-based programs.

The memorandum also required the Architects to ensure “Neighborhoods are ‘customized’ based on an assessment of needs and interests of students within each neighborhood.” This customization was to be ongoing and could change each semester or academic year. This principle reflects the notion that each neighborhood is different because of the students who live in there. Vaguely, this principle signaled the need to address the needs of specific groups of students without naming those different groups. Implicit in the text of this principle, the neighborhoods could have served as another proxy for identity. Another principle in the memorandum read, “Student-centered processes are developed whereby the standards, ambiance and character of each neighborhood are shaped by its residents and friends.” Again, the memorandum signaled the need to understand the identities of the students living in each neighborhood without explicitly naming race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, and first-generation status.

The memorandum concluded by saying, “We have the opportunity to make a transformational change for our campus, in ways that significantly enhance the undergraduate student experience while recognizing the formidable challenge of finding significant cost-savings.” The memorandum charged the Architects with providing an interim report by March of

2010. Upon completion of that report, the memorandum stated, “[W]e intend to move toward the implementation of a pilot project to be located in Hubbard Hall.”

The November 25 memorandum represented a concerted effort on the part of three major divisions at the University. With the support of Provost Wilcox, Vice President Poston, and Vice President June, this memorandum was distributed to the University community. It transmitted a great deal of credibility and expectation from Wilcox, Poston, and June. As Youatt explained in her interview, the Neighborhoods Initiative could not have moved forward without significant support from executive level administration. The memorandum explicated to everyone at MSU that the Neighborhoods Initiative was something supported from the highest levels. The rhetoric of the memorandum explained the need, described the possibilities, and framed the goals and principles of the initiative.

Youatt also spoke to the importance of Lou Anna K. Simon’s support. Simon, who did not respond to invitations to participate in this study, was the president of the University at the time. President Simon brought a commitment to this project. Youatt noted, “I don’t think she would take credit for building any of it... but again, you could not do this if you didn’t have a president who thought this was worth doing.” According to Youatt, Simon was taking on a great deal of risk by supporting the Neighborhoods Initiative. While the Neighborhoods Initiative was gaining steam, MSU announced that they would be closing their satellite campus in Dubai for financial reasons and because of the inability to attract a sustainable number of matriculating students. Kris Renn, a participant in this study, recalled that many on campus, especially faculty, saw the failure in Dubai and assumed that the Neighborhoods Initiative was just another “shiny object” that would fizzle out in a few years. Similarly, Reggie Noto, another participant in this study, said, “Early on there was talk that Neighborhoods would be like Dubai, a failed attempt to

open a campus in the United Arab Emirates and eventually it would go away” (Abramson, 2010). According to Youatt, Simon and the Architects anticipated the campus community would push back on the Neighborhoods concept for various reasons. However, her support added to the credibility and expectations brought by the three vice presidents and the Architects. The project moved forward with a pilot program.

“You opened your big mouth. We need you to run the pilot.”

In the fall of 2010, the Neighborhoods Initiative piloted with the opening of the Neighborhood Engagement Center in Hubbard Hall in the East Neighborhood. The Architects tapped Philip Strong lead the pilot. Youatt told me as the Architects prepared launch the pilot, they “pulled people that met [their] main criteria... They needed to understand student learning, but what we really wanted were people that we though would work together, people who could just cross boundaries and really not see boundaries.” The Architects wanted a strongly student-centered team, and they felt Strong was the perfect person to lead the initiative. His credentials, a Ph.D. in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, as well as his position as an assistant dean in a residential college provided him the necessary credibility to navigate the political terrain of MSU.

Strong came to MSU in May of 2000. The Lyman Briggs School, a residential school in the College of Natural Science, brought him in as an assistant director. He led advising efforts, the enrollment management functions, and he was charged with coordinating a first-year experience seminar course. While in this position, he enrolled and completed a doctoral program in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education department. While finishing his doctoral program, the president tasked the Lyman Briggs School with creating a 25% expansion in the community. Strong recalled in our interview that President Simon wanted to increase the impact of residential

colleges. Ultimately, under the joint leadership of Strong and the director at the time, the Lyman Briggs School would become its own college.

Strong recalled that toward the end of the expansion of Lyman Briggs, the “whole construct around the Neighborhoods came out.” In the interview, Strong jokingly said, “Like a fool, I opened my big mouth and wrote a white paper...” The 10-page white paper was titled, “Student Success Staffing for the 21st Century.” Strong recalled the paper paralleled “Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience,” a paper published by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) (NASPA, 2004). Strong understood the Neighborhoods concept to align with the Learning Reconsidered approach. In contrast to what others relayed to me, Strong told me that identity was not the basis of the work of the Neighborhoods Initiative. Strong added,

Then, of course, June Youatt, who was an associate provost at the time with Denise Maybank and Vennie Gore, the three that were the minds behind this, the thought leaders, basically came to me and said, “You opened your big mouth. We need you to run the pilot.”

Strong agreed to run the pilot, but for one year only. Upon the completion of the one-year pilot, Strong returned to his appointment in the Lyman Briggs College.

A press release from November 19, 2010 described the new Neighborhood Engagement Center in East Neighborhood, noting that the effort “has quickly shown signs of success” (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/msu-neighborhoods-pilot-program-promotes-student-success>). The press release quoted Provost Kim Wilcox saying,

Neighborhoods represent a new model for supporting students' academic success. The pilot program in the East Neighborhood marks the first time that the entire campus has come together with this level of intention and shared vision in support of our students.

The press release quoted Strong saying,

What we're doing is bringing the resources closer to the students, and in the context of their greatest needs. These neighborhoods serve as communities where students can connect with faculty, support staff, other students and resources that can help them be successful.

Strong led the pilot of the Neighborhoods Initiative pilot, and organized his team's work into four different student-centered pillars. This included the health and wellness pillar, the intercultural pillar, the residential pillar, and the academic pillar.

The Architects and Strong spent a lot of time considering the physical space and infrastructure. Gore recalled in our interview, the impetus for the Neighborhoods concept came from a Housing and Food Services strategic planning process completed in 2008 in consultation with Hanbury, Evans, Wright, Viattas & Company. The 2008 strategic plan identified multiple opportunities to leverage space for collaborations and student learning (https://issuu.com/hanburyevans/docs/michigan_state_university). Specifically, the plan states, "Integrate more academics/classrooms in residence halls/neighborhoods... Evaluate study spaces – location, size, use, success. Reappropriate to align with student needs. Study space outside of student room is consistently a high priority item." This strategic plan helped shape the physical space of the first Engagement Center in East Neighborhood, as well as the physical space of the other four subsequent Neighborhood Engagement Centers.

Importantly, in 2010 the Campus Living Services & Residence Life Department merged with Housing and Food Services. Gore changed the name of the division to Residence and Hospitality Services. Strong said, “Residence Life was moving over to Housing, which became Residential and Hospitality Services and then REHS... So that transition was happening at the same time. There was a lot going on.” This organizational shift illuminated political and cultural beliefs that complicated collaborations across divisional lines. Strong said,

It takes so long to make change at an institution like this, and we certainly learned a lot of lessons... There was a very strong, developed culture. They had a very thematic approach, and they saw the world one particular way. We came in with the neighborhoods and said, “We need to expand that.”

Beyond the logistical and infrastructural work Strong oversaw, he had to figure out how to navigate the politics of the multitude of organizational changes. He recalled a conversation he had with one staff member in Residence Life who vocalized a lot of opposition to the implementation of Neighborhood initiative. He told me about his approach to this conversation. He expressed his sincere appreciation for the work that individual did, but he went on to say,

We're going a different direction. We're expanding the work that we do. This is good. If you actually sit down and think about it, this is good for the work in Residence Life, now Residence Education... This is good. This is moving us forward.

Another unit on campus resistant to the implementation of the Neighborhoods concept was Olin Health Center. Individuals in that division resisted distributing their work and resources to the Neighborhoods away from their central campus location. Strong said some of their concern around distributing resources to the Neighborhoods stemmed from the notion they were weakening their organization and their ability to serve students at the main health center. Strong

continued conversations with individuals in the health center. He approached those conversations by explaining how opening a satellite would allow them to serve more students. He argued opening satellites in places physically close to where students live ensured more students seek out their services.

The political terrain continued to present challenges. Strong told me about the work of Inge Steglitz, the individual who led the intercultural pillar. Steglitz had a background in psychology and intercultural communication. She holds a Ph.D. in intercultural communication from the University of Minnesota. In Strong's view, her experiences and credentials provided her credibility. However, given the political context and organizational changes happening at the time, she had a challenging charge. Strong said the challenges arose because, "people were so territorial, and that's the political and cultural issue at MSU, especially at that time." He described the general mentality of the campus community by saying, "You've got to build your fortress and protect your fortress." Strong and Steglitz, however, pushed the agenda forward by focusing on the expertise of others. Strong described the approach as, "You've got the expertise. That's why you're at the table. Now let's expand. Let's have your expertise inform and be informed by my expertise so we can all be better at helping and supporting students."

Strong and Steglitz's approach is an important point to consider. Both Strong and Youatt suggested that with Proposition 2 as the backdrop, the multiple and disconnected identity-based programs and those who worked with those programs perceived a hostile takeover of their work coming from the work of the intercultural pillar. Strong led the pilot with a commitment to collaboration. This spirit of collaboration led him and his team to have conversations with people across the campus. Navigating the political landscape was difficult, but the mission remained the same: To help bring the campus and its constituents together to better serve students in a holistic

manner. Leading with this vision helped Strong build networks of people who eventually bought into the concept and the work. This approach and network building proved a successful strategy for the continuation of the Neighborhoods Initiative while simultaneously bringing in the voices of people doing identity-based work.

“First, we had to crawl, then we could walk...”

In our interview, Tom Fritz categorized the Neighborhoods Initiative into three eras: crawling, walking, and sprinting. At the conclusion of the Spring 2011 semester, Strong left his position with the Neighborhoods Initiative and resumed his appointment with the Lyman Briggs College. The Architects needed someone to take the helm and lead the initiative into its next phase, to go from crawling to walking. They tapped Kelley Bishop to usher the Neighborhoods Initiative into the next era.

Kelley Bishop started in the career services field in 1987 at Dartmouth college. In August 2001, Bishop came to MSU as the executive director of career services, which was situated in the division of student affairs and services. Reporting to Vice President Lee June and working with associate vice president Denise Maybank, Bishop was on the periphery of the initial conversations about the Neighborhoods Initiative. Bishop also served on the Advisory Committee for the strategic planning process for the division of Residential and Hospitality Services. Around this time, Student Affairs and Services saw some changes in personnel. In a press release dated September 16, 2010, the MSU community learned Lee June was stepping down as vice president for student affairs and returning to a faculty appointment at the beginning of 2011 (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/lee-june-to-step-down-as-vice-president-for-student-affairs>). At a the MSU Board of Trustees meeting on December 10, 2010, Denise

Maybank was named interim vice president for student affairs

(<https://trustees.msu.edu/assets/meeting-pdfs/bot-minutes-06-21-2013.pdf>).

Bishop was in the process of applying for a position at Pennsylvania State University's Career Center when Maybank approached him about directing the Neighborhoods Initiative. Bishop had visited Pennsylvania State twice and was ready to take the position. However, his family was not ready to make the move with him at this point. In our interview, Bishop told me,

I recall distinctly having lunch with Denise and Lou Anna. I said, 'Tell me what you really want out of this, because I don't have the background. I'm not a res. life guy.' If you look at all the facets, all of the entities that were being pulled together under this umbrella of... the Neighborhoods, I thought I don't have credibility with any of these people... but they were incredibly encouraging.

He went on to describe his conversation with Maybank. She told him, "Kelley, this could change your whole career. This would really vault your career." He had reservations and was still committed to ensuring the Career Center was supported. Bishop recalled a comment from Simon: "We'll get somebody else to run the career center. Don't worry about that." He eventually agreed to accept the position, and in August 2011, he was named assistant vice president in the division of Student Affairs and Services leading the Neighborhoods Initiative.

With Bishop at the helm of the Neighborhoods Initiative and reporting directly to Maybank, the Neighborhoods Initiative was moving forward with opening two more Neighborhoods locations. According to a press release dated August 24, 2011, the South and Brody Neighborhoods went live in the fall 2011 semester

(<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2011/directors-named-for-msu-neighborhoods/>). Bishop would supervise a team of three Neighborhood Directors, each of whom were selected by one of the

three Architects. Gore tapped Kelly High McCord to serve as the director of the Brody Neighborhood while also maintaining her role as assistant director in the Department of Residence Life. High McCord also led and convened the residential pillar. Maybank tapped Terry Walsh to serve as the director of the South Neighborhood while also maintaining their role as the communications and outreach coordinator for the Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions. Walsh also led and convened the intercultural pillar. Walsh worked previously as the director of refugee services in Lansing, Grand Rapids, and in Newark, New Jersey (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2010/staff-profiles-terry-walsh/>). Youatt tapped Reggie Noto to succeed Strong as the director of the East Neighborhood. She also held a position as an academic specialist in the Office of the Provost and convened the academic pillar.

In describing his work with the Neighborhoods Initiative, Bishop told me about his approach in other positions. Bishop recalled his work at Syracuse which he replicated during his tenure with MSU's Career Services Center, and again in his position leading the Neighborhoods. He described an approach he had not seen at other large institutions. Bishop went to every entity whose work might intersect with his and he said, "Tell me what you do. Tell me what you're up to. Tell me what your pressures are. Tell me how our office has helped you, if at all." He went on to describe a multi-dimensional chart that he created. He put the Career Center at the bottom and told the stakeholders, "Our job is to support what the rest of you are doing. I'll even put money on the table to do it. I'm just asking you all to form an advisory board and to hold me accountable." This approach drastically changed the power dynamic and got more people on board with the direction they all needed to be heading. He called this a "distributed network."

Bishop replicated this approach in his role leading the Neighborhoods Initiative, and it gave him a deep understanding of the political and cultural terrain. He had a "systems approach"

that began with finding out what everyone's stake was in the initiative. He found people were worried. Some thought they would be pulled away from their "real work." Bishop provided the example of the Counseling Center at MSU. He said, "I remember the Counseling Center. They wondered if the Health Center was going to take over them. Is so-and-so going to make us report to them? People were nervous. They were very nervous."

However, Bishop remembered his distributed network and systems approach calmed some tensions. He said, "I think I won enough trust to get dialogues going, and then I got to hire a crackerjack team of people." One of those individuals was Reggie Noto. Noto started in 2011 when Provost Kim Wilcox asked her to consider the position. Youatt later proposed Noto as her choice for the Neighborhood Director position. Noto recalled the reason Youatt wanted her in this position. She said,

I know she [Youatt] said to me after seeing my CV, she was interested in me taking this on because I had a lot of complex program experience as opposed to just students, that there were grades, and there was readings, and there was constructing curricula, and stuff like that in my previous position.

Youatt also valued her experiences working in matrixed organizations and working across organizational lines.

Bishop assigned Noto to lead and convene the academic pillar. Noto recalled challenges she encountered early in her position. She said, "If you're really going to be the head of an academic pillar, first of all, you should have your Ph.D. You should also be more entrenched in the academic mission of the institution than I was." Noto told me she thought Youatt really could not get anyone who had a real academic job at the institution to take the position. Noto said,

I turned out to be fine in some ways, but not in the power structure. I, personally, had a lot to overcome for people to understand that I was actually as smart as they were and had probably more degrees than they did, and even though I don't have a Ph.D., I do have two master's degrees. But neither of them is in student affairs.

Noto's recollections provided an important insight into why people resisted the Neighborhoods. Much like Strong expressed, those working on the Neighborhoods Initiative needed to have appropriate credentials. Those credentials provided credibility when Neighborhoods representatives tried to break through silos. Strong said the person leading the Neighborhoods as well as where the initiative sat organizationally had significant influence on what the team could put into action. During our interview Strong told me he had concern at the time of the appointment of Bishop. He thought highly of Bishop, but feared his lacking a terminal degree and standing in the academic community could prohibit achieving the goals of the Neighborhoods. Those working on the Neighborhoods Initiative began to see the importance of the credibility each individual brought with them to the project.

The team persisted though. Bishop had breakfast regularly with Youatt, Gore, and Maybank. He recalled the importance of having access to someone in the Office of the Provost. On the topic of credibility, Bishop said,

The credibility I gained over the first year was observed by the community. They would say, "He's not pretending to be someone that knows his stuff. He definitely knows what questions to ask and he knows when to ask them, though."

Bishop also benefitted from his strengthened relationship with Gore. "I could count on Vennie. I could ask him, 'Vennie, what broke down over here? What needs to happen differently?'" His

relationships with the Architects and his accumulating credibility was important in the second year of his leadership.

In 2012, the North and River Trail Neighborhoods both launched. Bishop continued to report to Maybank, which essentially situated the Neighborhoods Initiative in the Division of Student Affairs and Services. Gore and Youatt continued to support the project, especially financial resources. Jodi Roberto Hancock was hired as the Neighborhood Director for the River Trail Neighborhood and was assigned to convene the students pillar. Roberto Hancock previously served as the educational program coordinator for MSU's Women's Resource Center. Bishop hired Tom Fritz as the Neighborhood Director for North Neighborhood. Bishop assigned Fritz to the health and wellness pillar.

At this point, the five Neighborhood Directors were Fritz, Roberto Hancock, Noto, High McCord, and Walsh. When asked about the challenges the team faced early on, Noto described an incident with stakeholders from across campus. Bishop called a meeting with many campus partners to share the work happening through the Neighborhoods Initiative. The Neighborhoods team had collected data through Mapworks, a student success and retention software. The qualitative data provided the team an avenue for understanding students' experiences. The team worked for hours reading and coding data. Noto told me that after Bishop presented their findings an individual in the audience interjected, "Who did this coding?" Bishop explained the Neighborhoods team had done the work. The individual responded with, "Oh, so not real experts." This example highlights the ongoing resistance the Neighborhoods team faced in the campus community, especially around the idea of credibility.

Bishop recalled another example of how he negotiated resistance to the Neighborhoods from people in Residence Life. Using Mapworks, the Neighborhoods team collected data from

first-year students. This data and the proprietary algorithm used by the platform categorized students into four different groups. Students with no signs of academic distress were categorized as green. Those that showed some mild signs of distress were coded yellow. Students exhibiting significant signs of academic distress were coded red. Those that showed urgent signs of distress were coded double red. Bishop asked partners in Residence Life to use this information to go knock on the students' doors to connect them with resources that may help. Those in Residence Life philosophically opposed this request. Bishop recalled them saying something like, "No. This is their [the students'] private data. That's a violation of this or that."

Bishop consulted with Youatt about the resistance. Bishop recalled, "She [Youatt] was apoplectic to this philosophical opposition and their orientation." She told Bishop, "You will absolutely tell them that they're going to go knock on the door and help those kids out." Bishop played the go-between. He had to figure out how to explain the charge in a way that did not sound like a mandate or a directive. Bishop was very aware his message could not sound like a mandate, because as he said, "Remember, the only people who reported to me were those engagement directors." He did eventually convince his partners to reach out to students showing signs of academic distress, but he had to navigate that conversation with a great deal of care and political savvy. Bishop led the Neighborhoods Initiative for two years before leaving for another position.

Sprinting

Professor Kristen A. Renn succeeded Bishop as the leader of the Neighborhoods Initiative in 2013. Renn came to MSU in 2001 as an assistant professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education. Her department promoted her to associate professor in 2006, and later to full professor in 2012. A prolific scholar, Renn's research agenda started with her dissertation study

entitled, “Claiming space: The college experience of biracial and multiracial students on predominately white campuses.” According to her website, “Across [her] career, [she has] focused on LGBTQ students, mixed race students, women’s higher education around the world, and low-income student success.” Like others coming to the Neighborhoods Initiative, she understood identity to be a crux of student success work.

Coming from a faculty position, Renn recalled her perceptions of the Neighborhoods Initiative. Like others, she remembered the Neighborhoods Initiative was introduced to the University community around the same time the Dubai campus was closing. She knew the initiative had the support of the president, Gore, Youatt, and Maybank. Renn was not really interested in getting involved because to her, the Neighborhoods Initiative felt like the newest gimmick or “shiny object.”

In 2013, MSU appointed June Youatt as the interim provost, succeeding Kim Wilcox (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2014/youatt-recommended-as-new-msu-provost/>). Renn recalled in June of 2013, Youatt contacted her to ask if she would be interested in talking more about leading the Neighborhoods. After the initial conversation with Youatt, Renn had further conversations with Youatt, Gore, and Maybank. The Architects eventually persuaded Renn to take on the challenge. Starting in August 2013, Renn stepped in as associate dean of undergraduate studies and the director of the Neighborhoods. This title change represented a shift in the organizational structure. Bishop reported to Maybank with Gore and Youatt providing funding to the Division of Student Affairs and Services. Renn, though, would report to both Maybank and Youatt through Doug Estry, the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education. The Neighborhoods was now situated reporting to both Student Affairs and Services and the

Provost's Office. Renn agreed to a three-year term which would be the longest period of uninterrupted leadership for the Neighborhoods Initiative.

Renn recalled the message she was getting from the Architects focused on specific goals that needed to be accomplished. She understood her role as the director to build upon the good work already accomplished, create and implement what are now known as success teams, and to get several partners from across campus to come together to make noticeable changes in persistence and graduation rates. She told me one of the challenges of this work was as the leader of the Neighborhoods, she was asking people to do student success work in specific ways even though those partners did report to her. Now the third director of the Neighborhoods, Renn identified the organizational and political landscape in front of her.

In my interview with June Youatt, she shared her recollections of the importance of hiring Kris Renn. She said Gore, Maybank, and she all agreed on the importance of a faculty person leading the effort. Youatt said,

This was a huge piece of selling this... her scholarship, her direction in guiding really the questions that would be asked was everything. It was huge because it became very clear that this was a serious academic program that was research-based.

Noto recalled the import of Renn taking the helm of the Neighborhoods. She said, "Not just her credentials. I mean, yes, her credentials, and the woman is famous for goodness' sake... It just convinced people we're really not kidding. We're really actually doing this collaborative thing." Renn brought with her a great deal of credibility.

In September 2013, Terry Walsh left his post as the Neighborhood Director for the South Neighborhood. Renn conducted a national search and hired Genyne Royal to fill this position. Royal was finishing a higher education and student affairs doctoral program at Texas A&M

University. Royal's research focused on how practitioners can develop academic skills and behaviors that support Black students' persistence in college. At this time, the Neighborhoods Initiative was operating under a framework that each Neighborhood Director oversaw a pillar. Renn assigned Royal to oversee the intercultural pillar.

When I asked Royal about her initial understanding of the position, she commented on the ambiguity of the posted position description. She said, "When I think back on it now, the job description was probably as ambiguous as it was because the position was still in its early days of development." Royal also mentioned the importance of Kris Renn as the director of the Neighborhoods. She said, "Kris Renn, I mean, you do a doctoral program in higher education anywhere in the country and you've got to read Kris Renn. So, I geeked out a little bit around the scholar opportunity to be supervised by Kris Renn."

Royal recalled when she started in her position with the Neighborhoods, she knew she would be building partnerships across campus "specifically around identity, identity development, and intercultural engagement." She saw other directors, like Noto and High McCord, and felt that their Neighborhoods and positions were highly functional. Royal came in expecting the teams and spaces were already functioning well in her Neighborhood. "I thought I just needed to figure out how to get into the space and develop them. I got into the space and realized, well, no, it's not. You've got to do it. There was a lot of growth that needed to happen in South Neighborhood." Royal quickly identified some of the complexities with new initiatives that required people to break out of their silos.

Shortly after Royal started at MSU, Larry Long was hired as a management analyst for the unit. His position created and situated to work on the quality initiative reaccreditation process for MSU. Long started at MSU as a hall director. In our interview, he recalled he was frequently

“slapped on the wrist” for using data and creating reports in his hall director position. He told me he received those slaps on the wrist for two reasons. First, as a hall director, his specific job duties did not include analyzing data and creating reports. The second reason was “sometimes some people didn’t like the reports I was producing for political reasons.” His reports would illuminate aspects of their work that made people uncomfortable. The Architects became aware of Long’s extensive statistical expertise and envisioned a position where his skills could aid the Neighborhoods Initiative. Long said, “Then they created my positions in the Neighborhoods because they intentionally wrote my position in a way that I reported to both the provost and also the VP of Auxiliary Enterprises.” He told me this organizational strategy provided him with data from both the housing and academic sides of the University, allowing him access to more and sundry data than almost any other analyst on campus. This point will connect with a discussion later in this chapter about the politics and culture around data use and sharing at MSU.

In the spirit of full transparency, I was in my second year of the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education doctoral program at this time. In the summer of 2014, a graduate assistantship in the Neighborhoods was posted. I applied for the position. Larry Long and Reggie Noto interviewed me. I was selected for the position and started in August 2014 as a graduate assistant for research and assessment. For the 2014-2015 academic year, I reported to Royal and worked on several projects in which I collected, analyzed, and reported on student success data, usually from the Mapworks platform. I also participated in Success Teams and Neighborhoods Leadership meetings. I worked with the Neighborhoods until January 2018 when I took a full-time position at another institution.

Renn, bringing her credentials and research agenda, provided a lot of credibility to the Initiative. With a more developed staffing structure in place, Renn began to advance her

research-based student success agenda. Noto said, “People began to say, ‘The Neighborhoods are happening. No, it’s not Dubai.’” Noto told me, “Kris was a driver of a lot of it because they could respect her in a different way than Kelley. That’s just the truth of the matter.” With this realization setting in across campus, the Neighborhoods Initiative was poised to start making progress in ways previous iterations could not. Throughout Renn’s time leading the Neighborhoods, several important events occurred that help answer the question of how MSU adopted identity-conscious student success strategies.

Rhetoric of Student Success

Renn, Noto, and Fritz all told me the phrase *student success* did not show up in the ways that it does now at MSU. Fritz recalled the phrase used more prominently in his third year, or the 2014-2015 academic year. Fritz said, “Then Kris came in and I think that Kris really is the one who got us thinking about student success as a construct.” He also described how Renn helped shape conversations about student success needing to include holistic approaches. Fritz felt like holistic student success approaches were always the goal of the initiative, but the rhetoric had yet to catch up with the intent. Royal said, “We didn’t have a clear definition for what student success meant to us as a unit. The first inclination is to look at the institution, and the institution hadn’t gotten there yet either.” Noto recalled that as a group of professionals, and even at the institutional level, they had not defined student success. She said, “We were thinking about graduation rates, but we weren’t really defining student success more than students having a good experience.” Fritz said, “Kris [Renn] was able to connect the intent of the Neighborhoods Initiative to the body of literature around student success, persistence, retention, and graduation.” Fritz specifically recalled Renn bringing an ecological viewpoint of college students that seemed missing from their conversations. Renn recalled,

Student success weren't words that were used a lot on campus, then. Not that people weren't doing it, it just wasn't in their vocabulary. It was more about a positive student experience based in the residence halls. Then it shifted to thinking about the work in different buckets like academic advising, the Writing Center, the Math Learning Center. So, it was still a new and growing idea.

Renn's leadership fostered a robust campus conversation that helped the community think more deeply about the construct of student success.

When Renn assumed the leadership position of the Neighborhoods Initiative, she had just finished working with Robert Reason to write and publish a book entitled *College Students in the United States: Characteristics, Experiences, and Outcomes* (2013). Renn recalled,

Much of my research over time had been more around the student identity development area. Bob Reason had done more of the retention/persistence stuff. So, when we divided up who's writing chapters in that book, he wrote those chapters. As lead author, I went through and edited. I got really excited about some stuff I was learning... I was just coming out of this book process where I was really starting to think about and engage with more of these persistence, retention, gaps kind of things. It really threw me back into those data in a way that I hadn't been in years.

With her thinking primed and focused on specific academic outcomes, Renn led MSU's student success work with rhetoric and ideas from an existing body of scholarship and theoretical foundations.

During Renn's second year, MSU engaged in a reaccreditation process. The Higher Learning Commission accredits MSU. Part of the reaccreditation process is to assess a Quality Initiative (QI) and its impact on education at the institution. MSU had chosen the Neighborhoods

Initiative as its QI. Renn told me her work with the leader of the reaccreditation process and those working on the assessment of the Neighborhoods Initiative was when definitions of student success and explicit ties to retention, persistence, and graduation crystallized as part of the Neighborhoods work.

Around this time, the Neighborhoods team began to synthesize the research and data available to them. Royal recalled the conversations about student success evolving, and she told me about the Neighborhoods Model of Student Success. Royal, High McCord, Noto, and a graduate assistant, Erich Pitcher, created the model to guide the unit's work. Royal said,

We were thoughtful in developing the model of Student Success that we still currently use... Everything that we've read, there's a different definition. Every institution you look at, there's a different definition for how they are defining student success.

Royal told me in creating the model they looked at how and why students succeeded in addition to institutional barriers that prevented their success

(<https://nssc.msu.edu/about/studentsuccessmodel.html>).

The model includes three connected domains for student success work. The first domain focused institutional navigation. The group identified students' challenges navigating the institution's policies, processes, and cultural idiosyncrasies. The second domain focused on academic proficiency. This domain of student success work provides students the tools and resources they need to succeed in their course work, persist from year to year, and graduate in a timely manner. The third domain called for student success work to attend to students' socio-emotional wellbeing. This includes helping students build a strong sense of belonging; enacting strategies and utilizing resources to ensure good physical and mental health; helping students to learn across difference; and leading students to develop a strong sense of purpose. This model

provided nuanced language for how MSU would talk about student success and a theoretical grounding for the assessment of the various Neighborhoods programs and initiatives.

While the rhetoric of student success was being established and developed, a similar shift was happening in the rhetoric and mindsets people held regarding students in general. Fritz recalled in the early days of the Neighborhoods Initiative, many used deficit language and thinking. He specifically spoke to the term *at-risk*, a term also used in the memorandum from Wilcox, Poston, and June

(http://shapingthefuture.msu.edu/documents/SupportServices11_25_09.pdf). “These are at-risk students and we need to go get them and bring them into the fold and support them... Just overlapping circles of support.” Those using the term *at-risk* operated from the notion that something inherent in that group of students prevented them from succeeding in college. Noto similarly recalled the prevalence of deficit language and mindsets. She provided an example including academic advisors. Academic advisors felt like they knew their students better than anyone else on campus. Noto said there were generalizations “about students who are coming from Detroit public schools” that were “totally inappropriate and really coming from a deficit mindset.”

Fritz attributes Royal with the shift away from deficit language and mindsets. He said of Royal, “She pushed us into a whole new world too, because her research and her dissertation study focused on deficit language and the power structure that it is rooted in.” By 2020, in an attempt to combat deficit language and mindsets about students, the Neighborhoods and the new Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, Mark Largent, began to explicitly state, “Every student MSU admits has the capacity to learn, thrive, and graduate, and collectively we are responsible for ensuring that MSU has the capacity to support a welcoming, diverse, inclusive,

and equitable campus community” (<https://undergrad.msu.edu/news/view/id/258>). This shift in rhetoric and mindset moved conversations away from blaming students to focus responsibility on the institution. Importantly, this shift represents a step toward the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches.

The Culture and Politics of Data

Throughout data collection and analysis, I found the culture and politics around data played an important role in the institution adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. In the early days, from the pilot to the beginning of Renn’s leadership, data collection, management, analysis, reporting, and sharing were fraught with political tension. These tensions created a culture of territorialism and a failure to share data across departments or units. Noto said, “There were power dynamics around data, different than just people resisting something. It was more than that. There was a fear of loss of their position and fear of learning to do something differently...” Fritz recalled in the early days of the Neighborhoods Initiative, conversations around data went something like: “No. I’m not giving you that. Why would I give you that? That’s my data. You can give me your data, but I’m keeping mine.” Fritz said the culture was one that relied on data as a currency of power. “It was really weird,” he said.

The political context of data sharing created a culture of fear and misunderstanding of how data could be used in student success work. Renn recalled an example of this. She told me about the Math department, which oversaw the Math Learning Center (MLC). The MLC provided tutoring and workshops to help students achieve higher grades in their math courses. Renn requested data about students using the MLC resources. She told me someone in the department “talked to an attorney or something who said they don’t want to keep those data because if a student was in trouble they could be called in to testify.” Instead of keeping

identifying information about the students utilizing their resources so those data could be indexed with other data around demographic information, course grades, persistence, and graduation, the MLC destroyed the identifying information in their data set. Renn said she went around most of her first year with the Neighborhoods saying to herself, “This is no way to run an institution.” She spent much of that first year trying to have conversations with partners across campus to get them on board with simply sharing quality data.

The reaccreditation process played an important role in shifting the politics and culture around data sharing at MSU. Larry Long served as a management analyst of student success initiatives. In this capacity, Long collected, compiled, managed, and analyzed data relevant to the Neighborhoods Initiative as the QI in the reaccreditation process. Officially, he reported to the vice president of auxiliary enterprises and to the office of the provost through the leader of the accreditation process. Long said, “When they created my job, originally they were using me as a way to get around typical institutional research reporting.” Long explained to me MSU had a “students of color” variable for data analysis. This variable included Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students as well as multi-racial and Asian students. Asian students were doing very well in terms of persistence and graduation. Because of this, when analyses included the students-of-color variable, persistence and graduation rates looked much closer to how white students were doing around similar outcomes. Long explained reports on this variable masked a huge difference that one would see if they disaggregated the data. According to Long, Institutional Research (IR) primarily created reports aligned with federal guidelines. Generally, IR did not create reports that varied much from those guidelines. The result of this was that the Neighborhoods team doing student success work did not have access to disaggregated data,

which skewed their understanding of students' experiences at MSU. Long said, "And so, they were using me as an alternative way to get at information that they weren't able to get at."

The political terrain and cultural traditions around data sharing at MSU did change. Renn recalled when Joanna Young assumed the position of Chief Intelligence Officer (CIO) at MSU on August 26, 2014 (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2014/joanna-young-recommended-as-new-msu-it-vice-president/>). Prior to coming to MSU, Young served as the associate vice president for finance and budget and CIO at the University of New Hampshire. Renn noted, "She pushed for changes in the data climate as well as the technology climate." Long recalled when the former director of IR vacated the position, Young promoted Bethan Cantwell to direct the unit. Cantwell assumed the director role in August of 2015 and was generally viewed as more amenable to having Institutional Research analyze data in ways better aligned with the Neighborhoods Initiative's needs. Long told me, "They [IR] started acknowledging how systems and labels failed to align with students' actual identities, rather than focusing on creating reports based on federal reporting requirements." Noto identified this as a critical moment signaling the institution was heading toward identity-conscious student success strategies. She said, "Once you see that one in 10 Black men graduate in four years, there you go. I mean, that's just it." Once data from a centralized source, Institutional Research, was available and analyzed in ways that showed opportunity gaps existed, those gaps had to be named, and the Neighborhoods team could galvanize people to address them.

University Innovation Alliance

In 2014, Michigan State University joined with 10 other public institutions in the University Innovation Alliance (UIA). According to the UIA Facebook page, the UIA is a "coalition of eleven public research universities spanning the geographic, economic and social

diversity of our country. Together, we are working to regain our country's economic competitive edge by helping more students graduate with a high-quality and affordable education”

(<https://www.facebook.com/uiainnovation>) June Youatt told me, “Yes, that was an important group because it kind of legitimized what we were doing on campus. It really allowed us to talk about being part of a larger national movement.” She described what she called one of the most significant conversations of the group. The topic of conversation, as Youatt described, was, “Are we really talking about student success for everyone or are we talking about student success for those underrepresented populations who have traditionally struggled?” The conversation shifted to naming specific groups of students who historically encountered institutional barriers to success. Youatt added, “And, again, I think the University Innovation Alliance, it's been practically very important. But politically, it was very important, because it did put us, Michigan State University, on the map for student success nationally.” Ultimately, membership in the UIA solidified credibility of the Neighborhoods Initiative both on and beyond campus.

Naming the Opportunity Gaps

Actually naming the opportunity gaps experienced by Black, Latinx, and Native and Indigenous students marks another important moment in MSU adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Tom Fritz recalled Renn was leading the Neighborhoods Initiative when the team started to dive specifically into those data. He said the team came together to say, “Okay. Well we're moving the needle from the 77% [6-year graduation rate] to this goal of 80%. And we're getting closer. But for whom?” The team was confronted what the data were showing. In 2013, the six-year graduation rate at MSU was 77%. However, the six-year graduation rate for Black, Latinx, and Native and Indigenous students was 56%, 66%, and 71% respectively. The gaps existed, and the Neighborhoods Team committed to addressing them.

Renn recalled an address she gave at a gathering of campus partners to discuss student success for the 2014 academic year. There were many partners from across campus at this event, and Renn recalled feeling like the group was a “lions pit of hostility.” Maybank, Gore, and Youatt were all in the audience. During Renn’s presentation, she explicitly named opportunity gaps and provided data to prove what many had implicitly known. Renn knew she was taking a risk. She knew some people would feel attacked by naming the opportunity gaps. She also knew that others feared naming these gaps would equate to blaming the students in those groups for not doing better. Renn told me she did not show the Architects her slides or preview her presentation before hand. She said,

They were all there. I did not show them my slides ahead of time. Coming at this work... from the faculty side was a bit empowering because I always felt like if you don’t like what I’m doing, you can fire me. I’ll go back to [my faculty position]... I had the confidence of a tenured faculty member.

She also said, “I’m going to put them out there because we can’t start dealing with [the opportunity gaps] until we start talking about them.” Renn recalled the audience received the information well. She remembered people saying, “We have not seen that data,” and, “I did not know that.” Renn led what was at that point in MSU’s history the most robust campus conversation that explicitly named opportunity gaps. This proved to be a watershed moment in MSU’s adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches.

Noto recalled that after Renn’s presentation, and after the culture of data sharing had opened up, the Neighborhoods team was able to focus their efforts in new ways. She said,

We were defining student success in terms of persistence and graduation. We were very focused on students who struggled academically in their first semester. I mean, as soon as

you can disaggregate and see populations, then it becomes obvious. It leads you to what you're supposed to do.

With newly granted access to data, the Neighborhoods team identified students who ended up on academic probation after their first semester. In a June 16, 2016 press release, Doug Estry, the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education at the time, was quoted saying, “On average only 12 percent of the freshmen placed on academic probation in their first semester – which is a GPA below a 2.0 – will graduate in four years. After six years that number increases, but only to 36 percent” (<https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2016/keeping-students-off-academic-probation/#:~:text=This%20past%20year%2C%20the%20percentage,roughly%20200%20first%2Dtime%20freshmen>). The Neighborhoods team used the disaggregated academic probation data to focus their efforts, and it paid off. Overall, academic probation rates after the first semester have steadily decreased, but opportunity gaps still persisted. Long said, “The whole purpose of the Neighborhoods became closing the opportunity gaps Pell-eligible, first-generation, Black, and Latinx students. Like, the point was to close the gaps for those specific students.” Everything was pointing the Neighborhoods team in the direction of identity-conscious student success approaches.

Intentionally Implementing Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies

Genyne Royal told me the story of when identity-conscious student success work began in the Neighborhoods. Following Renn’s presentation naming the opportunity gaps, Royal, High McCord, Jasmin Lee, Rob Biddle, and Antonio Pee met to discuss what they had just heard. Being Black themselves, their conversations focused on what they could do for Black students to address the gap. Royal said “Okay, well, we gotta do something.” She recalled, “And we did. We

started doing something then, which was the early iterations of what we now have more broadly as the identity-conscious student success work.”

This group of Black higher education professionals was going to do something about the opportunity gaps experienced by Black students at MSU. While they were determined, they knew the work came with risk. Royal said,

But we were concerned about the Institution's scrutiny of it, and the pushback that we would get from students... So, no one unit was responsible for it. I took the lead on it because I wanted to make sure that it happened, but... it didn't belong to the NSSC

[Neighborhoods], it didn't belong to [the Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions].

The MSU Black alumni also became very involved. They would sponsor some events and provide support in multiple ways. Royal and her team figured out ways for their offices to sponsor or support some of the initiatives financially. When I asked Royal about the pushback they received, she said,

Actually, there wasn't any... Like I said, it didn't belong to anyone... All of us who were engaged in the work just managed to cover a couple of things, or whatever. And so, because no one knew about it, there wasn't anything that the administration could say about it... that's how we avoided the scrutiny in early years.

However, on the topic of pushback they received, she quickly amended the narrative. In the nascent stages, Royal told me that they all started doing research. They engaged students around conversations about student success, and they were enthusiastic. When Royal and the other professional staff told students what they were trying to build, students were extremely excited about it. One of their first initiatives came from a recommendation that from these conversations with students. Because of the challenges many of them were facing as Black

students at a predominately white institution (PWI), they wanted to see an orientation for Black students. The group rolled out the inaugural iteration of Welcome Black, a first-year orientation program specifically for Black students at MSU. The resistance came from some of the students, not the institution. Some of the feedback they received came from Black students who did not want to participate because they perceived the program to be racist. Royal said,

They came to a PWI because they wanted diverse experiences... We realized that first-year students hadn't had a racialized experience at MSU yet, and so they didn't know that they were going to be looking for what we were providing for them. That was interesting and something we didn't foresee.

They expected pushback from the administration. They had not expected it from students, but they went ahead with the work anyway.

Interlude

In the spring of 2016, Renn stepped away from her position with the Neighborhoods. A national search was conducted, and Luke Schultheis was chosen to assume the role of assistant dean of student success and director of the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC). The name was changed from Neighborhoods Initiative to the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative to reflect the collaborative nature of the unit's work. Schultheis's professional background focused on enrollment management and admissions. He would leave the position a year later in 2017. Doug Estry, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education and one of Renn's direct supervisors, stepped down from his position. On August 16, 2016, Professor Sekhar Chivukula assumed the position of Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education. A December 14, 2017, press release announced the Office of the Associate Provost

for Undergraduate Education had appointed Genyne Royal as interim assistant dean of student success initiatives and director of the NSSC (<https://undergrad.msu.edu/news/view/id/178>).

The Reveal

Royal recalled the story of how their identity-conscious student success work was revealed to the larger campus community. She had taken on the role of assistant dean of student success initiatives and director of the NSSC. She told me people finding out about the work she and her colleagues were doing for Black students happened accidentally. During a January meeting, Chivukula presented data about that year's academic probation rates. Royal told me everyone was very excited because Chivukula presented data showing "a significant decrease in the percentage of students who ended up on academic probation, and when they disaggregated by race and ethnicity, what they found was that about 50 fewer Black students ended up on academic probation." This represented a significant dent in the opportunity gap for Black students. Royal recalled Chivukula saying something like, "We've seen this and this is wonderful, but we don't know this happened. We haven't done anything different." Terrence Frazier, relatively new in his assistant vice president of Student Affairs role, spoke up and said something like, "Well, it could be because a group of our colleagues are doing this particular work."

Royal had a meeting with Chivukula. Royal remembered how surprised Chivukula seemed. He kept repeating that he did not know anything about the work they were doing. Chivukala said, "Well, how much money do you need to do this?" He ended up allocating \$30,000.00. Royal said,

The idea was that we would not just work with Black students. We know that there are gaps that exist in a number of places. We also wanted it to explore and push the institution to think about identity and student success in multiple ways.

They started looking at data around Latinx and Native and Indigenous students. They found staff and faculty who identified with those communities and brought them together to share this identity-conscious student success framework. Royal said, “So now it’s not hidden labor...”

Royal told me when she reported to different groups about the various communities emerging from the identity-conscious student success work, she would highlight the people engaged in efforts. This strategy ensured their supervisors could see how this work cut across the institution and that it has a strong theoretical foundation. The Neighborhoods team continued to look at data to identify other gaps. Royal described a conversation she had with a colleague at the University of Georgia. The colleague mentioned they were seeing negative trends for their students who hailed from rural areas. Royal said, “That’s a community we need to look at.” The team had conversations with other groups on campus. They collaborated, shared, and analyzed data. Today, the NSSC sponsors five different communities employing identity-conscious student success strategies. A Neighborhood Director, as a formal part of their job duties, coordinates the Latinx Student Success Community, the Black Strategic Outreach Community, the Veteran Student Success Community, the LGBT Student Success Community, and the APIDA (Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi American) Student Success Community. In the near future, the NSSC will add the Native American/Indigenous Student Success Community, the First-Generation Student Success Community, the Students with Disabilities Success Community, and the Rural Student Success Community (<https://nssc.msu.edu/identity-conscious/index.html>).

Summary and Conclusion

In a January 28, 2019 letter from Mark Largent, the current Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, he touted impressive decreases in the numbers of students ending up on academic probation after their first semester (<https://undergrad.msu.edu/news/view/id/215>). The probation rates for new students dropped to its lowest level in recorded history: 6.7%. Historically, that rate hovered at around 10%. Largent wrote,

When we look more deeply at the fall 2018 end-of-first-semester probation rates, we see good reason for optimism. The fall 2018 probation rate was at an all-time low and it declined for Latinx and Black/African-American students, students who receive Pell, and first-generation students. The tide is rising, and the gaps are closing. We suspect that this is due in no small part to the major reforms undertaken in gateway mathematics classes and in our ongoing identity-conscious strategies for student success.

Getting to this point was years in the making. The first finding of my study is this historical narrative. This study shows that context matters when adopting identity-conscious student success approaches. Using vertical case study methods, this chapter represents a synthesis of the data I collected from those who participated in interviews. I took the data and pieced together a narrative of the Neighborhoods. Throughout the narrative, I have followed the concept of identity-conscious student success strategies through the lenses of history, politics, culture, and economics. In doing so, my study shows that the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies at MSU depended on many contextual factors. In the next chapter, I discuss findings with direct implications for other institutions trying to take up identity-conscious student success approaches.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This chapter describes the findings from my study examining how Michigan State University adopted identity-conscious student success strategies to address opportunity gaps experienced by students from minoritized social groups. Chapter 4 consisted of a detailed narrative of how the Neighborhoods Initiative drove the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches. Using vertical and transversal comparative case study approaches, the narrative worked through historical, political, cultural, and economic lenses. Chapter 4 showed that context mattered in the Institution's adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps. The seven findings presented in this chapter focus on attitudes, actions, and strategies exhibited by individuals working with the Neighborhoods Initiative.

I organized the seven findings presented in this chapter into three major themes. The first set of related findings deal with attitudes and approaches to student success. This theme encompasses two findings. First, key actors working with the Neighborhoods Initiative identified and built on precursors of identity-conscious student success strategies. Second, individuals at Michigan State University worked to change the student success rhetoric and mindsets embedded in the institutional culture.

The second theme consists of three findings related to navigating the institution. First, my analysis found the credentials and the credibility of key players affected the uptake of identity-conscious student success strategies. Second, this study found benefit in the Neighborhoods Initiative's charge to work across organizational lines and in collaborating despite historically entrenched silos. Third, building networks around ideas of student success, opportunity gaps, and

identity-consciousness was an important strategy that created an institutional context amenable to the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches.

The third theme consists of two findings and deals with galvanizing members of the institution to create positive change toward the uptake of identity-conscious student success strategies to close opportunity gaps. The first finding in this theme deals with using and sharing data. As the culture around data use and sharing change, the leaders of the Neighborhoods Initiative moved conversations and people closer to adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Second, this study found certain people, or empowerment agents, can facilitate the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies.

Attitudes and Approaches to Student Success

Throughout this study, I heard from participants about how the idea of the Neighborhoods Initiative came into being, how it was piloted, and how it developed over time. Through examining the Neighborhoods Initiative as the organizational unit through which identity-conscious student success approaches came to be utilized, the data showed how people viewed student success, how they approached the work, and how they negotiated the political, cultural, and economic contexts in which they were embedded. Through my interviews and document analysis, two significant findings emerged that I have organized under the umbrella of “Attitudes and Approaches to Student Success.” The first finding that emerged from my analysis concerns key actors building on antecedents to identity-conscious student success approaches. Key actors leveraged these precursors which ultimately led to the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. The second finding emerging from my analysis deals with changes in the student success rhetoric and the mindsets people brought to this work. These changes

occurred over time and resulted in the Institution eventually adopting identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps.

Building on Precursors to Identity-Conscious Student Success Approaches

The first finding in the “Attitudes and Approaches to Student Success” theme illustrates how key actors built on precursors to identity-conscious student success strategies. Key actors’ experiences in college student identity-development work and multicultural affairs represents the first precursor to identity-conscious student success strategies identified in this study. While identity-conscious student success strategies were not explicitly part of the early formation of the Neighborhoods Initiative, many key individuals and participants in this study knew that student success efforts needed to work for specific groups of students from minoritized social groups. Youatt, Maybank, Renn, and Royal all had significant experience in college student identity work before they came to the Neighborhoods Initiative. These experiences shaped the way they thought about the work the Neighborhoods Initiative needed to accomplish. Knowing about their experiences explains how some of the precursors to identity-conscious student success strategies were woven into the fabric of the Neighborhoods Initiative. While both Noto and Strong noted identity was not the basis of the work early on, Youatt, Renn, and Royal all explained to me how their experiences working in the identity realm of higher education shaped their understanding of student success work. The data also show how the idea of diversity and inclusion cropped up in conversations and documents as precursors to identity-conscious student success strategies.

Maybank came to MSU in 2005 taking on the position of associate vice president for student affairs and services. Prior to her arrival at MSU, Maybank served in several capacities at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. In 2003, she began in her position as the associate to the president. Before that, she served as the director of multicultural affairs. In a press release

announcing her departure from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Maybank's work was characterized as being "responsible for ensuring that the university continues to be a diverse and equitable environment, and for formulating and implementing policies and strategies that enhance the gender and racial/ethnic diversity of the university" (University of Nebraska Medical Center Newsroom, 2014, July 14).

Youatt also had experience thinking about the intersection of identity and student success. In our interview, Youatt told me she joined the faculty at MSU in 1983 as an assistant professor in the department of Human Development and Family Studies. Her research agenda generally focused on family studies and adolescence. After several years, her department promoted to full professor. During this time, her research agenda shifted to examine the relationship between family support and academic success. Youatt recalled a particular program she worked on as a faculty member before her transition to the office of the provost. She was instrumental in creating and implementing a program for first-year students in her department. "We called it at that time a freshmen matriculation project." She told me the impetus for the project came from the realization that her department enrolled women of color at much higher rates than other departments across the campus. Youatt came to understand some of the specific issues that affecting how they acclimated to the institution. She took these understandings and experiences with her when she applied for and became the associate provost for undergraduate education in 2002. When I followed up with Youatt in the interview about how these experiences shaped her understanding of the initial mission of the Neighborhoods Initiative, she said,

I think those who were at the table at the very beginning would have said to you [closing opportunity gaps through identity-conscious student success strategies] was always the plan... We didn't have all the data then that we have now, but we had enough to know.

Renn came to MSU as an assistant professor in 2001. Her work experience and research agenda have always been directly tied to student identity development and the college student experience. In our interview, Renn recalled her early work experience at Brown University. She was an assistant dean and liaison for gay and lesbian students. In this role, Renn engaged in identity-development work, advocacy, and programming for LGBTQ students. She built networks with other people and units across campus doing work for minoritized students. She then completed a doctoral program using some of her work at Brown University as her research focus. She titled her dissertation *Claiming Space: The College Experience of Biracial and Multiracial Students on Predominately White Campuses* (Renn, 1999). She noted, “We didn’t use the words ‘student success’ at that time, but I was definitely involved in identity-conscious advocacy and education programming.” In the winter of 2013, Renn launched the National Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, and Queer (LGBTQ+) College Student Success. She told me, “That was the first time I was able to merge student success and identity-consciousness, but it’s always been a big part of my teaching and my practice.” Renn assumed the position of associate dean of undergraduate studies and director for student success initiatives in 2013, bringing her experiences and knowledge of college student identity to the Neighborhoods Initiative.

Prior to Royal coming to MSU in January of 2014, she was a research and graduate assistant at Texas A&M University while completing a doctoral program in higher education and higher education administration. She titled her dissertation *What Shall I Give My Children? Student Affairs Professionals and their Influence on the Academic Resilience of Underprepared African American Students* (Royal, 2015). A colleague shared the position posting for a Neighborhood Director at MSU. In our interview, Royal recalled how the colleague shared with her that the position reported “to both academic and student affairs.” This dual reporting

structure interested her most. She told me that while finishing her doctoral degree, she developed a philosophy “about these silos that we create in higher education, historically, where we’ve got academic affairs and student affairs in two spaces.” Her philosophy understood breaking down these traditional silos could greatly improve students’ success. “I thought it was a dream come true to find a space and a place that aligned with how I understood higher education should work.” Royal assumed the position of neighborhood director of South Neighborhood and convener of the intercultural pillar.

Gore did not have similar experiences working specifically with multicultural affairs or identity development. Gore came to Michigan State University in 2007. Prior to his arrival, he served as the associate director for housing and food services at the University of Washington. While Gore did not bring with him direct experience in the multicultural affairs and identity-development realm, he did provide important insight about the Architects’ examination of institutional data at the onset of the Neighborhoods Initiative. “We saw that Black and Latinx students were not staying at the University at the same rates as their white peers.” The Architects focused especially on the first- to second-year and second- to third-year retention rates. Having just finished a strategic planning process that illuminated these disparities, Gore knew they had an opportunity to address inequity and close opportunity gaps through the residence halls and the Neighborhoods Initiative.

To be clear, though, not everyone perceived the mission of the Neighborhoods Initiative to focus on identity or identity-conscious student success strategies. Strong, the leader of the pilot of the Neighborhoods Initiative, told me, “No doubt about it, identity is important and essential, but that wasn’t the basis [of the Neighborhoods Initiative].” He understood the purpose as “to get out of a siloed approach to supporting student success.” Breaking through these silos

was about making the campus smaller, having space where students could build community, and centering academic success in the Neighborhoods. Strong said the intention of the work meant to give more students an experience similar to students' experiences in the existing residential colleges. Noto described the early days of the Neighborhoods Initiative by saying, "There was no identity-consciousness at all at the start that I was aware." Noto said the purpose was "student success and wraparound support... and providing a network for students that had fewer and fewer gaps in it."

The intentions of key players and the experiences with multicultural affairs and identity development they brought with them began to permeate the organizational structure. For example, Bishop understood the mission of the Neighborhoods Initiative was generally tied to retention rates, and ultimately closing the gaps. He said, "So, at the core, I understood it as retention, and I believe it was predominantly about retention of students of color, first-generation students that especially at a place the size of Michigan State would be so easy to lose." The focus on retention guided his approach. Bishop knew some groups of students persisted at higher rates than others. His understanding pointed toward identifying gaps and closing them in order to increase the overall retention rates. At this point, though, the work still focused on the retention rates of all students, not of particular groups of minoritized student groups.

Precursors to identity-conscious student success strategies also appeared in a November 25, 2009 memorandum from Provost Kim Wilcox, Vice President Fred Poston, and Vice President Lee June to Youatt, Gore, and Maybank. As Youatt recalled in our interview, she knew that she needed a statement of support charging Gore, Maybank, and herself to move forward with the Neighborhoods Initiative. She wrote the memorandum for Wilcox, Poston, and June, which was eventually shared with the entire University community. One of the outcomes in the

memorandum read, “Integrated services to promote academic success and engagement for academically at-risk students” (Wilcox et al., 2009, p. 2). The phrase *at-risk* will be discussed in a later section, but it signals specific groups of students. Knowing Youatt wrote this, one might infer that this phrase signaled specific attention needed to be paid to Black and Latinx students and students from lower-income backgrounds experiencing opportunity gaps given her work with the freshmen matriculation project she described.

Another precursor to identity-conscious student success strategies could also be seen in the memorandum. The memorandum asked that the Neighborhoods Initiative planning process reflect several principles. One of these principles stated, “Neighborhoods and services reflect the university values of quality, connectivity and inclusivity” (Wilcox et al., 2009, p. 3). Similarly, another principle stated, “Neighborhoods are ‘customized’ based on an assessment of the needs and interests of students within each neighborhood” (p. 3). By tying the Neighborhoods Initiative to the University’s espoused value of inclusivity as well as acknowledging that each neighborhood would house students with different needs and interests, the memorandum sets the foundation for conversations about specific identities. In essence, the memorandum’s broad terms oriented the work of the Neighborhoods Initiative toward focusing on specific groups of students based on their needs.

Taken together, the finding covered in this section speaks to how identity-consciousness entered into student success conversations at MSU. Multiple key players and participants in this study brought with them experiences working in college student identity development and multicultural affairs. They also brought with them a commitment to making the college experience better for groups of students who have been historically marginalized on campus. With these experiences and knowledge, those key players embedded notions of inclusion and

diversity into the work of the Neighborhoods Initiative along with improving retention rates, graduation rates, and student success more broadly. These precursors eventually required the Neighborhoods team to examine and address the opportunity gaps experienced by students from minoritized social groups.

Changing Rhetoric and Mindsets

The second finding included in the theme of “Attitudes and Approaches to Student Success” is that throughout the course of the Neighborhoods Initiative, the way people talked about students and student success changed from deficit thinking to an asset-minded understanding. This change in rhetoric signaled a shift in the way people thought about students and student success. Further, this cultural shift allowed and encouraged more people from across the University to buy in to the Neighborhoods Initiative work. It also allowed more people to specifically name opportunity gaps and support efforts aimed at closing them.

The rhetoric people use when they talk about students and student success work reflects their mindsets regarding those topics. In this finding, multiple shifts in rhetoric and mindsets emerged that are important to understanding how MSU eventually adopted identity-conscious student success strategies. My data showed most people employed deficit language when referring to students. Deficit language around students locates success or failure inherently on the student while failing to acknowledge and understand the role of the institution in student success.

Noto perceived deficit language as common place when she started in her position with the Neighborhoods Initiative. She told me colleagues would make blanket generalizations about the students they worked with. One example she shared related to the number of credit hours academic advisors counseled students to take. She said,

There was this feeling that, ‘I know my students, and I know they can only take 12 credits in the first semester.’ Which there are some students who should take 12 credits in the first semester, but these blanket ideas about students who are coming from Detroit public schools is just, it was totally inappropriate and really a deficit mindset.

Similarly, Fritz recounted, “But in the beginning that was the nomenclature. These are at risk students...” The language used assumed an inherent fault or deficiency in students based on their identity or background, and these deficiencies would prevent them from succeeding at MSU.

Fritz identified Royal as one person influencing the shift away from deficit language. Royal was finishing her doctoral program, and her dissertation focused on the impact of student affairs professionals in the academic resilience of African American students at predominately white institutions. She was deeply immersed in literature and scholarship about deficit language and mindsets. Royal pushed the broader student success campus conversation toward an examination of the role the Institution played in students’ success, rather than blaming students when they do not achieve certain success metrics. This aligned with the implementation of the Neighborhoods Initiative in that people at MSU were starting to understand MSU could reduce and remove barriers to students’ success.

Another rhetorical phenomenon at MSU surfaced with the institutionalization of coded language used to refer to specific groups of students. Fritz described a general consensus in the campus community that the institution was “not doing well by... Black students; bottom line.” He pointed to Proposition 2, the state of Michigan’s affirmative action initiative, as one factor preventing public education institutions from providing educational opportunities based on race. Fritz told me Proposition 2 caused fear among people and prevented conversations about race. He described a strategy many at MSU employed. People used the names of programs to refer to

groups of students. For example, the College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP) was a “retention initiative designed to address the needs of... first generation and low income students, and students who meet other criteria” (Office of Supportive Services, 2007). Another document stated, “The College Achievement Admissions Program is an alternative admissions procedure for students who have academic potential, but who, because of their economic, cultural, or educational background or environment, would be unable to realize that potential without special supportive services” (Undergraduate Education, 2002, p. 3). Youatt explained,

I will tell you that in the '90s anytime there was an African American student in a class, someone would say, “Are you a CAAP student? If you were black, you must have gotten in on that admissions program.” I mean, ... that's not a microaggression that's a macroaggression. But that was real because it was so attached to that program.

Similarly, Michigan State University’s MAGIC (Maximizing Academic Growth in College) program housed in the Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions is a summer transition initiative that primarily serves incoming students of color. Both Fritz and Renn explained how people would say, “CAAP students,” “MAGIC students,” or, “TRiO students” when referring specifically to Black students or students of color. Fritz said, “That meant we're going to talk about Black students without saying, ‘Black students,’ because Prop. 2 happened.” This coded language for talking about groups of students along with the deficit language and mindsets people brought to their work resulted in significant stigma to students’ association with some of these programs.

Youatt told me she also knew that stigma would only end by dismantling program. In 2014, the Spartan Success Scholars Coaching program was piloted in the South and East Neighborhoods. For the purposes of full transparency, I worked with Noto, Royal, and Christina

Finley, a MSW intern at the time, to create and launch this program. Shortly after the roll out of the program, the CAAP designation was phased out, and the Spartan Success Scholars program served those students. While the eligibility requirements have changed over time, the program was originally open to students enrolled in two developmental courses, Pell Grant recipients, and/or first-generation college students.

Gore described to me one significant outcome of the strategic planning process he oversaw. He came to the realization that how people viewed students needed to change. He said,

It became really clear that we had to change how we looked at our students, that they weren't my students like my Housing students or my Student Affairs students or my academic students. They were our students, and [should be] using the resources that we had available to help make this better.

Ideas around student success were still developing in the field of higher education. Renn told me, “*Student success* weren't words that were used a lot on campus, then. Not that people weren't doing it, it just wasn't in their vocabulary... So it was still a growing idea.” MSU was beginning to think about student success in new ways. The Architects and those student success practitioners developing the Neighborhoods Initiative intentionally approached their student success work by acknowledging the Institution’s role. Bishop said, “Rather than asking students to connect the dots, we needed to connect the dots ourselves so that students have a framework, a network, a safety net under them.” Royal said,

The broader structure of the program, it being embedded in the neighborhoods, this idea of de-centralizing services so that students have increased access, or more convenient access, the success teams and core teams, those things were already established in the

neighborhoods, and functioning at different levels depending upon who was in the space, or who had been in the space.

This shows that people started to question the role of the Institution. They were coming to the realization that institutional barriers existed, and those barriers prevented students from succeeding at MSU.

Another important shift in rhetoric and mindset occurred when people began to explicitly name the opportunity gaps experienced by Black, Latinx, Native and Indigenous, first-generation students, and students from lower-income backgrounds. Renn identified the reaccreditation process as the point in time when the Neighborhoods team started to tie their student success work explicitly and intentionally to academic outcomes like retention and graduation rates. Agreeing, Long told me the shift to identity-conscious student success strategies really occurred when the team began to intentionally disaggregate data. Long told me he and others conducted detailed analyses of retention and graduation measures. Tying student success work to academic probation, retention, and graduation rates and being required to critically examine how MSU could improve those required a deeper dive into the data. Disaggregating by race, Pell Grant eligibility, and first-generation status revealed groups of students who they could proactively support.

Examining academic outcome data in this way led Renn to present these findings to a large group of constituents from across campus. She was keenly aware that deficit language and mindsets permeated the community. Renn told me she carefully framed the findings. She wanted people to understand the gaps were not the fault of the students. The opportunity gaps did not exist because something was inherently or essentially wrong with students who were Black or the first in their families to attend college. Instead, the data she showed illuminated the

Institution's inequitable allocation of opportunities. To close the gaps, MSU needed to address institutional barriers to specific groups' success. Renn's presentation represented a watershed moment that changed the way many people on campus thought about students, student success, opportunity gaps, and the role of the institution.

The multiple rhetorical shifts and changes in mindsets that occurred over the course of the Neighborhoods Initiative represent a significant finding. Addressing deficit language and mindsets required ongoing conversations. The Architects acknowledged the University could break down barriers to student success by decentralizing support services. It became easier for students to access services. Student success became the Institution's imperative. As student success work became more clearly defined, the Neighborhoods team took a more critical approach in analyzing the relevant data. They disaggregated it by race, ethnicity, legal sex, socioeconomic background, and first-generation status. The team identified and named opportunity gaps allowing people to discuss the problem. They could try to fix the institution rather than the students.

Navigating the Institution

The second theme of findings regards navigating the institution. Throughout my study, I found key players, especially the participants, navigated MSU culture, politics, tradition, and policies throughout the implementation and subsequent years of the Neighborhoods Initiative. From the data, three significant findings emerged relating to this theme. First, the participants talked to me about how they considered the organizational structure of MSU. Second, the data showed credibility, both of the people and of the Neighborhoods Initiative, served as cultural capital for furthering their student success agenda. The third finding ties the previous two together. Given the specific organizational context, to expend the cultural capital gained from the

accumulated credibility of the Neighborhoods team and the Initiative itself, key players built and activated robust networks of key constituents from across campus.

Organizational Considerations

Youatt, Gore, and Maybank proposed to build an initiative that would enhance the MSU student experience. The Neighborhoods Initiative would work by breaking down institutional siloes. This approach required people to work across organizational lines. The Architects, came together from three distinct divisions at the University. In a way, they were modeling the collaborative nature of the project. This project, though, was going against the grain of the institutional culture and traditions. The organization had not historically been structured to promote this kind of cross-unit collaboration.

Youatt and others recalled the large number of programs across the university that focused on identity. She told me,

And this isn't a criticism, this is an observation. They were disconnected from faculty. They were disconnected from student life. They were disconnected from Residence Life. It was a very small group of people who had taken on the responsibility and were passionate about it. I mean, really good people, but in total isolation from everything else related to the campus.

Important to note, the group of people to whom Youatt was referring in this quote did not include the group that Royal convened to do identity-conscious student success work. Youatt said,

I likened it to, instead of rebuilding the house, just putting gerrymandered additions on. So you've got your big machine that was built for this group of people. "Oh, well, we have some African American students so we'll build a little room over here for them." And, "Oh, well, we've got this group. We'll build a room for them over here." But

fundamentally, nothing changed... At what point do you say, “There’s something wrong with the place we’ve built. We have to rebuild this.”

Youatt deduced the organizational structure at MSU at that time was not going to lend itself to closing opportunity gaps.

Gore also provided important insight into how he was thinking about the organizational structure when the Architects were working to get the Neighborhoods Initiative off the ground. Gore said, “I think the other part that we tried to do too was provide strategic intent that this is what we wanted to do without putting so much structure in place that it didn’t get a chance to evolve.” This strategic ambiguity allowed the unit to evolve over time and with each new leader. Gore assessed, “I think we’ve become much more sophisticated. I think we’ve become much more... data driven, and I also think too that the institutional barriers have been dropped over the years.” Gore, the last of the Architects still at the University, has supported this project and studied its evolution. He told me, “The Neighborhoods is just a part of who we are, versus in the past it was like, ‘This will never work or be successful.’” He further explained that arriving at point required the Architects to reassure the campus community and to ask for their patience. Allowing the unit to evolve over time and with each new leader enhanced the project’s ability to address real needs at the University. Gore said, “And that’s why you saw last year our graduation rate being at 81%.”

Allowing the Neighborhoods Initiative to be loosely structured in the beginning also helped address some of the organizational issues Youatt highlighted. She told me the disparate identity programs just did not work structurally. She said, “But we also, frankly, didn’t think we could take what we had and fix it. We really felt we had to sort of level everything out and then begin again.” The organizational structure of MSU when the Neighborhoods Initiative was

conceived was better suited for a manufacturing process, not for the individual success of students. To move from what she called the manufacturing structure to an organization that cared about the needs and success of individual students, they would need to take an intermediate step.

Youatt said,

I just believed there was this intermediate step where we had to rebuild the machine before we could begin to specialize. Before we could begin to do the work that needed to be done. I just did not think we could go from where we were, because in some ways I thought that's what the old model tried to do.

To Youatt, the Neighborhoods Initiative could create the kind of institutional change that would eventually lead to identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps.

Credibility

Throughout the course of this study, participants repeatedly talked about credibility. From the time the Architects conceived the Neighborhoods Initiative through the evolution of the project, participants noted the importance of the credibility of certain actors and the credibility of the Neighborhoods Initiative itself. Often times, this credibility came with a person's educational credentials, their research agendas and scholarship contributions, and/or the positions they held within the University. What became clear was that the credibility people brought with them added to the credibility of the Neighborhoods Initiative. As credibility accumulated for the Neighborhoods Initiative, the unit gained more influence on conversations about student success and identity-conscious work.

The Neighborhoods Initiative was met with skepticism by MSU community when it was announced. Renn recalled her own skepticism at the time from her perspective as a faculty

member. Specifically, both she and Noto recalled the Neighborhoods Initiative was unveiled around the same time leaders were ending the MSU Dubai campus project. Renn told me it was perceived as a pet-project of the president at the time, Lou Anna K. Simon. People on campus thought the Neighborhoods Initiative represented more of a public relations strategy instead of a serious attempt at enhancing undergraduate education at MSU. Notably, though, Youatt stressed the importance of Simon's support. In the early days, many on campus did not perceive a great deal of credibility associated with the Neighborhoods Initiative, but presidential support offered enough credence for the project to move forward.

The credibility key players brought to the Neighborhoods Initiative began to change the perception on campus. Renn commented that when the idea was unveiled, she knew Gore, Maybank, and Youatt were spearheading the charge. The three Architects were each promoted over time to vice president of auxiliary enterprises, vice president of student affairs and services, and provost, respectively. Youatt told me she went to her supervisor, Provost Kim Wilcox, to ask for help in lending credibility to the Neighborhoods Initiative. In her conversation with Wilcox, Youatt said,

The only way we can get this done is if you and the vice presidents... charge us to do this... You're going to have to do this because there's going to be so much campus blowback from all of the 500 programs.

As was discussed in Chapter 4, Wilcox had Youatt draft a memorandum (Wilcox et al., 2009) that charged the Architects to proceed with planning the Neighborhoods Initiative. That memorandum was signed by Provost Wilcox, Vice President Fred Poston, and Vice President Lee June and distributed to the entire University community signaling a serious institutional

commitment to the project. This commitment added another level of credibility to the Neighborhoods Initiative.

Once the Architects decided to pilot the Neighborhoods Initiative, they knew the need for credibility in moving the project forward. They identified people who met several criteria. Youatt told me they looked for people who understood student learning, college students' experiences, and someone who brought a strong student-centered approach. The Architects also wanted people who could work together and cross boundaries. She also said they selected Philip Strong to be the first director because of his background in student affairs as well as being an assistant dean in a residential college. Youatt said, "He really got the relationship of the environment to learning and that if these things came together they could make a difference." Strong also brought credibility with him through his doctoral degree in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education. Strong said of his doctorate degree,

It was essentially important... At that point in my career, a relatively newly-minted Ph.D. but also assistant dean title coming from a college absolutely, positively got the academic group on board because, quite frankly, if it was run with a [person with a master's degree]... there's just no way, no how, anyone in the academic world was going to jump on board unless they were forced.

Strong expounded on this point. He told me he had taught several classes by this point. He had already been working with the Math Learning Center for seven to nine years. He told me he was a "known quantity" to many, and that he could "speak their language." He understood his appointment to this position as an attempt to build bridges across the university, to not see the traditional boundaries. He said, "I was intentionally put in that position because I could bridge academic and student affairs." He also thought that it was important for the leader of the pilot to

come from within MSU. As Strong recalled, the Architects wanted someone who would “know where you’re going to get flack from... You need to know where your resources are... That was very intentional on their part.” Strong noted that throughout the history of the Neighborhoods, hiring for the leadership position has strayed away from these strategies eventually settling again on an individual who embodies the criteria, credentials, experiences, and credibility described above.

The Architects then tapped Bishop to lead the Neighborhoods Initiative after Strong’s one-year stint. Bishop was serving as the executive director of the career services unit situated in the division of Student Affairs and Services. The Neighborhoods Initiative was reporting to Maybank, the vice president of Student Affairs and Services, while the majority of funding was provided by Gore and Youatt from auxiliary services and the office of the provost respectively. Bishop and his team worked hard to build connections across campus. Bishop told me about the credibility he gained over the first year in his position. People appreciated his approach to the work because he relied on their expertise.

During Bishop’s time with the Neighborhoods, he assigned Noto to convene the academic pillar in the Neighborhoods Initiative. Noto took the charge seriously, but conveyed in our interview some of the challenges she encountered. She felt many of the challenges she encountered stemmed from her lack of a doctoral degree. She perceived colleagues, especially those in academic affairs, viewed her as less credible because she lacked a doctoral degree. This lack of credibility prevented her from moving conversations forward.

At this time, though, the Neighborhoods Initiative was picking up steam. Noto recalled that while the early years of the Neighborhoods Initiative were met with significant resistance, the appointment of Renn was a turning point. Noto said, “Then Kris [Renn] of course was a

driver of a lot of [the change] because they could respect her in a different way than Kelley [Bishop].” She described Renn’s credibility by adding, “Not just her credentials. I mean, yes, her credentials, but the woman is famous for goodness’ sake... It convinced people we’re really not kidding.” Similarly, Royal and Fritz spoke to the credibility Renn brought to the project. Royal pointed out the prominence of Renn’s scholarship in student affairs programs. Fritz said, “Once Kris [Renn] was in place... then we started sprinting.”

Youatt also described her perspective on the importance of the credibility Renn brought to the Neighborhoods Initiative. She said, “Yeah, that was huge.” She told me the decision to appoint Renn was something upon which all three of the Architects agreed. She told me student affairs is not always respected by faculty and academic administrators. Renn’s appointment ensured faculty and academic administrators would take the program seriously.

At the same time Renn vacated her position with the Neighborhoods, Estry also vacated his position as the Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education. Youatt appointed a new Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, Professor Sekhar Chivukula, and another director was hired to lead the Neighborhoods project. The Neighborhoods Initiative had grown, and the name changed to the Neighborhoods Student Success Collaborative (NSSC). The new director, Luke Schultheis, stayed in the position for a little over a year and then left. Upon his departure, the new Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education aimed to select a director with a combination of expertise, credentials, an extensive background in the field of student success, and someone who had the skillset and cultural capital to navigate the institution. Chivukula chose Dr. Genyne Royal.

Royal started as a Neighborhood Director in January of 2014. She was close to finishing her Higher Education and Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Texas A&M

University, where her research focused on the role student affairs professionals can play in the academic resilience of African American college students. In her Neighborhood Director role, Royal led and convened the intercultural pillar for the Neighborhoods Initiative. In this role, she brought together the leaders of the many “pocket programs” focusing on identity. Renn told me, “I think Genyne [Royal] came with credibility in the community.” Royal had built a strong rapport with the leaders of these disparate programs because of her credentials. Renn described Royal’s approach as, “We’re not coming to take over what you’ve done. We’d love to learn from what you’ve done. We’d like to replicate it if we can, or support it or partner with you if we can.” Her work as a Neighborhood Director led Chivukula to tap her to lead the NSSC in an interim capacity in December 2017 (<https://undergrad.msu.edu/news/view/id/178>) and she currently holds the position. As noted earlier, she has leveraged her credibility allowing her to formally and explicitly include identity-conscious student success strategies in the work of the NSSC.

Building and Activating Networks

The third significant finding that emerged from the data reflects the need for building and activating social networks. The Architects based the Neighborhoods Initiative on breaking down silos to enhance the student experience at Michigan State University. Breaking down silos required people to work across the historical organizational structure. The Architects charged the people working with the Neighborhoods Initiative to convene and lead groups of people who had no formal reporting line to them. Part of the resistance to the Neighborhoods Initiative that has already been described resulted from the organizational culture. The Neighborhoods Initiative had to change this culture in order to achieve the broader goals.

Renn recalled that prior to the Neighborhoods Initiative, the administrative culture did not support cross-department/unit collaboration. She told me the administrative culture seemed to emanate from Lou Anna K. Simon's presidential leadership. Renn said, "The administrative culture at Michigan State under Lou Anna Simon felt to me like people were afraid to have their hands slapped... So, people wouldn't try new things, or when they would do something they wouldn't talk about it." She added, "It seemed like a lot of the lack of communication around these programs, ideas, and concepts was people being afraid of getting in trouble for somebody thinking they were out of their lane." Renn told me that the early work of the Neighborhoods and her work leading the project required the team to build relationships with key stakeholders from across campus.

Similarly, when I talked to Strong about leading the pilot, he recalled the importance of leaving his office and meeting with people. When I asked Strong how he developed the skills to successfully navigate the institution, he told me it took a lot of time and experience. He was working with many faculty members in a residential college before he took on the Neighborhoods Initiative pilot. He told me he used to say to himself, "Everybody around me is a faculty member. I better work my tail off to understand them and the work that they do." He recalled getting frustrated going to national student affairs conferences and seeing multiple sessions focused on garnering faculty engagement. "Seriously? If you want a faculty member to help and support the work you do, then you need to go and work and support and help and understand them first." From this perspective, Strong made an observation. He said, "We get so focused on our daily work and where we're at... there's such a divide. It's like I don't see that much of a divide." This keen understanding, in addition to his credentials, experience, and

positions at the University, allowed him to build bridges between student affairs personnel and academic constituencies.

Bishop succeeded Strong as the leader of the Neighborhoods Initiative. While Bishop did not have a doctorate nor a position that directly interfaced with faculty and academic administration, he brought an important approach to his work. In my interview with Bishop, he told me about his work at other institutions. This work required him to convene groups of people and lead cross-unit collaborations. He told partners that his job was to support the work that they were already doing. Bishop said that this changed the power dynamics, and people were more comfortable engaging in the conversation. He brought this approach with him to his role with the Neighborhoods Initiative. He told me,

We built this distributed network. At the time, I don't think there were more than two other campuses in the country that were taking a similar approach, and we got a lot of press for it, and attention, and it worked shockingly well.

Bishop recalled that his approach seemed to calm some of the unease surrounding the Neighborhoods Initiative. In discussions with partners, he would say, "Look, I don't know much. Fill me in. What's your piece of this? What... do you know needs to happen in this domain? How would you do it if you were in charge?" This earned him enough trust with people to open productive dialogues. He persisted. He knew that if he could get partners to trust him and the Neighborhoods team, he could get the ball rolling in the right direction. He described what he saw as the priority by saying,

Our job was to try to get these folks to trust us. Get their trust, get them to experiment with us, and say look, "We don't know what the long-term is on this, but we'll experiment." And it worked fairly well.

Bishop framed student success work to his partners not in deficit language, but as, “We lace together all of the different entities on campus and try to connect the dots...” This was received well, by most. However, once he had relatively strong networks and buy in from various constituents, there was still resistance to how to accomplish some of the work. Taken together, this theme of findings revealed the importance of individuals’ ability to navigate the institution. The next theme of findings regards how key actors galvanized organizational change.

Galvanizing Organizational Change

A third theme of findings emerged from the data that assists in answering the question, “How did MSU adopt identity-conscious student success strategies to address opportunity gaps?” This theme includes two findings that speak to how organizational change was created. In this section, I lay out how two different mechanisms worked to make substantive changes in the organization which contributed to MSU adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. The first finding shows the culture at MSU around data use and sharing had to change. The second finding shows how key people at the institution served as empowerment agents (Pendakur, 2016).

Changing the Culture around Data

In Chapter 4, I detailed the culture around data use and sharing throughout the time of the Neighborhoods Initiative. As Gore told me in our interview, “When we first started, we didn’t have – and this is going to sound archaic – we had information systems for doing data that were held in different places, and they weren’t necessarily connected.” He and other participants told me how difficult it was to obtain data about students and their success. Youatt said of data sharing, “Well, first of all, there was no sharing. If you knew it, you didn’t share it.” Similarly,

Fritz said, “It was very much a world in which data was power and people hoarded it. It was really weird.”

When the Neighborhoods team began asking questions about student outcomes, the group could not access the necessary data management platforms to answer those questions. Noto said, “There were power dynamics around data ... Different than just people resisting something. It was more than that. There was a fear of loss of their position and fear of learning to do something differently.” Gore told me that from the implementation of the Neighborhoods Initiative pilot, it took about three years to figure out how to coordinate and access necessary data input.

Gore also pointed out that in the beginning of the Initiative, no data analysts worked solely on the Neighborhoods projects. He said, “Again, it happened in departments and in different groups, but not from an institutional perspective.” Royal shared an important perception. She recounted when she came to MSU, the Neighborhoods team was happy to share data with other units, but the sentiment was not reciprocated. Royal said,

I think because the Neighborhoods isn't anything that exists on other campuses, folks saw it is as not a partner, but someone who was coming in to fix them, or tell them what was wrong. And if they shared their data, we would find out what was broken in them, and tell them that they had to fix it. And the reality of it is that's never what the intention was. But now I certainly understand university culture, when you're bringing something new in... maybe you don't understand why or what this is...

Similarly, Youatt said, “Everyone did a little. The residence halls did a survey, but they kept it to themselves. And yeah, student life did almost no assessment. It wasn't part of the larger student life culture traditionally.” She added, though, “And again, this isn't a criticism. There was a time

when our registrar's office was very, very privacy oriented. And part of it came... It was philosophical in part because the attitude was that these [students] are adults.” This philosophical stance from the registrar’s office greatly influenced the overall data sharing culture at the University.

During the pilot of the Neighborhoods Initiative, the team rolled out Mapworks, their own data management system. According to the Skyfactor’s website, Mapworks is a “student success and retention management solution that empowers Colleges and universities to effectively and efficiently impact student success”

(<https://www.skyfactor.com/events/mapworks-improving-student-success-and-retention-9/>).

Rebecca H. Murthum oversaw the data collection process and reported findings from the Mapworks process. She also served as a liaison to Skyfactor, the owner of the MAP-Works platform.

Strong also commented on using Mapworks during the pilot. Using the platform allowed his team to integrate more than one piece of data from more than one location. He said, “Mapworks actually got us residence and academic information, and then we got those reports from professors... that was the first time we were able to combine that information.” With this combined data, Strong and his team could identify a list of students presenting some level of academic distress and reach out to them. Strong described,

An academic advisor may have known something, an RA may have known something, a hall director may have known something... This was the first time without a hard copy file that advisors across programs were able to share information about a student.

The Neighborhoods Initiative tried to address the need to bring multiple data sets together using Mapworks.

When Bishop took the lead of the Neighborhoods Initiative, he inherited Mapworks. However, he also needed more collaboration as he pushed the Neighborhoods agenda forward. Fritz described Bishop's work to me. Fritz said, "So, Kelley [Bishop] kind of saw his role as to go and get that [data]." According to Fritz, Bishop approached others by saying, "Look, I understand that this is your data. We're going to use it for good. You can trust me because we have a relationship... We're just trying to get this wraparound student success." According to Bishop, the reason he took this approach was because of the culture at MSU around student data. He told me, "Looking back, it's kind of a no-brainer. If you know someone's struggling, you go help them... right away. But we had a different approach about privacy..." Many viewed the sharing students' data with other units and departments as a violation of students' privacy. However, building and activating the networks he had allowed Bishop to start to open up the strict culture around data sharing. "The idea was that this thing was going to tip us off to what someone was struggling with, and how some resources we had right there in the Neighborhoods could address that need." The argument for helping students moved the needle on norms around sharing data.

According to Gore, Renn started building out the capacity for the Neighborhoods Initiative to systematically collect, analyze, and report findings from complex sets of data. This aligns with my own experiences with the Neighborhoods Initiative, as I was hired during Renn's tenure as one of multiple graduate assistants for research and assessment. In our interview, I asked Renn about the culture around data at MSU. Noting that the former president had come up through the MSU administration from an institutional research background, she said,

I don't know to what extent it is tied to Lou Anna's presence in particular, but what I observed when I came into the Neighborhoods, and it was consistent with what I

experienced with her leadership style, was there were super tight environments around data, and some of that got reinforced by interpretations of FERPA... You just couldn't do a bunch of stuff.

Renn perceived that keeping people siloed maintained centralized power at the top of the hierarchy. Renn said, "I think that those things created these really difficult things for the NSSC to work on and put us in a really hard position... So, I think the climate around data came from the president, for sure." Having identified the problem and concluding where it was coming from, Renn persisted.

One way Renn built out capacity in the Neighborhoods for people to focus on data analysis was through the reaccreditation process. The Provost appointed Sue Blanshan and a special team to work on the quality initiative portion of MSU's reaccreditation process. That team chose the Neighborhoods Initiative as the quality initiative. Working with this team, Blanshan pushed for the creation of a position that could focus on analyzing data and providing reports that about work happening in Neighborhoods. Long was hired into this position and provided the kind of specialized data analysis and reporting Renn and her team needed to answer the big student success questions posed by the Neighborhoods. In my interview with Long, he told me about how his position was uniquely and strategically placed in the larger MSU organization. This strategic organizational placement enabled long to work around barriers to accessing germane data. Long said, "Because everything was already siloed and there was already this... culture of being separated, they intentionally wrote my position in a way that I reported to both the Provost but also to the V.P. of [auxiliary enterprises]." Long had access to both housing data and academic data in addition to the data collected through Mapworks. In a way, creating this position institutionalized a new approach to data.

Renn identified another important consideration in the changing culture around data at MSU. In August, 2014, Joanna Young was hired as MSU's chief information officer. Young came from the University of New Hampshire where she also served as the chief information officer. Renn told me, "She also pushed for changes in the data climate, as well as the technology climate." A year later, Bethann Cantwell took on the position of director of institutional research. Long believed the culture around data really began to shift at MSU when Cantwell took the lead of Institutional Research. He remarked that she was more amenable to leveraging the resources of Institutional Research to analyze data in ways that better aligned with the needs of the Neighborhoods Initiative. The unit specifically started acknowledging how systems and labels failed to align with students' actual identities. They also acknowledged the need for reports that were more nuanced than the federally required reports they historically produced.

Then came the moment when Renn specifically named opportunity gaps and presented the data that supported those findings. This presentation was described earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 4. This watershed moment was part of the "Changing Rhetoric and Mindsets" finding, but it also directly connects to the changing of climate around data. Sharing her slides, naming the opportunity gaps, and showing the supporting data shifted the understanding of student success work, ultimately reshaping practice. People saw the urgency for removing institutional barriers that reproduced the opportunity gaps for students from minoritized social groups. Along with changing the culture around student success, this moment also shifted the climate around data sharing. Now, it was imperative to operate as one institution to ask and answer the questions to which so many were morally committed.

The climate around data has changed markedly. Under Royal's leadership, she approaches conversations about sharing data in a particular way. She told me,

And so, being honest and consistent, one of the ways that I always pushed colleagues to think about this work when we're talking about Student Success, is the focus needs to be on the institution, right? People aren't broken, the institutions are... And these things are systemic.

The shift in the climate around data is also informed by the shift in rhetoric and mindsets about student success. Royal has harnessed the momentum of these cultural shifts to continue pushing the conversations around student success. Royal went on to say,

In this system where we've created these barriers to student success, or created conditions that are problematic... we don't make it about the individual college, or units, or colleague. It's about all of us doing this work and using the data to inform this work in ways that allow us to be better for students. And so I would say that now the conversations around data are much easier to have.

It is with this approach Royal, as the leader of the NSSC, oversees identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing the opportunity gaps.

Empowerment Agents Create Change

The second finding in this theme focuses on empowerment agents. Empowerment agents are individuals who created organizational change by employing a “reflective, identity-conscious framework that actively [grappled] with the hegemonic nature of power” (Pendakur, 2016, p. 110). According to Pendakur, empowerment agents have a critical network orientation, an asset mindset, are embedded in the community, work from a political worldview, and help students with marginalized identities overcome institutional barriers. Through this study, I identified two empowerment agents: Renn and Royal.

The first person identified in this study as an empowerment agent was Kristen Renn. Renn told me in our interview about her previous work experience and her research agenda. At Brown University, Renn served as an assistant dean of student life. She was the Institution's first LGBT liaison. She and her colleagues did not use the phrase *student success* at that time, but she was essentially engaging in identity-conscious advocacy and educational programming for LGBTQ students. Mentioning identity-conscious advocacy signals her understanding that her work helped students navigate the power structure of the institution. Renn's research agenda aligned with the idea of identity-consciousness. She said, "My own research has been entirely focused on student identities." Her dissertation focused on biracial and multiracial students. Later at Michigan State University, she created and launched the National Study of LGBTQ Student Success. Renn came to the Neighborhoods Initiative with a lot of experience critically examining students' identities situated in the hegemonic power structures of colleges and universities.

Being embedded in the Michigan State University community gave Renn a keen understanding of how to navigate the political terrain. When Renn spoke about naming opportunity gaps and presenting the corresponding data, she knew she was taking a risk. She navigated the political risks of this presentation by framing the opportunity gaps from an asset-minded perspective. She perceived this conversation had not already happened because there was general sense that it could be detrimental to Black students. According to Renn, many people argued, "We don't want to put out the data about these differences because we don't want people saying Black students aren't capable. We don't want people blaming the Black students for the gap." Her asset-minded framing of the opportunity gaps encouraged the audience to focus on changing the Institution rather than operating under the assumption that the problem could be located in marginalized students themselves. It is important to note that as a White faculty

person, Renn was afforded considerable privilege. Her whiteness allowed her to address issues of institutional racism in ways that would pose greater political risk to other people of color. Further, having secured tenure as a faculty member meant that if she expended too much social and political capital, she would still maintain her employment at MSU.

The second individual identified in this study as an empowerment agent was Genyne Royal. Royal just finished her doctoral program at Texas A&M University when she joined the Neighborhoods Initiative team. Her research focused on the role of student affairs professionals in the academic resilience of African American students. Inherent in this topic is the assumption that student affairs professionals can help students succeed at institutions not built or organized for them. She brought this asset-minded approach to the team. Fritz credited Royal with significantly developing the asset-mindedness of the team. As evidenced throughout Chapter 4 and earlier in this chapter, Royal has thought deeply about the hegemony embedded in language and organizational structure.

Royal also drew from her time being embedded in the MSU community. As the leader and convener of the intercultural pillar, she built networks with individuals coordinating identity-based programs as well as with other Black faculty and staff. When Renn presented the opportunity gaps, Royal and other Black faculty and staff knew they needed to act. With a keen sense of the political terrain, she took the lead on implementing identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at helping Black students succeed at MSU. She worked with her colleagues to support these initiatives for Black students. Their work was successful. Pointing to the work they had done when presented with a significant drop in the rates of Black students ending up on academic probation after their first semester, Royal leveraged the success to secure

funding and an institutional home for identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps. The NSSC still houses and funds those efforts.

Chapter Summary and Conclusion

This study illuminated seven different findings that help to answer the question, “How did MSU adopt identity-conscious student success strategies to close opportunity gaps?” I categorized the findings of this study into three themes. The first theme concerns the attitudes and approaches to student success and encompasses two findings. First, before Michigan State University adopted identity-conscious student success strategies, precursors were embedded into the policy and the work of the Neighborhoods Initiative. Overtime, these antecedents were expounded upon and eventually led to the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. Second, significant changes in rhetoric and mindsets began to manifest. Specifically, people begin using asset-minded language rather than deficit language when talking about students. This led to people approaching student success work differently. They shifted their focus from what they saw as inherent deficits with the students to the shortcomings of the institution.

The second theme of findings deals with navigating the institution. The first finding showed key players had a keen awareness of the organization’s power structure. Participants and others understood the organization and the way it had historically operated. The second finding signaled the importance of credibility. The credibility of key actors as well as the credibility of the overall Neighborhoods Initiative was leveraged to push conversations forward. As the Neighborhoods Initiative gained credibility, the team initiated a grass-roots movement shifting how the University community saw student success and opportunity gaps. The third finding in this theme showed that the networks people built and activated served as loci for institutional

change. Combined with a deep understanding of the organization and the accumulating credibility of the Neighborhoods Initiative and those working on the team, participants and others were able to implement the incremental organizational changes that led to the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies.

The third theme of findings in this study focused on the watershed moments in which certain individuals galvanized change at the institutional level. First, changing the culture around data sharing and use allowed Renn to name the opportunity gaps and present the supporting evidence. MSU did not embody a data sharing culture. This prevented a coordinated approach to identifying institutional barriers to student success. However, over time, key actors facilitated the necessary shift in data culture that allowed for the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. The second finding in this theme identified specific people as empowerment agents. The two individuals identified in this study as empowerment agents were Renn and Royal. These two individuals had a critical network orientation, an asset-minded approach, were embedded in the community, worked from a political worldview, and helped students with marginalized identities overcome institutional barriers.

CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS, PRACTITIONERS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined how an institution, Michigan State University, adopted identity-conscious student success strategies to address opportunity gaps. Using both the vertical and transversal axes of Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach, I examined the concept of identity-conscious student success strategies through historic, political, cultural, and economic lenses. Following the idea of identity-conscious student success strategies through time, politics, culture, and economics, I created a narrative that illuminated the moments and places where the concept made appearances. Seven findings emerged from the data analysis. This chapter includes a discussion of the implications arising from the findings of this study. First, I describe four organizational-level implications. Then, I describe the two implications for student success practitioners advocating for the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. Finally, I provide a description of four lines of inquiry for future research.

Implications for Organizations

The findings from this study provide three implications to consider at the organizational level. The first implication requires an organization to identify and build on antecedents of, or precursors to identity-conscious student success strategies. The second implication for consideration at the organizational level is to strategically build the credibility of identity-conscious student success programs and initiatives. The third implication calls for organizations to identify and support empowerment agents working to create an appropriate context for the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. Fourth, organizations should seek to thoroughly understand the institutional culture around data to leverage complex, nuanced understandings of existing opportunity gaps. An institution or organization intending on adopting

identity-conscious student success strategies can use these four implications to further their agenda.

Building on Antecedents of Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies

This study found that leaders at Michigan State University identified antecedents to identity-conscious student success strategies and built on them to eventually arrive at adopting such educational interventions. As evidenced in Chapter 5, this study identified multiple actors who brought with them to the Neighborhoods Initiative and the NSSC a deep understanding of college student identity development. They also understood the large-scale student success initiatives already operating at MSU. Using the existing infrastructure, these individuals were able to build out student success strategies focused on specific groups of students. Pointing to the Institution's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion created the opportunity for conversations to focus on students from minoritized social groups who experience opportunity gaps.

Organizations looking to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies should rely on people who understand both college student identity development as well as student success strategies. Organizations should support individuals with the opportunity to facilitate rich, robust campus conversations around identity-conscious student success strategies and approaches. College and university leaders should leverage their institution's commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Further, organizational leaders should foster partnerships between individuals and units engaged in student success work as well as those individuals and units participating in identity-development work. Building on these precursors can further the organization's goal of adopting identity-conscious student success strategies.

Strategically Use and Build Credibility

This study found that in the context of adopting identity-conscious student success strategies, credibility mattered a great deal. Throughout this study, participants discussed credibility in two ways. First, participants spoke of individuals who brought credibility with them to the Neighborhoods Initiative and the NSSC. Key actors amassed their credibility through their previous work experiences, their research agendas, and their ability to bring people from many siloed units together to work toward the mission of the Neighborhoods Initiative. Second, participants spoke of the credibility of the Neighborhoods Initiative. While the Neighborhoods Initiative lacked wide support in the early stages, the initiative gained credibility through public support from executive-level leadership and from credible individuals leading the Neighborhoods team. This implies organizations in the process of adopting identity-conscious student success interventions need to strategically lend credibility to the initiative to garner the necessary institutional approval.

Scholarship on leadership and organizational change in higher education support the need to strategically use and build credibility when adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Bryman (2007) conducted a review of literature related to effective leadership in higher education. Bryman found multiple scholars pointing to credibility as a necessary component of effective leadership in higher education (Benoit & Graham, 2005; Bland et al., 2005; Brown & Moshavi, 2002; Creswell et al., 1990; Creswell, & Brown, 1992; Gordon et al., 1991; Harris et al., 2004; Stark et al., 2002;). Bolden et al. (2008) asserted “the legitimacy of leadership is crucially bound up with perceptions of credibility with the relevant field, and credibility is a ‘currency’ that is negotiated and secured at a group level” (p. 372). Institutions then, can distribute, allocate, and leverage credibility conceptualized as social currency to create

the institutional change needed to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies. Further, Hofmeyer et al. (2015) wrote, “Leaders need to understand how the organization works to have: *institutional credibility..., be aware of power relations..., know their staff...,* and know how to lead staff and the organization towards a common vision” (p. 184). Most of this scholarship described the credibility of leaders of academic departments or units, but the body of literature still speaks to a larger culture embedded in institutions of higher education. Kouzes and Posner (2012) provided a concise but important point: “Competence is a key aspect of credibility” (p. 1).

Given the findings and the supporting literature, organizations should consider taking a few actions. First, if an institution aims to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies, executive-level leadership should publicly support the agenda. At Michigan State University, two vice presidents and the provost distributed a memorandum of support to the entire University community. Leaders of institutions can add credibility to the project of adopting identity-conscious student success strategies by explicitly publicizing their support, expectations, and vision. Second, those leading the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies should bring with them significant credibility, and they should maintain and build that institutional credibility throughout the process. Leaders should be chosen based on their ability to build bridges between different silos across the campus. Leaders with this quality could have amassed credibility through their history of embeddedness in the campus community, formal positions they have held at the institution, or the contributions their research has made to relevant scholarship.

Support Empowerment Agents

This study found empowerment agents create the type of institutional change required for an organization to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies. Through analyzing the

data, the study identified three empowerment agents at Michigan State University. These individuals leveraged their positions, expertise, and social capital to work against the institutional factors impeding the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. At some point, each of these individuals' work was seen and supported by leaders at the University. This support ushered in Michigan State University's adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies.

Bourdieu (1986) described a theory of social capital. Bourdieu asserted bias in an institution rewards those in dominant groups while devaluing those in minoritized groups. This system of rewards and punishment ultimately reproduces inequities through institutional systems. Scholars have applied this theory to understanding educational gaps that exist by race, gender, and socioeconomic background (Lareau, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). Stanton-Salazar (2011) used Bourdieu's social capital theory to better understand empowerment agents. Empowerment agents are "individuals who leverage their positions and capacities to either directly transmit or negotiate access to highly prized, key forms of institutional resources, support, and opportunities while concurrently working to alter the institution from the inside" (Pendakur, 2016, p. 112). Similarly, Bensimon (2007) described such individuals as those who use their knowledge and capital to assist marginalized students in navigating complex institutions. Further, according to Pendakur (2016), "Because of the explicit and strategic nature of empowerment agents—their consciousness regarding structural inequity and their actions to counterbalance inequity—their work with minority youth becomes counterhegemonic" (p. 113).

The findings from this study in conjunction with the supporting literature about empowerment agents imply organizations intending to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies should identify and support empowerment agents. Upper-level administration should

publicly support the work of empowerment agents and their work for equity at the institution, as was the case with Provost Kim Wilcox's support of Youatt. Universities can also strategically place empowerment agents as leaders of the movement to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies, like the appointment of Renn to lead the Neighborhoods Initiative. Institutions should also allocate appropriate amounts of funding for empowerment agents' work, similar to when the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education provided substantial financial resources to Royal's identity-conscious student success work. When an institution supports empowerment agents, those individuals can create the organizational environment necessary for adopting identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps for marginalized students.

Use the Data

Participants in this study frequently pointed to how the culture around data use and sharing changed over time in a way that promoted the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies at Michigan State University. This finding showed in the nascent stages of the Neighborhoods Initiative, data was housed in various departments across campus. Further, the institutional culture discouraged data sharing. Over time, though, the organizational culture changed to one that promoted data sharing. As the culture changed, empowerment agents and others doing student success work analyzed institutional data in new ways, ultimately illuminating opportunity gaps experienced by students from marginalized social groups. When leaders shared these more nuanced interpretations of the data analyses, they shifted how the campus community thought about student success. This shift supported the Michigan State University's adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies.

Pendakur (2016a) explained how data could be leveraged to make a compelling case for institutional change. Pendakur noted that every institution of higher education that receives federal financial aid reports retention and graduation rates to the U.S. Department of Education. While this information serves as a baseline for understanding student success at a particular institution, it generally fails to spur the kind of organizational change necessary for adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Pendakur went on to emphasize the importance of campus's institutional research departments. These departments can provide "access to the raw data that can be mined to tell a much more compelling story about the role of identity" at their institutions (Pendakur, 2016a, p. 151). He also described how empowerment agents can use data to work towards closing opportunity gaps. "Successful change agents need to be able to move beyond anecdotes toward harnessing local institutional data, along with supportive national research, to make compelling cases for institutional transformation" (Pendakur, 2016a, p. 153).

The findings from this study and Pendakur's (2016) discussion of data usage imply organizations ought to leverage data to create the institutional change necessary for adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. If a university has a culture that prohibits data sharing and collaborative analysis, such as the case of MSU, then the organization can employ specific strategies to change that culture. For example, data analyst positions that have dual reporting lines could be created, like Long's position. The organization should also hire chief information officers and directors of institutional research who value and prioritize a collaborative approach to data use and analysis. Once a collaborative approach to data use and analysis has been achieved, leaders should leverage nuanced data analysis to name opportunity gaps. Doing so will shift how the campus community understands and approaches student success, as was the case with Renn's presentation of opportunity gaps and the corresponding

data. Organizations ought to make use of these strategies to create an institutional context primed for adopting identity-conscious student success strategies.

Implications for Student Success Practitioners

The findings from this study point toward two implications for practitioners to consider. The first implication requires student success practitioners to build and activate networks on campus to develop support for adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. The second implication coming from this study calls for student success practitioners to develop asset-minded approaches to their work and rhetoric. Student success practitioners who effectively build and activate networks on campus and utilize asset-minded approaches and rhetoric can create conditions appropriate for the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches.

Build and Activate Networks

A major finding from this study showed participants built and activated social networks on campus which advanced efforts in adopting identity-conscious student success strategies at Michigan State University. At Michigan State University, the Architects built the Neighborhoods Initiative to work in a way that ignored institutional silos. Many of the participants actively engaged with people in other departments and divisions to build networks. Individuals activated these networks to draw from expertise across the university ultimately adding incremental progress to the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies at MSU.

Similar to the discussion on supporting empowerment agents, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital serves as foundational scholarship supporting the building and activating of networks to ensure the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies. An institution's power structure relies on individuals accumulating and expending social capital in all organizational functions. To address opportunity gaps experienced by students from

marginalized social groups in an organization built on structural inequity, student success practitioners can effectively cultivate and activate networks using the currency of social and cultural capital (Pendakur, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2004). Pendakur (2016) wrote,

The network orientation of a successful empowerment agent is centered on the critical idea that empowering marginalized students is not accomplished only through the actions of an individual but is built in concert with actors, resources, and support mechanisms embedded in their own social networks and bridging functions (p. 112).

Similarly, Bolden et al. wrote,

Universities (like many organisations) usually attempt to resolve their problems either by focusing on key individuals or by restructuring, less often reflecting on the forces that connect people and enable them to work together in pursuit of a common aim. (p. 372)

The authors went on to assert individuals must understand notions of social capital so they may navigate the organizational power structure, build on bonds that bridge various groups of people, and accomplish their shared vision.

The findings from this study along with the supporting scholarship imply student success practitioners should build and activate social networks on campus to further the process of adopting identity-conscious approach to student success work. Much like the early work of those in the Neighborhoods Initiative, the project required the team to build relationships with key stakeholders from across campus. In fact, to achieve the mission and vision of the Neighborhoods Initiative, leaders built and mobilized networks to combat skepticism and resistance. Practitioners should rely on their networks to further conversations about identity-conscious student success strategies. As attitudes change and knowledge spreads through the

network, practitioners can play an important role in creating an institutional context amenable to adopting identity-conscious approaches to student success work.

Employ Asset Mindsets and Rhetoric

This study found that deficit mindsets or cultural deficit thinking and rhetoric impeded the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches at Michigan State University. Facilitating robust campus conversations about deficit thinking and working to change common deficit rhetoric primed the campus community to address opportunity gaps through removing institutional barriers encountered by marginalized students rather than blaming those marginalized students for disparities in student success metrics. Many individuals worked to change the approaches taken up by student success practitioners. As this shared understanding of student success work spread throughout the campus community, Michigan State University was better positioned to adopt identity-conscious approaches to student success work.

Deficit theories, deficit thinking, and deficit language place blame on students from marginalized social groups for not achieving certain academic outcomes. Blaming the student, rather than acknowledging the institution's role in inequitably distributing opportunities to succeed, perpetuates harm (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Harper, 2014, 2016; Harper et al., 2009; Martin et al., 2018; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Pendakur, 2016a, 2016b; Sayani, 2014; Smit, 2012; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006; Yosso, 2002). As a result of deficit thinking, the rhetoric on many campuses focuses on achievement gaps, essentially blaming marginalized groups of students for failing to achieve specific academic outcomes. As Harper (2016) wrote, "Conversations about the so-called achievement gap tend to blame those who are persistently underserved for their bad academic performance outcomes... In this way, it is not about an achievement gap; rather, it is about the inequitable distribution of opportunities" (p. ix). To

combat the negative results of deficit thinking, scholars call for a shift to asset-minded approaches and rhetoric. Shifting from using terms like *achievement gaps* to *opportunity gaps* reflects the adoption of an asset-minded approach (Harper et al., 2009; Milner, 2012; Pitre, 2014). Similarly, Weiner (2006) wrote about the possibilities of challenging deficit thinking: “Invariably this illuminates possibilities that have eluded us, including strategies that focus on student strengths” (p. 3).

This finding and the aforementioned scholarship imply student success practitioners ought to develop and employ asset-minded approaches, rhetoric, and practices. Using data to specifically identify and name disparities in educational outcomes, student success practitioners should frame these disparities as opportunity gaps, much like Renn. In these campus conversations, explicitly framing these differences as opportunity gaps helps others focus on institutional barriers and inequities rather than blaming those groups of students for the disparities. Student success practitioners should also resist using program names as coded language to refer to marginalized students, much like the CAAP program at Michigan State University. This coded language along with deficit thinking attach stigma to those programs and the students they were intended to serve. Using asset-minded rhetoric encourages others to apply asset-minded approaches to student success work. This ultimately leads the campus community to address opportunity gaps through the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies.

Implications for Future Research

This study contributes to the knowledge and scholarship regarding how institutions adopt identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps experienced by minoritized students. The results of this study also raise four important lines of inquiry for future research. First, this study examined how one institution adopted identity-conscious student

success strategies. Future research should employ Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) horizontal comparative axis to examine multiple institutions of various types to create a generalizable model for the adoption identity-conscious student success strategies. Second, this study examined the uptake of identity-conscious approaches to student success. Future research should examine how institutions sustain this approach. Third, this study did not examine the efficacy of adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Future research ought to focus on the effectiveness of adopting identity-conscious student success strategies in closing opportunity gaps for marginalized students. Fourth, future research should examine more deeply the risks associated with advocating for the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies and how practitioners can avoid and mitigate those dangers.

A Generalizable Model for Adopting Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies

This study employed a vertical and transversal case study approach, a design informed by Bartlett and Vavrus's (2017) comparative case study approach to illuminate how one institution adopted identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps experienced by minoritized students. Specifically, this study used the vertical and transversal axes of the CCS approach. Future studies should employ a CCS approach that includes the horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes to examine several other institutions' efforts to adopt identity-conscious student success strategies. Researchers should examine multiple institutions of various types to better understand the nuances that affect the uptake of identity-conscious student success strategies. After completing many comparative case studies of various types of institutions using the horizontal, vertical, and transversal axes, researchers should create guides for other institutions to use in their own adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches. How does adoption of identity-conscious approaches at a small, private, liberal arts

institution differ from the adoption at a large, public, research-focused university? Such a comparison could facilitate the creation of a generalizable model for other institutions adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. This model could provide an outline of action items institutions might employ to adopt identity-conscious approaches to student success, while also highlighting important insights into the most appropriate strategies for specific institutional types.

An Examination of Maintaining Identity-Conscious Student Success Approaches

This study examined the process of adopting identity-conscious approaches to close opportunity gaps. As described earlier, this process takes place in an institutional context that embodies and continuously instantiates normative power structures (Bourdieu, 1986). Such systems of power reward dominant narratives and ideology while devaluing and marginalizing minoritized experiences. Adopting identity-conscious student success strategies represents the first phase of an ongoing counterhegemonic effort (Pendakur, 2016a, 2016b). Since systems of power represent an impeding force against counterhegemonic ideas like identity-conscious student success strategies, future research should focus on how institutions maintain and continue to grow identity-conscious student success strategies. This inquiry could provide scholars and student success practitioners with an understanding of how institutions protect and support this work.

Understanding the Effectiveness of Adopting Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies in Closing Opportunity Gaps

This study examined how an institution adopted identity-conscious student success strategies but did not consider the efficacy of this uptake in closing opportunity gaps. While some research has shown the effectiveness of specific identity-conscious student success

interventions and programs (Arzuga, 2016; Brown & Stewart, 2016; Furr, 2016; Mata & Bobb, 2016; Morales & Mata, 2016; Munin & Enos, 2016), future research should examine the relationship between adopting identity-conscious student success strategies at the institutional level and the effect those strategies have on opportunity gaps. Such an examination would provide a more thorough understanding of how institutions can close opportunity gaps for minoritized students.

A Risk Assessment for Empowerment Agents

Throughout this study, multiple participants expressed an awareness that advocating for identity-conscious student success strategies was associated with a certain amount of risk. Renn weighed the risks of naming the opportunity gaps experienced by marginalized students at MSU. Royal engaged in identity-conscious work for Black students, but knew she faced a certain level of risk because of the institutional context. Future research should examine the various risks empowerment agents face in advocating for the adoption of identity-conscious work. This research would provide student success practitioners with a realistic assessment of the risk they would assume in advocating for the adoption of identity-conscious approaches at their own campus. It might also provide guidance for how student success practitioners can avoid or mitigate those risks.

Chapter Summary and Conclusion

Drawing from the findings of this study, I outlined implications for organizations, student success practitioners, and future research related to adopting identity-conscious student success approaches as a strategy to close opportunity gaps for marginalized students. At the organizational level, I outlined four implications. First, organizations must identify and build on antecedents to identity-conscious student success strategies. Second, organizations can

strategically use and build credibility to support institutional efforts to adopt identity-conscious student success approaches. Third, organizations should identify and support empowerment agents who can help shift the campus toward adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Fourth, organizations should create a culture of collaboration around data use and analysis, which ultimately leads the campus community to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of existing opportunity gaps.

Following the discussion of the organizational-level implications, I outlined two implications for student success practitioners. Student success practitioners should build and activate social networks of campus partners to garner community endorsement for adopting identity-conscious student success approaches. Second, student success practitioners should develop and employ asset-minded approaches and rhetoric to challenge deficit thinking and avoid blaming marginalized students for opportunity gaps. Doing so will refocus attention on the culpability of the institution in creating and perpetuating opportunity gaps. Refocusing attention on the institution will allow student success practitioners to address institutional inequities and impediments to marginalized students' success.

Finally, I provided a description of four lines of future inquiry for higher education researchers to consider. First, higher education researchers should study the adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies at multiple institutions to create a generalizable model. This model could be used by leaders at various types of institutions to guide the process of adopting identity-conscious student success approaches. Second, future research should examine how institutions maintain and build on identity-conscious student success approaches once they have been adopted. Third, higher education researchers should focus on the effectiveness of institution-wide adoption of identity-conscious student success strategies in closing opportunity

gaps. Fourth, an examination of the risk empowerment agents assume when advocating for the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches can provide strategies for avoiding and mitigating those factors.

Dissertation Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how one institution, Michigan State University, adopted identity-conscious student success strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps. In Chapter 1, I introduced this study by talking about three major terms and concepts: Deficit thinking, opportunity gaps, and identity-conscious student success strategies. Then, I outlined the purpose of this study and the overarching research question. Finally, I provided an argument for the significance of this study.

In Chapter 2, I reviewed relevant literature to this study. First, I discussed the current landscape of undergraduate student success in higher education in the United States. Then, I provided a more detailed discussion of opportunity gaps and identity-conscious student success strategies. Throughout Chapter 2, I provided the scholarly context for my study.

Chapter 3 provided a discussion of the methods I used in my study. First, I discussed my philosophical grounding, pragmatism. Then, I provided a much deeper discussion of the design of my study, the Vertical and Transversal Case Study approach. Then, I discussed the site I selected, Michigan State University and the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative. Then I provided a description of how I sampled participants in this study. Following this section, I discussed how I collected and analyzed data. I also provided a rich discussion of my positionality and how employed reflexivity throughout this study. In addition, I outlined the limitations of this study and how I ensured rigor and trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 includes an historical narrative describing the contextual factors that led the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative to take up identity-conscious student success strategies. I created this narrative after I analyzed the data, both the data I collected during interviews with participants and the documents and other media items. The narrative tells how the Neighborhoods Initiative began, the evolution of the Neighborhoods Initiative over time, how individuals in the unit eventually implemented and sustained identity-conscious student success strategies.

In Chapter 5, I outlined the major findings that emerged from this study. First, there were two findings that dealt with attitudes and approaches to student success. First, participants and those involved in with the Neighborhoods Initiative over time identified and built on precursors to identity-conscious student success strategies. Also, throughout the time of the Neighborhoods Initiative, there were significant shifts in community members' mindsets and rhetoric related to student success. There were also three findings that emerged dealing with how individuals navigated the institution. First, individuals understood their institutional context. Specifically, the Architects of the Neighborhoods Initiative strategically refrained from implementing the concept with too much structure. This allowed for growth and evolution. Second, the credibility of the project was boosted by the credibility of those brought in to work on the project. Third, individuals built and effectively activated networks of key partners to further the agenda of the Neighborhoods Initiative. Finally, there were two findings that related to how individuals galvanized organizational change. First, the institution changed the culture around data by strategically creating positions and choosing people to fill relevant positions. Second, empowerment agents effectively navigated their context to create changes that eventually led to the implementation of identity-conscious student success strategies.

Finally, Chapter 6 outlined implications for organizations, practitioners, and future research. Organizations should consider four strategies. First, they should identify and build on antecedents of identity-conscious student success strategies. Organizations should also strategically use and build credibility for their efforts in implementing identity-conscious student success strategies. Also, organizations need to make strategic and innovative use of data to tell nuanced stories and influence the institutional narrative around student success. Fourth, organizations should identify and support empowerment agents. Student success practitioners should consider two strategies when adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. First, they should build and activate networks of key partners to create investment. They should also intentionally employ asset mindsets and asset-minded rhetoric. Future research should aim to create a generalizable model for adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Other research should examine how institutions maintain identity-conscious student success approaches. Future research should also seek to understand the effectiveness of adopting identity-conscious student success strategies. Finally, future research should also seek to understand how empowerment agents can effectively assess risk and how they can institutionally navigate those risks.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Initial Communication with Participants

Dear [Participant's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I'm writing to invite you to participate in my dissertation study and I am hoping you would be able and willing to participate.

The working title of my study is "Adopting Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies: A Vertical Case Study." Through my study, I will examine the historical, cultural, political and economic factors that have led to the adoption of Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies at MSU. Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies refer to those educational interventions and programs designed to increase the educational outcomes of particular groups of students based on a specific social identity. In order to complete this study, I will interview individuals who have or have had some connection to MSU's Neighborhoods, the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC), or the office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education (APUE).

If you choose to accept this invitation to participate, I would need to meet with you via Zoom for a one hour interview. Upon completion of the interview, I will have our conversation transcribed. Then, I will send you the transcript for you to review for accuracy.

If you are able and willing to participate, could you please respond with some dates and times over the next couple of weeks so I can schedule the interview?

Thank you for your time and consideration!

Best wishes,
Scotty

[Professional Signature]

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Study Title:

Adopting Identity-Conscious Student Success Strategies to Close Opportunity Gaps: A Vertical Case Study

Researcher and Title:

Scotty M. Secrist, HALE Doctoral Candidate, Neighborhood Director for Student Success

Department and Institution:

Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, College of Education, Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative, Michigan State University

Contact Information:

secrists@msu.edu, (574) 780-1750

Sponsor:

BRIEF SUMMARY

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation including why you might or might not want to participate, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to discuss and ask the researchers any questions you may have.

You are being asked to participate in a research study aimed at understanding the context in which MSU adopted identity-conscious student success strategies to close opportunity gaps for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Your participation in this study will take about 1.5 hours. You will be asked to answer a series of questions during an interview. After the interview, I will provide you with either a transcript of our conversation or detailed notes about our conversation. You would then review this information for accuracy and also let me know if there is anything that you would not want the researchers to share.

The most likely risks of participating in this study are minimal. Because the site and participant selection are so limited in scope, I will use identifying information in the final write up when appropriate. However, the researchers will consistently consult with each participant to ensure that information they provide is deemed acceptable to share in the final write up. Any information you do not want shared will either be masked or eliminated entirely.

You will not directly benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding of how other institutions can adopt identity-conscious student success strategies to address opportunity gaps for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of the context that led to MSU adopting identity-conscious student success strategies to address opportunity gaps experienced

by undergraduate students of color and undergraduate students from low-income backgrounds. Throughout this project, the researcher will collect data that speaks to the history of the Neighborhoods at MSU, the organizational context in which student success work has proceeded since the implementation of the Neighborhoods, the adoption of identity-conscious student success approaches to address opportunity gaps, the broader political and economic climate in which organizational decisions were made, and the experiences of individuals implementing this work at various levels of the organization.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO

You are invited to participate in an interview. The interview will last approximately one hour. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your affiliation with Michigan State University, your role in the Neighborhoods, and your understanding of the historical, political, economic, and localized context in which identity-conscious student success approaches were adopted.

Following your interview, I will send you an electronic copy of either a transcript or very detailed notes of our conversation. I will then ask you to read through the document to ensure that I have accurately represented your responses. If there is any information that you wish not to be included or identified with you, we will work together to either mask it in a way that you deem appropriate or to remove it from the final write up entirely.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The researchers will work to maintain your privacy and confidentiality. However, the site (Michigan State University) and departments/units (e.g., The Neighborhoods, the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative, the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education) will be identified in the final write up of this study. This means that it is possible for individuals with knowledge of undergraduate student success work may be able to identify you. The researchers will only use your name or job title with your consent. If you wish, the researchers will omit or mask to the best of the researchers' ability any information you do not want identified.

During the interview, the researchers will record the conversation. These audio recordings will be stored on a password protected computer. Only the primary researchers will have access to this data. These data will be kept for 1 year following the publication of the final write up of this study. Following this period of time, the audio recording files will be deleted.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW *(This is a required element of consent)*

You have the right to say no to participate in the research. You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive. You also have the right to participate in the interview and answer some questions while refusing to answer other questions.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

There are no costs or compensation associated with participating in this study.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of this research project will be provided to the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative, the office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, and all participants.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Your name and job titles collected as part of the research, even if information that identifies you is removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researchers (Scotty M. Secrist; 241 Brody Rd W, East Lansing, MI 48825; secrists@msu.edu; (574) 780-1750 or Kristen Renn; 620 Farm Lane, 425 Erickson, East Lansing, MI 48824; (517) 353-5979).

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.

You indicate that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study by proceeding with the interview.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Do you agree to allow your identity to be disclosed in reports and presentations?

☐ Yes ☐ No (As recorded in the interview)

Do you agree to allow audiotaping/videotaping of the interview?

☐ Yes ☐ No (As recorded in the interview)

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Participants: Participants will be identified and selected based on their involvement with the Neighborhoods at MSU, the Neighborhood Student Success Collaborative (NSSC), and/or the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education (APUE)

Estimated Duration of Interview: 45 to 60 minutes.

Script prior to interview: Thank you so much for being willing to participate in this interview for my study. As I mentioned to you in my introductory email, my study seeks to understand the how the NSSC and APUE have adopted identity-conscious student success strategies. The interview is meant to last approximately 45 to 60 minutes, during which time I will be asking you questions about your experiences working in the NSSC or APUE and how you have adopted an identity-conscious student success approach.

Before we start, though, I want to go over the consent form.

[Review the consent form]

Just to confirm, do you still approve of me recording our conversation today?

If yes: Thank you. Please let me know if at any point during the interview if you would like me to stop recording or if you would like something you said kept off the record.

If no: Thank you for still agreeing to do the interview. I will only take notes during our conversation. If there is anything you say that you do not want me to note, please let me know and I will be sure to strike that from my records.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions for me?

If you have any questions during the interview, please feel free to stop me and we can address them as they arise.

Questions:

Background

- What is your current position in the NSSC or APUE?
- When did you start working in the NSSC or APUE?
- When did you start working at MSU?
- How would you describe identity-conscious student success work?
 - How do you incorporate identity-conscious student success strategies in your current role?
- How has NSSC and APUE viewed student success since you've been here?
 - How have the units evolved to adopting identity-conscious student success work in addressing opportunity gaps?

Role and Job Responsibilities

- How would you describe your role in APUE?
- What are your primary responsibilities?
- How do you see your role in relation to closing the opportunity gaps at MSU?

Identity-conscious Student Success Approach

- How would you describe an identity-conscious student success approach?
- How have you learned about identity-conscious student success approaches?
 - Who has taught you about identity-conscious strategies?
 - Which scholars and researchers have enhanced the ways you understand identity-conscious student success work?
 - How do you inform or teach others about identity-conscious student success work?
- In your role, do you do any identity-conscious student success work?
 - If so, what are the social identities of the students you are serving?
 - What specific programs or initiatives do you lead that incorporate an identity-conscious student success approach?
 - How did you design these programs or initiatives so that they are identity-conscious?
- What other positions in APUE and the NSSC are charged with doing identity-conscious student success work?
 - What are the specific programs or initiatives those roles oversee?
 - What are the specific social identities of the students they are serving?
- Would you say most or all of the NSSC and APUE does identity-conscious student success work?
 - If yes, describe how most or all of the NSSC and APUE staff feel about the importance of identity-conscious student success work.
 - How do you think that most or all of the people in the NSSC and APUE have come to realize the importance of identity-conscious student success work?
 - If no, please elaborate on why you think that is.
 - Should most or all of the NSSC and APUE be doing identity-conscious student success work? Why or why not?
 - What do you think is keeping most or all of the NSSC and APUE from adopting an identity-conscious student success approach?
 - Who is the most influential person when it comes to pushing an identity-conscious student success approach forward in APUE?

The History:

- Please describe your perception of why the Neighborhoods initiative was started at MSU.
 - Who were the major players?
 - What was the context that facilitated these major players to create the Neighborhoods initiative?
 - How has the composition of the Neighborhoods changed over time?
 - What resistance has there been?
 - Has this resistance hindered or helped addressing opportunity gaps?

- How so?
- How would you describe the NSSC and APUE now, in terms of identity-conscious student success strategies?

Before we conclude the interviews, is there anything you would like to share that you did have the opportunity to address during the interview? Thank you again, for participating!

Appendix D: College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP)

College Achievement Admissions Program (CAAP)

The Office of Supportive Services (OSS) is a multifaceted holistic retention initiative designed to address the needs of College Achievement Admission Program (CAAP) students; first generation and low income students, and students who meet other participant criteria. Through the collaborative efforts of MSU faculty and staff, the Supportive Services personnel implements an intensive and comprehensive university-wide service. Students have access to program services from the time they enter the university, through graduation and placement into graduate school. The primary goal of OSS is to assist in the increase of retention rates, facilitate academic successes and enhance graduation rates among program participants. This is accomplished by offering a variety of services which foster student academic achievement, self-confidence and leadership.

In order to provide program services that satisfy student needs and are of high quality, we have in place a diverse staff of professionals. The composition of the staff is reflective of our student composition and the University's commitment to diversity! The Academic Specialist staff is assigned to serve in a liaison capacity to the following colleges.

Academic Specialists

Eric Thomas

- Students (A-D)
- Advising Majors in Colleges of (Education, James Madison, and Social Science Science)
- email thoma507@msu.edu

Liliana Mina

- Students (E-I)
- Advising Majors in Colleges of (Agriculture and Natural Resources, and Engineering, Asian Pacific American Liaison)
- email mina@msu.edu

Todd McHerron/Danielle Flores

- Students (J-N)
- Advising Majors in Colleges of (Natural Science/Lyman Briggs, Nursing, Pre-Veterinary, UUD/No Preference, and Chicano/Latino Liaison)
- email floresd3@msu.edu

Betty J. Sanford

- Students (O-Q)
- email sanford@msu.edu

Tammy (Norman) Reed

- Students (R-Z)
- Advising Majors in Colleges of (Arts & Letters, Business, and Communications)
- email normant@msu.edu

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