STUDENT SUCCESS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES:
HOW RETENTION, GRADUATION, DEGREE CONFERRAL, AND ACADEMIC
IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES SUPPORT STUDENTS

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Gabriel, Madison, Lillian, and Olivia. I hope you all chase your dreams and continue to always be learning.
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ABSTRACT

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Michael A. Cioce

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*Student success* is a term that has gained a lot of notoriety within higher education discourse. As measured by the graduation rates that institutions of higher education are required to report on an annual basis, one chapter of the story on how well students and colleges are doing on the college completion agenda is revealed. As graduation and student success accountability measures are put in place, the changes institutions are implementing to acknowledge and adapt their campus practices and shift more focus from access to completion are worthy of further review. This qualitative case study examines what three Aspen Institute Prize for Community College Excellence finalists have incorporated on their campuses that they believe have been instrumental in moving the needle on student success. The purpose of this study is to closely examine these institutions and to explore practices and policy change adoption that has influenced overall graduation rate improvements. This research relies on Kezar’s (2014) work on organizational change as the theoretical framework for the numerous models and theories that help understand and explain change. The findings of this study reveal the significance of institutional support, organizational commitment, and approaches to change that are effective and have positive impacts on campus culture as it relates to
student completion. Institutional leaders can use these findings when addressing high-impact approaches if they are considering any policy or program adoption and the effects these have on community college campuses within higher education.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Background

Community colleges in the United States have never been more in the spotlight than in the last several years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES, 2017) most recent analysis of college year-round enrollment (as opposed to fall enrollment only), the total number of students who enroll in public 2-year colleges is representative of the second largest sector within higher education. The analysis indicates that, in 2015-2016, 8.9 million undergraduates were enrolled in public 2-year colleges, which signified 33.8% of all students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (NCES, 2017). In Fall 2016, nearly 5.8 million students were enrolled in public, 2-year colleges, which was down from the 6.2 million who were enrolled in Fall 2015 (NCES, 2017). According to the NCES (2017), while the community college enrollment levels had decreased during this period, overall fall enrollment was also down in degree-granting postsecondary institutions from 19.9 million students to 19.8 million.

For these public, 2-year institutions of higher education, there are often many reasons why students choose to ultimately enroll; as such, it becomes a difficult task to then measure these institutions on educational outcomes. Although accountability within higher education has placed focus on some of these metrics, such as overall degree attainment, transfer rates to 4-year institutions, and even overall credit accumulation attempt, comparing schools and identifying reasons behind higher (or lower) rates has become a conundrum. Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, and Leinbach (2008) attempted to review institutional characteristics over which either colleges or policymakers have control to see if the inputs influenced the outputs. The inputs examined included: (a) size
of the college size; (b) tuition levels; (c) the use of part-time faculty; (d) overall expenditures per student; (d) the distribution of those expenditures among possible functions, such as instruction, administration, and student services; (e) the extent to which the college focuses on certificates as opposed to associate's degrees; and (f) the level of financial aid (Calcagno et al., 2008). From a predictive perspective, these inputs make sense, but to see what is really separating the high-achieving institutions from the rest requires a look at the outcomes.

With a direct correlation between community college capacity and the need for a highly developed workforce being viewed as vital to increases in degree attainment figures, community colleges are looked at as being central to this conversation. For community colleges to merely enroll students is not the solution, so the focus has shifted to students completing certificates and associate’s degrees and to retention and persistence initiatives being the vehicles to achieve increased numbers of graduates (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). It is the methods institutions are employing that can have the greatest influence on completion. Much of the work community colleges have tried or are currently using to improve graduation rates involve initiatives that serve or are aimed at smaller cohorts of students (e.g., athletes, first-generation students) or those who are receiving some form of grant funding (Price & Tovar, 2014). Jenkins (2011) points out that significant increases to the completion numbers at community colleges require institution-wide reform on policies and practices, as opposed to the cohort-based adoption of small-scale programming, such as learning communities, supplemental instruction, and mentoring programs, since these are not as productive when conducted outside of college-wide reform.
Accountability in higher education has had multiple different meanings with different constituents using various definitions over history. Recently, a focus on student success has emerged and, depending on the literature being reviewed, this term can mean anything from retention or persistence of student enrollment from term to term, academic performance measurements like GPA, or even post-graduation employability. The absence of a single definition makes conversations on this topic difficult given the need to frame and recalibrate what is truly being measured and sought from any discussion involving the term.

With one primary focus—student success centered on institutional graduation rates and federal reporting standards requiring colleges and universities to measure, track, and report this figure for over a decade—it made sense to explore the topic to see if there was value to the current methods used to calculate the rate and the importance that individual schools place on the measurement. It is documented that a real gap exists between college attendance and overall graduation rates and that the requirements for schools to make their rate publicly available to prospective students and policymakers is one that not only touches on accountability, but also the issue of transparency (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017). This is part of why graduation rates have become an attractive data point for use related not only to student success, but also to institutional success. An easy and obvious way to gauge how well a school is doing is through a measurement that takes the number of degree-seeking students and compares it to the number of degrees conferred.

On the surface, a universal and standardized measure of calculating a school’s graduation rate has a few benefits. It requires schools to track, in a straightforward
manner, the number of students who begin within a certain semester and receive a degree within a reasonable number of subsequent semesters (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006). Having all schools publish their rates allows any prospective consumer or interested party to review and compare across institutional types and geographies as well. Schools would want “higher” rates and would have opportunities to review any internal deficiencies if rates were “lower.”

Of course, nothing is ever as easy as it appears. The collection method for how schools report their figure is handled through the NCES and its core postsecondary education data collection program, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Any college that participates in federal financial aid programs is required to submit these data annually. There are some shortcomings on the selection criteria for which students need to be reported to IPEDS, since only students who are enrolled on a first-time, full-time basis are currently included. With the rapid increase of nontraditional undergraduate enrollments, this means that large numbers of students are currently being excluded from a college’s published graduation rate (Itzkowitz, 2018).

Additionally, since many community college students have enrollment patterns that include starting full-time, shifting to part-time, and periods of interruption in between, the current statistics that measure at different times of entry will unsuccessfully capture any graduate who takes a longer time to earn their degree (Crosta, 2013). One suggestion to mitigate the shortcomings in the current calculation is for there to be updated definitions that would identify any of the many interim measures of progress, such as certificate completion, continuing enrollment, or completion of designated thresholds of cumulative credits earned (Clagett, 2013). For students who have no intent
of ever completing a degree or certificate, a label to recognize students who are seeking
to transfer to baccalaureate degree-granting institutions is also recommended. In Fall
2017, the NCES actually included part-time and non-first-time students under the first
year of the new Outcome Measures Survey via College Navigator (Ginder et al.,
2017). The previously omitted data related to students beyond the first-time, full-time
groups are now returned in a new First Look report that examines graduation rates,
outcome measures, financial aid, and admissions data for various academic years (Ginder
et al., 2017). Outcomes for students who enter college part-time or who have attended
college elsewhere are now included, but given the infancy of these data, it will take some
time before the historical data are normalized and compared to the presence of these
additional groups. One key finding from Itzkowitz (2018) that addresses the
shortcomings of the current federal rate is that the inclusion of part-time and transfer
students into the overall graduation rates results in a decrease from 51% to 45% when all
students are factored in.

In addition to there being known issues in the actual way rates are calculated,
there are also challenges for any comparisons to be fairly made among institutions. If
graduation rates are meant to serve as a means to gauge effectiveness, it would be
reasonable to interpret that a school with a higher graduation rate is more successful in
graduating students compared to a school with lower graduation rates. The fallacy with
this comparison is that it fails to take into consideration any of the differences between
the schools. For example, the school with the higher rate could be a highly selective,
private institution, and the school with the lower rate could be not as selective and a
public institution. If the rates are calculated the same way, readers of these data would
need to know that variance between institutional types can heavily influence the way a school ultimately can assist its enrolled students in completing their degrees.

This critique of a singular rate that calculates graduation as an outcome measure also fails to take into consideration the educational background of students who ultimately enroll. A college or university with a higher bar of entry, in theory, would have a higher graduation rate based on the academic preparedness of the student body. Community colleges with open door admissions policies built around access would then see the inverse. When comparing community colleges to senior-level, baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities, the populations that are ultimately served and the students’ work, family, and school responsibilities often vary widely. The educational programs community colleges provide are often broader than 4-year institutions; many comprehensive community colleges are designed for transfer, and the coursework corresponds accordingly (Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2013). That being said, community colleges, policymakers, and researchers will continue to struggle with the development of appropriate markers of student success, but the graduation rate is a benchmark with which we have to live.

**Purpose of the Study**

With this increased focus on student success, and graduation rates being part of this conversation with prospective students, policymakers, and media outlets despite some possible misleading interpretations, there are reasons for better understanding college graduation rates and what it takes to improve them. In addition to a better understanding within the definition, the importance schools place on this rate and the ways they invest and make attempts to influence rates are worthy of increased research.
For community colleges to implement policy and procedural improvements that impact graduation rates, institutions will need to review what support options are offered to students and how the academic, nonacademic, and financial practices are structured and delivered to students (Moore & Shulock, 2009). Commitment from institutional leadership and institution-wide initiatives that lead to and support an environment where the success of students is engrained within the college culture is a starting point to which successful institutions can be traced back. Students who enroll in community colleges that have developed and implemented high-impact practices, including supportive environments through academic advising, nonacademic supports (e.g., counseling), and financial supports, have proven to be more engaged, and higher engagement levels influence, are linked to, and are predictive of higher institutional graduation rates (Price & Tovar, 2014). Instead of simply attempting to making comparisons of institutions or clustering schools that demonstrate increases (or decreases) to their graduation rate, a review of similar institutions and a deeper analysis of the characteristics and programs that schools seek to change for positive effects on graduation rates will add to the literature.

Although there are recommendations on how to improve the construction of the current definition and the way higher education graduation rates are currently calculated, there is no consensus within the literature on specifically what the largest influencers are on graduation rates. With that in mind, the purpose of this study was to collect qualitative case study data at three community colleges that have been recognized for the progress they have made in their retention rates, graduation rates, and improved academic
performance over time. An attempt to understand the prioritization these schools placed on student success initiatives and whether there is a match of institutional goals and strategies linked to these priorities was also conducted.
CHAPTER 2 – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Context

In an attempt to define student success within higher education, college graduation rates are typically pointed to as something that can be calculated, compared across institutions and sectors, and made available for prospective students, families, and policymakers to review. Often, this can lead to a greater emphasis on the students who choose to attend these schools and not on how much of an influence the schools can have on this figure. Since there is an opportunity for this measure to be confused without a complete understanding of the structure that defines it, both on college campuses and within the public sharing of the rate, it is worthwhile for higher education professionals to have a firm grasp on what an institution’s graduation rate means, who and what it includes, and who and what it does not include. The U.S. Department of Education (2006) issued a report that outlined that, while the proportion of high school graduates who were entering institutions of higher education had significantly increased in recent decades, the college completion rate had failed to rise at anywhere near the same pace. Additionally, with increased scrutiny on how students and institutions are performing, there is a chance for schools to inform internal and external constituents on what is contained within the graduation rate and areas where schools should focus their resources—for example, practices that have been shown to benefit and increase the number of students who are successful in degree attainment.

The American Council on Education conducted an analysis on college graduation rates and stated that they are a critical measure of both student and institutional success (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Before any reform is undertaken to establish graduation rates of
institutional accountability, there needs to be improved comprehension of the existing graduation rate calculations and the numerous databases that capture and report these increasingly important data (Cook & Pullaro, 2010). Since there are both areas of similarity and opposing views of thought within the research on college graduation rates, which will be discussed in the following sections, it is important for interested parties to have an understanding of why graduation rates are published and how they are calculated, as well as an examination of inputs over which higher education leaders have some control as policy and practice are adjusted and adapted in an attempt to have this number improved.

The first section in this chapter—Graduation Rate Availability—summarizes the history and expansion of college graduation rates as a primary performance indicator for colleges and universities, students and families, and policymakers at the federal and state level. The second section—Institutional Characteristics—offers evidence and information about various data elements that can influence graduation rates at different institutional types, including 4-year (public and private) and 2-year community colleges. The third section—Predictability—examines models that have been established to show a correlation between particular student and institutional characteristics associated with graduation outcomes. The fourth section—Funding Policies—reviews current and proposed discussion items linked to graduation rates to which colleges and universities may be held accountable as outcomes-based discussions continue at the federal and state level for funding priorities. The fifth section—Strategies to Increase Graduation—examines policy adoption at colleges that have had success in improving their rates. While there is clear disagreement across the research as to any single input being the sole
determinant for institutional graduation rates, there is enough consensus that inputs can affect them and also that there are strategies schools can implement to influence them (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008). Current findings, along with future proposals, will influence how graduation rates are viewed, looked at, and the implications they can have for schools and the students who ultimately choose to enroll.

**Graduation Rate Availability**

Research seems to focus on college access and post-graduation earnings as the two primary outcome measurements discussed outside of higher education; yet, the requirement of schools to publish their graduation rate is a piece of data that has become relevant and worthy of discussion, as this rate can affect both admissions research and earnings. An amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1999 required colleges to begin reporting graduation rates for first-time, full-time students enrolled in degree-seeking programs who began their studies in the fall term. This metric is included within the Student Right-to-Know (SRK) data that schools report through the annual IPEDS survey, and that is available through College Navigator, FAFSA, and Peterson’s Guides (Oztekin, 2016). As defined in the IPEDS (2016) glossary, graduation rate is “calculated as the total number of completers within 150% of normal time” (p. 4). This means that students at a 4-year institution have 6 years to complete their degree, and students at 2-year institutions have 3 years to complete their degree for either to be considered a completer (IPEDS, 2016). As a metric, this current graduation rate definition has its limitations, since it only measures first-time, full-time students and considers students who transfer out as dropouts; it fails to consider students who transfer in or begin as part-time at all. Miller (2014) explained more of how these current definitions are problematic, since a
significant proportion of new students from the college reported each year are omitted, and there is also no consideration of students who begin at a school with transfer credit. Compounding the graduation rate concern is how transfer students count as a negative toward the graduation rate for the institution at which a student started and then are excluded in the graduation metrics of the school that ultimately confers the degree, since these students were not in the first-time, full-time cohort.

Colleges are required to report SRK data, which has helped to bring college completion to the front of the education conversation. However, during a 2009 address to Congress, then-President Obama announced a college completion agenda that challenged colleges to attain the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. Data from the NCES revealed that the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in Fall 2008 was 60%, and the 6-year graduate rate was 28% for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began a certificate or associate’s degree program at a 2-year institution in the Fall 2011 semester and completed within 3 years (Ginder et al., 2017). With knowledge of where current rates are, higher education was put on notice as to how much these rates would need to rise to meet the presidential challenge (NCES, 2018).

Since the IPEDS data only include students who are defined as being first-time and full-time at a particular institution and neglect to look at transfer students and part-time students in the graduation rate calculation, there is a possible misrepresentation of the true rate of how a school is aiding students in degree completion because the publicly reported figure does not include all students. Given this limitation to the definition, there
are options for the incorporation of additional pieces of data into the current calculation that can provide more comprehensive rates that assure that subsets of the population of college attendees are not being omitted. The National Student Clearinghouse offers the opportunity to broaden the definition of student success to include where a student ultimately completes a degree along with the first school the student may have attended (Fain, 2014). Attempts to expand the definition to include the NSC data were conducted recently to incorporate degree information from other institutions. Since the NSC offers third-party degree enrollment and degree verification for over 3,600 colleges and universities through the StudentTracker service (Fain, 2014), this study explored a group that was divided into two groups: those who were successful at the institution of entry and those who were not. Students not considered to be graduates of the starting institution were sent through the StudentTracker service to determine if degree attainment occurred at another institution of higher education; thus, we can determine success through different methods (Jones-White, Radcliffe, Huesman, & Kellogg, 2009).

With the ease of availability, graduation rates and college rankings have become widely published and accessible to students and their families when researching schools. Although sticker price and net cost—items that are also posted through the SRK data—still rank as top items that prospective students take into consideration when researching a school, there is also evidence that graduation rates are important to this decision-making process (Cool & Pullaro, 2010). How schools distribute institutional aid can also be viewed by prospective families as investments that assist on-time graduation rates. There is also evidence that shows that another significant contributor to timely graduation is the net cost of the college and the amount of institutional aid provided (Raikes,
Berling, & Davis, 2012). As prospective students review how much financial aid is provided to current students, they can identify institutions that view scholarship dollars as a means of support that enable students to graduate on time (Raikes et al., 2012). The other finding in this study was that students—often first-generation—are less likely to review these data, which can lead to ill-informed decisions on which school they ultimately attend and the likelihood of graduation (Raikes et al., 2012).

**Institutional Characteristics**

The use of graduation rates or other outcome variables to compare institutions through publicly available data is relatively easy. In addition to the items most explored by prospective students, such as the amount of financial aid available, the other available variables that exist for school comparison and analysis primarily consist of institutional characteristics, such as location, size, expenditures, and student composition (Bailey et al., 2006); the ease of any comparison is contingent on choosing the appropriate optics. In their article in *Research in Higher Education*, Bailey et al. (2006) explained some options for the creation of comparison groups and ways to compare colleges within those groups. Two available ways for schools to be compared includes use of software that NCES has created to allow users to select comparison schools, either by name or according to various criteria, such as institution size, control, or urbanicity (Bailey et al., 2006). The other comes from the National Community College Benchmark Project, which also allows reviewers to create a comparison group based on institutional characteristics and then provides lists of outcome measures that include graduation and retention rates for the selected schools (Bailey et al., 2006).
For researchers and policymakers, a deeper dive into these characteristics often uses additional components to attempt to explain the “why” behind overall graduation rates, including the composition of the faculty at a school, student demographics (race/ethnicity, family income), the federal or state financial aid that was made available, the admissions process, and the selectivity of a school. While the graduation rate is strictly a calculation of students who completed their degree during the normal time period, this calculation fails to account for how schools provided resources to address these additional inputs that may influence the number of students completing their degrees and the ultimate number reflected in the graduation rate.

A study published in the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* highlighted the scarcity of research specifically related to Black males and 2-year college graduation rates, but also highlighted some of the recurrent themes on attempts to explore items that influence graduation rates (Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2017). The first theme was that schools with a higher percentage of students of color enrolled were shown to have lower graduation rates; the second was that schools see linkages between the number of part-time faculty members employed and graduation rates (Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2017).

Expanding on one theme, Vasquez Urias and Wood (2017) highlighted that one factor influencing an institutional graduation rate is the demographic makeup of the student body at the institution. Research on college access and race—who is enrolling and where—only looks at the entry point of higher education, which calls for increased focus on completion (Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2017). Since different students receive and qualify for different amounts of financial aid, the relevant research on race that had a
specific focus on the completion of bachelor’s degrees within 150% of time also paid special attention to the consequences graduation has with a focus on student loan balances and defaults (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013). So, while non-White high school graduates’ overall access to higher education increased over the last century, Black college students have had lower graduation rates than White college students (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013). For schools that enroll a high number of minority students, often from less rigorous urban and rural schools, there may need to be additional services in the form of tutoring and academic advising support if the graduation goals for these populations is to be realized. Breaking the overall student body of an institution into cross-sections and cohorts can allow for better enterprise-wide and targeted initiatives aimed at improving retention, persistence, and graduation rates for specific student populations.

Analyzing data from the 1980s and early 1990s on admissions practices at selective institutions and the overall impact these have had on graduation rates for majority and minority students, a hypothesis—the mismatch hypothesis—posits whether minority students suffer negative consequences in terms of reduced graduation rates when they opt to attend selective colleges compared to their same-race counterparts who attend less-selective institutions (Alon & Tienda, 2005). One of the key findings from this research is that the high retention (and subsequent graduation) of students may be due, in part, to the institutional endowments that allow for smaller classes and the establishment of personal relationships between faculty and students at these competitive schools (Alon & Tienda, 2005). But, simply having more money and more resources alone are not the sole variables that contribute to higher graduation rates. Future research
recommendations from this study seek to identify and specify what best practices enable minority students to succeed at less selective institutions.

One of the institutional characteristics that schools have direct control over is the ratio of full- to part-time faculty members. According to Alon and Tienda (2005), schools that rely less on part-time, adjunct faculty and more on full-time faculty enable students to develop stronger relationships with faculty over a student’s time at an institution. However, there seems to be major disagreement within the literature over how much influence the faculty-to-student ratio and the makeup of faculty can truly have on the overall graduation rate an institution realizes.

Tincher-Ladner and King (2014) focused on the community college sector and specifically examined the influence employment practices that relied on increased part-time faculty had on graduation rates. Their study reviewed current institution-level models and compared these to requirements established by regional accreditors in regulating adequate numbers of full-time faculty. The findings highlighted that there was indeed a significant correlation between graduation rates among schools belonging to different regional accreditation agencies. However, Tincher-Ladner and King also indicated that linking these differences to the actual regulation of faculty ratio was inconclusive. This research did, however, confirm the predictive nature of several variables affecting graduation rates, with faculty makeup being one of them.

Research conducted by Jacoby (2006) is consistent with Tincher-Ladner and King (2014) in finding that, within the community college sector, the reliance on increased part-time faculty was linked to lower graduation rates. This study also implied that one main driver behind these decisions is primarily a financial one as opposed to a
philosophical or pedagogical one (Jacoby, 2006). In other words, it is more likely that the decision behind hiring practices of part- and full-time employees is partially explained by the affordability of part-time contracts rather than intentional decisions of seeking out potentially less engaged faculty or those with fewer qualifications (Jacoby, 2006). While the specific hiring policies vary across institutions, both Jacoby and Tincher-Ladner and King found that adjunct faculty are often neither part-time nor temporary, insofar as their contracts indicate they must be rehired each term or that they are ineligible from teaching for more than half of the equivalent to a full-time load, again in an attempt to control costs. Hiring practices such as these rarely lead to establishing deep relationships between faculty and students and, in turn, can have a negative impact on the campus-learning climate (Jacoby, 2006; Tincher-Ladner & King, 2014). Typically, for community colleges, part-time faculty are paid per course or per credit. Scale payments like these fail to provide the part-time faculty any incentive to be present before or after classes or during regular office hours, leaving few options for students to obtain any academic or career advising outside of the classroom (Jacoby, 2006). There is also evidence that indicates that many part-time faculty are employed at multiple institutions (Curtis, Mahabir, & Vitullo, 2016). So, from an hours-worked perspective, these faculty members may actually be working the equivalent of a full-time load across multiple schools.

The main concern discovered with respect to the full-time vs. part-time faculty discussion is that there fails to be consensus with the findings across previous studies. In the article, “Part-Time Faculty and Community College Student Success,” Rogers (2015) outright disagreed with the previous research and demonstrated, at community colleges at
least, that the employment status of the faculty does not appear to hinder the success of the students they teach compared to their full-time counterparts. From a strict financial perspective, the increased numbers of available part-time faculty also allow community colleges to teach a larger number of courses to a higher number of students than would be possible if more investment was allocated to increase the number of full-time faculty (Rogers, 2015). Although there is statistical evidence in his findings, Rogers appears to have an emotional investment in his defending of part-time faculty. This is witnessed in one of his key recommendations when he states how painting with a broad brush can be dangerous:

[To say] that full-time faculty members are better than their part-time colleagues dismisses the tremendous value and skill the contingent faculty members bring to the institution. This dismissiveness also demeans, marginalizes, and demoralizes an entire class of professionals who are often bringing in real-world knowledge into the classroom that career faculty do not possess. The diversity of backgrounds and skills of the part-time faculty should be celebrated and not denigrated, as they so often seem to be. (Rogers, 2015, p. 682)

Personal sentiment aside, Rogers (2015) also pointed out that, although there is no evidence that institutions investing more in part-time faculty will lead to a measurable increase in academic success, the fact that few schools have evaluated or investigated this allocation of resources may be a future opportunity for review.

**Predictability**

Two of the most often cited conceptual frameworks of persistence and completion are Tinto’s (1993) student integration model and Bean’s (1985) student attrition model, both of which call on faculty and administrators to be cognizant of the institutional factors referenced earlier and to influence them purposely where they can. In attempts to expand on these, there have also been data models based on certain characteristics created
by numerous researchers to determine predictive models for institutional graduation rates (Koker & Hendel, 2003; Raikes et al., 2012). By knowing the variables that influence the completion percentage, the value that predictive models can provide colleges is in maximizing the success of new investments designed to increase graduation rates.

One piece in the literature, although focused on religious-based institutions, presented the findings as if the primary reader was a prospective student or family. In the article, “To Dream the Impossible Dream: College Graduation in Four Years,” Raikes et al. (2012) suggested that the majority of readily available data points can direct students to the best schools to attend, but also identified factors that do not appear to contribute significantly to the variation in 4-year graduation rates across these institutions. However, Raikes et al. did highlight that these data points are probably linked more to student fit and overall satisfaction with the educational experience and not necessarily related to a student’s likelihood of graduating in 4 years.

A second piece of research related to the ability to predict graduation rates looked at variables that were outside of the institution’s control. Koker and Hendel (2003) explored the impact of student demographic variables, including high school and pre-transfer college GPA, enrollment intensity, transfer student cohort, post-transfer college academic characteristics, and the influence their efforts had on bachelor’s degree completion. This study, and a majority of the other similar studies, explored the relationships between student characteristics and type of institution as opposed to seeing if there were causal relationships that the institution had on the student.

An additional variable referenced in a majority of the literature reviews by multiple researchers was that the relationship to normal-time graduation rates included
noncognitive factors such as emotional intelligence (EQ). Sparkman, Maulding, and Roberts (2012) specifically examined the variables of empathy, social responsibility, flexibility, and impulse control. Although there were definite linkages between student scores on these metrics and the ultimate graduation rate, one of the key weaknesses within this design was that the EQ tests were only administered to students who attended an orientation session prior to their initial enrollment and who attended a specific session designated for the survey to be taken (Sparkman et al., 2012). Even with the absence of complete participation, Sparkman et al. made recommendations for college practitioners wishing to increase retention and graduation, which included developing extracurricular activities with the specific intent to encourage growth in EQ for improved educational outcomes for both students and the institution.

Despite these examples citing variables that have a relationship to the calculated rate, the discussion sections of those papers did not seek to conduct an additional review of what schools can actually influence. In their article, “Competing Explanations of Undergraduate Noncompletion,” Attewell, Heil, and Reisel (2011) highlighted the effect sizes of the various predictors to determine which variables have a direct relationship to graduation—as opposed to mediating variables—for schools and policymakers to better ensure that attempts to improve these rates are targeted and that potential interventions are prioritized appropriately. The original exploration of this subject was based on an assumption that the area of predictability and the existing research was based on the discovery of a model that would allow schools to specifically analyze their institutional characteristics for improvement opportunities wherever possible.
Another study attempted to relate student demographics and improvements to current on-campus support services to increases in an institution’s graduation rate. Oztekin (2016) argued that, after efforts to focus admissions practices on the initial selection of students who are likely to be successful, effective on-campus practices that support student persistence were important to student success. There is also a call for the establishment of dedicated undergraduate advisors who can track student performance and behavior and engage students when there are GPA or attendance concerns (Oztekin, 2016). A shortcoming with the results in Oztekin’s study is that it is difficult to apply these strategies to schools like community colleges that have open admission policies. The other key takeaway is the call for increased student financial assistance instead of focusing financial investment into the services students need (Oztekin, 2016). This again is a departure from what first-generation and/or low-income students have identified as needing the most for their academic success.

Despite calls for improvements to college graduation rates, the reality is that there was no evidence of a single approach that would enable researchers to estimate the multiple predictors of degree completion while at the same time adjusting for selection on each of those predictors. The upside is that future research may identify strategies to accomplish these goals as more data are collected and reviewed, if the continued emphasis is continued and the overall importance of graduation rate is maintained.

**Funding Policies**

As policymakers attempt to align institutional goals and state priorities, there has been a shift for states to tie a portion of appropriations to institutional performance measures, such as retention and 6-year graduation rates. With so much confusion around
the current definition of graduation rates and the already discussed limitations, the current measurement and suggestions for states exploring adoption of research related to this topic need to have a strong understanding of what the current benchmarks are, what improvements are possible, and what goals are realistic.

As the number of states with some sort of performance-based funding component within their appropriations continues to rise, the overall effectiveness of these programs continues to receive mixed reviews. Sanford and Hunter (2011) conducted a thorough review of the Tennessee state system, since it serves as one of the oldest and most stable performance-based funding models. They pointed out, however, that the current literature on this overall topic remains scarce, and what does exist either focuses on policy adoption or abandonment. Central to much of the literature are the factors that actually go into a state opting to implement a performance-based funding model and the specific performance outcomes that are expected (Clotfelter et al., 2013; Heck, Lam, & Thomas, 2014). Success may be defined in a number of ways, including overall degree completion, persistence or progression, or graduation rates (Clotfelter et al., 2013). Once the measure is selected, how progress will be measured must be answered, as well as what amount of funding will be allocated for the policy initiative (Sanford & Hunter, 2011). Schools that have a choice in the matter do not want to place too much emphasis on historical figures; if they do not have a say in the benchmark criteria, they are cautious on tying too much of their funding to something outside of their control (Clotfelter et al., 2013). Finally, if a school does achieve an increase or minimum goal, and there is not sufficient funding to reward the institution, motivation for change will lag.
For states that ultimately decided to embrace a performance-based funding model, there is a requirement for time to pass to assess if the structure works. Shinn and Milton (2004) examined how states with performance-funding programs improved the institutional performance of higher education over a 5-year review period from 1997 through 2001. One of the primary limitations with their findings was that not all states at the time used graduation rates as an indicator of performance. This made comparison across states and schools difficult. One of the other findings during the review period was that the implementation of performance-based programs did not have the immediate or dramatic impact on higher education institutions that policymakers may have expected (Shinn & Milton, 2004). There are numerous possible explanations behind this, but this also explains why Sanford and Hunter (2011) discussed gaps in the literature. If states fail to yield the desired results after a 5-year commitment, this could be a possible explanation for why states opt out after a length of time.

Consistent with the performance-based research is the challenge that states face in selecting an appropriate threshold or benchmark for whatever outcome they intend to measure. Underwood and Rieck (1999) reviewed the graduation rate thresholds developed by several states and analyzed the benefits and weaknesses of the different approaches. They proposed four alternative statistical approaches to establishing performance thresholds for states. While there are certainly differences between state demographics and the students who public institutions serve, the lack of a national definition makes any future performance expectations and comparisons challenging across states (Underwood & Rieck, 1999). There could certainly be variation between 2-
and 4-year institutions, but the amount of funding on the line also complicates an otherwise simple need for decision-making to occur.

Taking a similar approach to Shinn and Milton’s (2004) study, Heck, Lam, and Thomas (2014) explored longitudinal data on state indicators and institutional variables related to graduation rates, but their review was extended over an 11-year time period with specific emphasis on states’ political cultures (i.e., underlying traditions, values, and public policy choices). One of the telling findings within their study was that having a universal benchmark rate at the national level would be challenging due to their attempt to explain differences between states in their patterns of appropriating funds for higher education and how these vary across the different economic contexts (Heck et al., 2014). There were also conflicting findings in Heck et al.’s study about the relationship between increased appropriations and higher graduation rates; however, within certain states, higher appropriations were positively related to improved graduation rates.

**Strategies to Increase Graduation**

Research on the characteristics that have possible linkages to graduation rates—and, to some extent, even a predictive ability—does not take into consideration any of the policy adjustment that certain colleges have implemented to mitigate and, in some cases, reverse declining graduation rate trends (Koker & Hindel, 2003). While it is evident that certain variables, in hindsight, can influence an overall rate, there are also many documented cases of strategies that colleges and universities have implemented to place more opportunity back within the institutions’ control (Attewell & Reisel, 2011). A large amount of the research that does exist shows that the majority of this reform is happening at 2-year community colleges (Clotfelter et al., 2013). In addition to the institutions,
central systems and states are all beginning to use years of accumulated data to identify best practices, support planning for improvement, and reform policy to better support improvements to graduation rates, degree attainment, and overall student success (Moore & Shulock, 2009).

One of the most important decisions in recent history was a contribution that the Lumina Foundation made in a commitment to student success. With the realization of the need for a centralized, sector-wide way of strategic thinking and alignment of resource allocation, Lumina sought leaders from the community college field, which prompted the decision to develop and establish the Achieving the Dream (ATD, 2018) program in 2004 in a cooperative venture with seven national partners. The ATD program has gone on to create a movement that includes multiple foundations, think tanks, and professional associations with a completion and student success focus. The ATD program has now partnered with over 220 institutions of higher education in 40 states, which by their estimate has reached 4 million students within their reform (ATD, 2018).

Another reform plan that has gained significant prominence by community colleges looking to improve persistence and completion rates is the guided pathways model that was proposed through research by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University’s Teachers College. Years of research that the CCRC conducted was popularized in the publication of Redesigning America’s Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success, which was co-authored by Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015), all of whom are associated with the CCRC. The primary argument presented within this text is that community colleges, and the cafeteria-style model that allows students to enroll in course offerings with limited guidance, is part of the problem
related to low completion and graduation numbers. The introduction of structure through a guided pathways model can establish clear academic choices through default program maps that link to a student’s academic degree plan (Bailey et al., 2015). The authors acknowledged that community colleges within the United States have already begun to implement pieces of the pathways reform but,

> to achieve substantial improvements in student completion rates, however, more colleges will need to embark on guided pathways, and those that have already begun the process will need to expand from implementing only one or two elements to implementing the full suite of elements in an integrated and systematic way. (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 211)

Baker (2016) pointed out that pathways models, along with other recommendations that address any of the organizational obstacles students encounter, are attractive for community colleges since they are “affordable, scalable, and relatively easy to sell politically” (p. 629).

Whether it is a college partnering with ATD, the CCRC, or any other organization focused on student success, the key takeaway is the acknowledgement that there is progress that can be made. The adoption of best practices within the sector makes sense in theory since, if it is working for some schools, then it is entirely plausible that a process change could also yield positive results for others. But, it takes the acknowledgement by institutional leadership that the status quo is not working and that college-wide adoption is the only way to secure any progress. This realization needs to start at the executive level and work its way throughout an entire organization to be effective. College leaders working in close concert with their governing boards are the leaders who need to lead the processes that look at completion and progression issues, as this is the only clear way for outcome gaps to be identified; these outcome gaps will
include many of the input variables, such as student age, race, ethnicity, and even financial aid status (McClenney, 2013). Once these gaps are identified, this data could provide a committed leadership team with a starting point on areas and cohorts of students who will benefit from intervention, which in turn could assist with improvements to institutional rates.

The Aspen Institute is another organization that has attempted to define successful community colleges through the establishment of prize money offered to innovative community colleges that are advancing policy goals that include improvements to institutional graduation rates (Wyner, 2012). According to Wyner (2012), The Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program seeks to recognize and replicate college practices that significantly improve student outcomes in community colleges, and recipients are selected and awarded a $1 million prize. The prize has been awarded every 2 years since 2011, with selection being based on outcomes in four areas: (a) student learning, (b) degree completion, (c) employment and earnings for graduates, and (d) increased access and success for low-income and minority students (Wyner, 2012). With community colleges enrolling more than 40% of all undergraduates in the United States, and the stark reality that fewer than half of those students graduate with a degree or certificate, the intent of the award is to document how colleges can increase their success rates (Mangan, 2015). In a recent forward, Anthony Carnevale acknowledged that Aspen Institute recognition for community colleges has made improvements and has led to reform through the practice of self-determination and not through mandatory policy enforcement at the state or federal level (as cited in Wyner, 2014). An Aspen Institute spokesperson
has stated, “A prize requires you to set standards [and] a lot of these prizes are aiming to reset the standards for what excellence looks like” (Blumenstyk, 2015, para. 6).

**Change Research in Higher Education**

Research on the changes that colleges and universities have incorporated to improve student success on their campuses included examples of strategies, but since change is unique and oftentimes tied to the specific institutional setting and timing, replication can be difficult to obtain. Since circumstances and environment play such a large part in how change is implemented—whether large- or small-scale—it is nearly impossible to expect that following a formula will allow future institutions to achieve similar results. Ansell (2008) stated, “What matters just as much in higher education is the type of change that prevails. . . . Institutional change is not inevitable but neither is it unidirectional” (p. 229).

The challenge in looking for research to guide how colleges and universities can accomplish change is that there is much variance across individual campuses. One study reinforced this by reminding readers that, “even within one university, there are important professional and cultural differences across and within colleges and research units in addition to levels of authority among faculty and administrators and students” (Foss & Gibson, 2015, p. 275). This same study went on to warn future readers that, accordingly, policymakers at national and regional levels should appreciate that there is no “one best way” or “set of best practices” to legislate an entrepreneurial economy or entrepreneurial university and that policy directed at “the university” is often interpreted and employed differently across and within university colleges and departments. (Foss & Gibson, 2015, p. 275)
Howells, Karataş-Özkan, Yavuz, and Atiq (2014) illustrated that change within higher education involves four key themes: (a) vision, (b) alignment, (c) strategic collaboration, and (d) innovation. The authors also stated:

It has become more apparent that universities will have to change, in order to survive and sustain their operations in the new funding environment, which is characterized by significant cuts in public funding and reduced institutional and corporate support and endowments. (Howells et al., 2014, p. 267)

While student success initiatives are important reasons behind these necessary changes, there is still an absence of research that suggests a concept or model that could be used to facilitate the change for colleges to then adopt on their respective campuses.

The decision to use Kezar’s (2014) framework was made primarily because it provided a synthesis of organizational change within a higher education lens. Compared to strictly relying on theories of institutional change through a business viewpoint, which is reliant on a focus of the underlying theories, this framework allowed for a review to be done that had aspects viewed at multiple levels of the organizations. The six change theories that it uses are also not singular and allow for multiple theories to be addressed if appropriate. Since it was unknown which of the framework’s six change perspectives would emerge when the data collection began, this made sense since it had a higher education focus while also providing multiple options.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that there has been an increased level of emphasis in higher education on better understanding college policies and practices that promote student success. While there have been multiple productive discussions about some of the reasons behind and the different ways to measure institutional performance, what graduation rates mean
and how these rates can be influenced do not have any simple answers. There is easy access to the availability of these data, but how do institutions of higher education use it most effectively to make changes to institutional practices that can positively affect graduation rates? With prospective students and families having access to these same data, how do higher education advocates ensure that these data are not only made available but understood and used by consumers effectively when it comes to deciding on what school to attend? If policymakers are going to link funding to graduation rates, it is imperative that increased research be conducted, by sector, to help inform what institutions are doing to improve these rates, how sustainable changes are being implemented, and what institutional leaders can learn from one another.

The current federal approach to how graduation rates are calculated has shortcomings based upon the ways agencies, organizations, and the media interpret and understand these data. In an NCES report, the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative acknowledged the limitations of the current calculation and also issued recommendations on how to improve the rate (Albright, 2010). The report yielded four key themes that included the definition of the initial cohort of students, the definition of a completer, the length of time to completion, and finally, the incorporation of students who transfer out of an institution into the equation (Albright, 2010). Even if the federal definition received an overhaul, the variance among states in how they prioritize the treatment of these data makes it difficult for students to clearly compare institutions that are located within different geographic regions. Compounding the ability to make a comparison is that certain states with accountability measures and performance-based funding linked to graduation rates, versus those that are either in their infancy or are
contemplating the adoption of such performance measures, might mean students still do not have a consistent means of comparison. For students, institutions of higher education, and policymakers to have equal and consistent access to the way success is described and defined, a thorough review of how institutional leaders understand and approach efforts to increase graduation rates and the implications it has on changing institutional characteristics and practices is necessary.

Ultimately, the determination of whether a graduation rate is a measurement of student success, institutional performance, or both is part of the conundrum facing this area of research. With that on the table, there are institutions of higher education that have made improvements to their graduation rates, and there are those that are generating graduates at a higher rate than the state and national levels and among their peer schools. Most of the current research attempts to explain the multiple possible factors that can influence graduation rates. Ultimately, the current methodology used to calculate graduation rates within higher education has flaws and shortcomings in trying to compare different types of institutions, but this methodology is also accepted within higher education. There have been recent improvements to better expand the way different cohorts of students are included in federal reports as well. This research is intended to focus on institutions that have proven track records of college completion and to attempt to provide evidence for what changes were adopted on their respective campuses to yield the increases.
CHAPTER 3 – METHODS

Aim of Study/Purpose

While the use of enrollment as a metric allows for the measurement of access on college campuses, it does not speak to student success. The myriad of student success goals that exist are more problematic due to the lack of longitudinal or comparable datasets. As discussed, every institution of higher education in the United States is required to report and collect data on their respective graduation rates. Although graduation rates for institutions can be found in a variety of ways, understanding what might be done to improve these may not be well known or understood. Identification of strategies and services that have led to increased graduation rates allows institutions to participate and cultivate processes for continuous improvement (Wyner, 2012). Since every school cannot merely employ investments in initiatives across the board, sometimes difficult decisions need to be made. The purpose of this study is to look at institutions that have recently been considered eligible for The Aspen Institute’s most recent Community College Excellence Prize, to identify what is contributing to positive changes in graduation, transfer, and employment rates on these campuses and to provide college administrators with strategies that influence student success.

The Aspen Institute conducts three rounds of review to arrive at the winners: Finalists With Distinction and Rising Stars. For the 2017 award cycle, The Aspen Institute assembled a national panel of community college experts who developed the analytic formula, which is comprised of national data on performance and improvement. The institutional performance formula uses three general areas: (a) retention, completion, and transfer; (b) improvement in performance over time; and (c) equity, defined as...
performance outcomes for underrepresented minorities and institutions in low-income service areas (The Aspen Institute, 2017). Of all community colleges that were reviewed for Round 1, 152 were eligible to apply for the prize in Round 2. The second round of selection involves invited institutions to submit a formal application to be reviewed by the selection committee. The eligible colleges are then reduced to 10 finalists. There were 10 total finalists for the 2017 Prize, with one school earning recognition as the Aspen Prize winner, two named Finalists With Distinction, and two more named Rising Stars, which is a designation for schools that have made rapid student improvement. Of the finalists, four have been finalists for the prize at least once before, with two colleges in the Top 10 every year since it was launched (The Aspen Institute, 2017). The Aspen Institute (2017) prize finalists include:

- Anoka-Ramsey Community College (Coon Rapids, MN)
- Broward College (Fort Lauderdale, FL; 2017 Finalist With Distinction)
- Chaffey College (Rancho Cucamonga, CA)
- Indian River State College (Fort Pierce, FL; 2017 Finalist With Distinction)
- Lake Area Technical Institute (Watertown, SD; 2017 Prize Winner)
- Northeast Community College (Norfolk, NE)
- Odessa College (Odessa, TX; 2017 Rising Star)
- Pasadena City College (Pasadena, CA)
- San Jacinto College (Pasadena, TX; 2017 Rising Star)
- West Kentucky Community and Technical College (Paducah, KY)

The Executive Director of The Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program has indicated that policy and practice adoptions can be gleaned from Aspen Prize finalists that can cut across all institutional environments associated with student success and that any curious observer can easily adopt these accordingly to their own campus (Wyner, 2014). While there may not be a single panacea policy or practice, Wyner (2014) stated
that the absence of perfect data related to this should not weaken the change process that community colleges need to make improvements on their campuses.

**Rationale and Research Questions**

The background of this study examined inputs that influenced graduation rates, as well as the policy adoption and institutional commitment related to completion increases for which strategies had the most impact and in turn could be replicated at schools struggling with low graduation rates. Since student success means different things to different constituents, it was important to start with the rates as defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). School leaders are cognizant of how the graduation rate definition can be interpreted publicly given the continued focus on the completion phenomenon, and many have taken large steps to invest in strategies and resources that will help these numbers continue to climb.

While there seem to be limitations to the measurement of student success in current graduation rates used throughout the country, seeking evidence-based improvements in the rates remains important to institutional leaders, policymakers, students, and families. While 3-year graduation rate measurement is only one of the performance metrics used by The Aspen Institute (2017) for prize eligibility, there is much that can be learned from these institutions on adopted changes that contributed to rate improvement.

This study used multiple case study design, since these can be used to examine, describe, or explore the experiences of participants in the everyday context in which they occur (Yin, 2009). Creswell (2013) explained that, when using a case study approach, the “researcher explores an issue or problem, and a detailed understanding emerges from
examining a case or several cases” (p. 123). By reviewing data from multiple case studies, this research explored and described changes that were attempted or implemented at community colleges with the intent of improving the graduation rates of students. Through a review focused on completion outcomes, the goal was to closely examine how these institutions excel at helping students earn an associate’s degree or attain a certificate with demonstrated value in the labor market and to ensure that students make timely progress toward degree/certificate completion. The following research questions framed this inquiry:

RQ1. What institutional characteristics do community college leaders, administrators, and faculty view as the most important predictors of student success that warrant fiscal and human resource investments?

RQ2. What institutional practices (programs and services) did these community colleges adopt to support college completion (measured by graduation rates) for their students?

RQ3. How do institutional leaders, administrators, and faculty describe the changes that occurred on campus? Was the change process successfully managed or not?

Theoretical Framework

Student success initiatives are forcing education leaders to explore processes already in place and the implementation of additional policy adoption that will stimulate additional positive gains to graduation and completion outcomes. Since there are institutional, state, and federal goals that are being examined, adjusted, and designed to impact the various metrics that can directly or indirectly influence graduation rates, organizational change theory was selected as the framework to examine changes that were occurring at the selected institutions in this study.
Kezar (2014) explored change within the higher education setting and categorized change attempts in six main change models and theories: (a) scientific management, (b) evolutionary, (c) political, (d) social cognition, (e) cultural, and (f) institutional. The positive takeaway from each of these is the illustration of key insights from Kezar’s change macro framework (see Figure 1). The reality is that change attempts that have been successful are those that have drawn from all six perspectives. Since there will undoubtedly be examples of change that institutions have attempted that have been unsuccessful as well (or at least not due in part to the practice attempted), this framework and the consideration of the six theories in some combination will add more context for why institutional characteristics and/or practices have worked at one institution and not at another. The change macro framework that Kezar developed will guide how the data are analyzed.

**Site Selection – Study Participants**

Based upon feedback during both the pilot study and preliminary outreach to The Aspen Institute directly, the focus was to approach the 2017 Finalists With Distinction and 2017 Rising Star institutions to gauge interest in participation. Of the 10 finalists in 2017, four had been finalists for the prize at least once before, with two of these colleges in the Top 10 every year since the Aspen Prize was launched. The assumption was that all of these schools were primed to eventually earn the top prize, and by examining several institutions that had been in contention multiple times, high-impact practices would emerge across them all.

Despite The Aspen Institute’s use of the IPEDS geography options of “urban” versus “suburban,” the institutions selected each have diverse constituents they serve, and
Figure 1. Change macro framework. Adapted from How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change by A. Kezar, 2014, p. 46.

these different populations ultimately come from urban, rural, and suburban locations, which meant there would be hierarchical differences that institutions place on resource allocation. In addition to each of the main campuses, these schools all have branch campuses and instructional sites and centers with locations across all of their respective state. The geography of these locations is intended to educate and provide services to students from each of the counties throughout the state, so similarities in schools with similarities in their measurements related to success may also have similar explanations behind their performance. Additionally, since some states have more centralized community college systems, whereas others are much more autonomous, the selection of a single state would raise the issues that had been advised to avoid during the pilot study.

One of the Rising Star colleges (Odessa College, TX) had the IPEDS geographic location classification of urban, whereas the other three sites were all classified as suburban, which led to Odessa College’s elimination for further consideration. With that
removal, three colleges remained that would be approached for further exploration. The three remaining institutions included both 2017 Finalists With Distinction and one of the Rising Star institutions. Table 1 illustrates the 3-year graduation rates for the selected institutions, the progress that has been made over time, and a comparison to the national community college rates.

With the selection of the three schools finalized, The Aspen Institute provided recommendations for key personnel to contact directly at each college for this study. With the receipt of this contact information, the next step was to use snowballing tactics to further the research. Snowball sampling is when a researcher contacts informants through contact information that is provided by other informants. This process is, by necessity, repetitive: informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on. Hence the evolving “snowball” effect, captured in a metaphor that touches on the central quality of this sampling procedure. (Noy, 2008, p. 330)

Once initial outreach commenced to the primary points of contact The Aspen Institute provided, there were individual IRB hurdles. Upon receiving IRB approval from each of the colleges, initial telephone conversations were set up to discuss the three primary research questions and to gauge further participant interest and inclusion. After the preliminary calls were completed, the three key personnel at each institution provided additional contacts.

The Aspen Institute’s Prize for Community College Excellence is considered one of the most impressive distinctions that a community college can receive; former President Obama once said, “It’s basically the Oscars for great community colleges” (as cited in Fodness, 2015, para. 9) so when direct outreach to the institutional personnel was
Table 1

*Three-Year Graduation Rates for Selected Institutions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Name</th>
<th>2013 Three-Year Graduation Rate</th>
<th>2015 Three-Year Graduation Rate</th>
<th>2017 Three-Year Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broward College</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian River State College</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jacinto Community College</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Community College Average</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


conducted, it was with optimism that key personnel at each school would assist with providing recommendations for college leadership, including the president of each institution, the provost/vice president for academic affairs, the vice president of student services, faculty members, and frontline student service directors (e.g., advising, registration, financial aid), who would be selected for interviews related to the primary research questions. Other decision-making individuals and departments were going to be added if necessary. Based on the criteria discussed, the three institutions that agreed to participate ultimately included Broward College in Florida, Indian River State College in Florida, and San Jacinto College in Texas. These three institutions included both of the 2017 Finalists With Distinction and one of the Rising Star colleges. Contacts established at each site ultimately provided contact information for additional staff and employees who were representative of key personnel involved and instrumental to the changes that had occurred on campus, resulting in eight total contacts being established per school or
24 total key personnel participating in the interviews across the three schools. The complete list of institutional contacts is included within Appendix A.

The total number of interviews was contemplated before any interview was scheduled. Since these sites each employ thousands of employees, there would have to be careful consideration of the appropriate number of participants to achieve data saturation. The initial approach was to begin with the 24 initial suggestions for interviewees and under a thematic saturation approach, which means data should be collected until no more patterns or themes emerge. It was discussed with each participant that a follow-up conversation may take place to see if there were key personnel they would recommend. With the understanding that there is not a single method to reach data saturation, the starting point for the initial sample size was where the study began with the optimism that the data obtained would accomplish both the depth and breadth sought. One way to describe a proper approach is as follows:

The easiest way to differentiate between rich and thick data is to think of rich as quality and thick as quantity. Thick data is a lot of data; rich data is many layered, intricate, detailed, nuanced, and more. One can have a lot of thick data that is not rich; conversely, one can have rich data but not a lot of it. The trick, if you will, is to have both. (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1409)

Significance of the Study

Although The Aspen Institute (2018b) recently revealed the eligibility model for how they identify the public 2-year institutions (out of nearly 1,000) for initial consideration for the second round selection process, the model is based on institutional performance in three general areas: (a) retention, completion, and transfer; (b) improvement in performance over time; and (c) equity, which is defined as performance outcomes for underrepresented minorities and institutions in low-income service areas.
The metric related to performance that makes up one third of the weighted value includes: (a) first-year retention rates for students, (b) 3-year graduation rates for all students and minority groups, and (c) certificates and degrees awarded per 100 students for all students and minority groups (The Aspen Institute, 2018b).

A primary intention is for the findings to highlight institutions that have high success metrics, schools that have made continual improvements to their success metrics, and/or schools that have overcome challenges moving the needle on this measurement, all with the purpose of aiding struggling schools in the future with proven approaches of how to make progress on the completion and success front. Through the identification of the best practices these institutions have employed to become exemplars within the community college sector, the institutional perspective results will aid in showing how these changes have been sustained over time and maintained.

**Data Collection Tools**

There were no established instruments used to capture the responses from each school, and the interview questions and process were created exclusively for this study. An interview protocol was developed (see Appendix B), and the interview questions were used during the finalization of site selection.

**Procedures**

Semi-structured interviews with the 24 college personnel were set up and conducted by telephone during the fall and winter of 2017. The interviews were audiotaped with participant consent and additional handwritten notes were taken. A transcription service was used upon completion of the interviews.
Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted through a 2-step process: first, the initial questions were sent via email, and second, interviews were conducted via telephone. The responses were coded for schools that ranked certain characteristics high and had evidence of strong investment in these areas, schools that ranked certain characteristics low and had evidence of low investments in these areas, and schools that had a disconnect between what they ranked as high or low and that had the opposite in their investments. The responses were then mapped back to the conceptual framework for areas of similarity. Kezar’s (2014) framework included four key pillars: (a) Type of Change, (b) Context for Change, (c) Agency/Leadership, and (d) Approach to Change.

Trustworthiness

As a community college administrator, coupled with the nature of the research being conducted for the satisfaction of a doctoral dissertation, it is fully expected that schools that were approached had a level of confidence that the intent behind this study was to obtain findings that will help inform other schools struggling with similar concerns on where to invest finite resources given the number of competing priorities tied to each school’s mission.

Potential Research Bias

Given the way in which graduation and retention rates are calculated and publicly reported, this researcher already had an issue in using this as a measure of success. The expectation was that certain community college leaders or staff associated with graduation and completion, whether it be on the location of the school, within the population served, and/or in proximity to senior institutions, may also share an
understanding of the shortcomings associated with the accepted definition of on-time completion and how graduate rates are calculated per IPEDS.

Limitations of the Study

One key challenge with the way graduation rates are calculated is the length of time required before a cohort is reported. Since 150% of time is used, a 2-year institution has to have 3 years’ worth of data to report. The lag time that exists between a freshmen class beginning school and when their metrics are reported can give the impression that an institution has not made any changes to their standard operating procedures. By examining Aspen Institute finalists, this was not likely to be an issue, but the shortcomings in the calculation are worth mentioning.

Given the exclusivity that community colleges recognized as Aspen Institute finalists reflect, it was possible, prior to the interviews beginning, that institutions might be reluctant to share lessons learned. This was quickly assuaged once the interviews commenced. Additionally, since interviews included eight total employees per site, there may have been elements that were missed, but the belief is that saturation did occur. It is believed there was sufficient participation from each site to illustrate any emergent themes and that each site consisted of an adequate number of participant interviews.

One other potential concern was the manner in which the interviews were conducted. Three total techniques were considered to complete the interviews; these included face-to-face, telephone, and email interviews. Ultimately, the definition of a qualitative interview is for the researcher to obtain descriptions and meanings to central themes directly from the participants, and the main objective is for the researcher to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale, 1996). Although there was
a possible loss of social cues through the telephone method, this approach allowed the interviewer access to all 24 initial participants.
CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

Gaining Aspen Institute recognition is indicative of what successful community colleges are doing related to student achievement, and one key to this research was to understand what the profiled community colleges were doing and what changes were implemented to make improvements in student success. Prior to the outreach that eventually resulted in the ultimate data collection for this study, a review of both federal and state data for the three sites was conducted to get familiarized with the institutions. In addition to the 3-year graduation rate performance, all three colleges were outperforming the national average when it came to first-year retention rates. For any 2-year institution to successfully include a graduate within their 3-year rate, students who begin full-time would logically need to enroll in subsequent semesters, and Broward College, Indian River State College, and San Jacinto Community College all had demonstrated rates higher than national community college rates. The calculation is a percentage of fall first-time (full- and part-time) students returning the following fall semester. The measure combines the most recent 3 years of students who were still enrolled the following year after originally enrolling as a first-time student the previous fall, and the data are culled from IPEDS Enrollment Survey files. A review of data from previous year Aspen Prize eligibility showed that Indian River had consistently had increases to this rate, while Broward and San Jacinto had some variance that was still higher than the national rates (The Aspen Institute, 2018a; see Table 2).

An additional item debated in the literature that is worth reviewing is student characteristics and their relationship to retention and completion. Since all three sites have open-enrollment policies that allow any applicant to gain admission, these
Table 2

*First-Year Retention Rates for Selected Institutions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Name</th>
<th>2013 First-Year Retention Rate</th>
<th>2015 First-Year Retention Rate</th>
<th>2017 First-Year Retention Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broward College</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian River State College</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jacinto Community College</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Community College Average</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Community colleges have little control over what students ultimately enroll. One of the measures The Aspen Institute also reviews within their model is related to equity and minority enrollment, which looks at the percentage of undergraduates enrolled in a given aid year who identify as either Black, Hispanic, or Native American and that is recorded via the institutional enrollment surveys that each college submits on an annual basis. All three institutions enroll a large number of students who identify as minorities, and the 3-year graduation rates for these students exceed the national average as well (see Table 3). Although the colleges have no control over which students ultimately enroll, all three campuses have demonstrated success on improvements to serving at-risk populations and the overall student population.

One additional item of consideration, given that there will be multiple references to this work, is the importance and credit that many respondents highlighted related to the Pathways work on which each college has embarked. The American Association of
Table 3

Three-Year Graduation Rates for Minority Populations at Selected Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Name</th>
<th>Percent Minority (2017)</th>
<th>2013 Three-Year Graduation Rate</th>
<th>2015 Three-Year Graduation Rate</th>
<th>2017 Three-Year Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broward College</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian River State College</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jacinto Community College</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Community College Average</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Community Colleges (Jenkins, Lahr, & Fink, 2017) launched the AACC Pathways Project in 2015 that invited 30 community colleges to assist in the design, planning, and implementation of guided pathways reform. This reform involved a redesign of academic programs and student services that structure coherent pathways for students to assist in degree completion. According to the Community College Research Center (CCRC), for colleges

rethinking their new student intake systems to help students choose and successfully enter a program of study as quickly as possible. These comprehensive, guided pathways reforms are designed to provide students with greater support and guidance as they make decisions, while not limiting their options. (as cited in Jenkins, 2015, p. 934)

All three colleges selected as sites for this study were members of the inaugural cohort of 30 that the AACC (2018) selected to initially participate. Since academic degrees, certificates, and student services are organized in different ways at different institutions, there is not a single model implemented at these three or the remaining 27 colleges. The AACC Pathways Project’s participating colleges have different tactics they
have employed within their respective redesign, but there are numerous commonalities to the features and goals that each is striving to accomplish.

**Broward College**

The Junior College of Broward County enrolled the inaugural class of college students in the fall of 1960. Community college creation in Florida started in late 1957, and roll out continued based on priority and population size of each sector of the state. There were 701 students who took classes the first year. By the late 1960s, the institution had changed its name to Broward Junior College, and then, through legislative changes within the state, changed its name again in 1970 to Broward Community College.

In 2008, the official adoption of the current name—Broward College—took place, which was reflective of its designation as one of Florida’s state colleges. Broward currently enrolls over 68,000 students annually. Broward College has been an eligible institution for the Aspen Prize during each award cycle dating back to 2011. The college was acknowledged as one of two finalists for the 2013 prize and as a Finalist With Distinction for the 2017 prize.

In total, there were eight interviews completed with participants from Broward College. Participants included a campus president, an associate vice president, two associate deans, an executive director, an associate professor, and two assistant professors. The full titles are contained in Appendix A.

**Primary Observations**

**Awareness of students and their needs.** Across the participants, one item that quickly emerged was the overall understanding of key demographics of the student body. Almost half of the enrolled students at Broward College qualify for federal Pell Grants,
with underrepresented minority students making up nearly two thirds of the student body. Both of these two items are considerably higher than the national averages.

Underrepresented and low-income students encounter barriers to student success, and this was not something lost on the interview participants. The responsibilities that students have outside of the classroom were observed by all participants as the primary barriers that prevent students from being successful. Concerns about affordability and students’ lack of preparation emerged in a majority of the interviews as well. Being cognizant of their student population and the demographics of these students seemed to be well known by the interviewees as well. A commitment to this student population was clear, and despite the variance between a recent high-school graduate or a returning adult student, the acknowledgement that many students who enroll at Broward are first-time college students was enough of a commonality to provide a focus on student success efforts. One assistant professor shared that their students “have different experiences or expectations or ideas about what it means to participate in a college environment and that also can be a challenge . . . sometimes that can be an advantage.”

**Interdependence and understanding.** A shared awareness of the challenges facing their student population is a starting point, but the level of understanding that the interview participants had about the efforts of other college departments was the piece that connected understanding to action on how to direct students to the appropriate people and resources. With a faculty and staff of over 2,000 people, it could be easy for employees to simply know their area of expertise without much knowledge beyond that silo. The amount and extent of information on institutional practices and departments outside each interviewee’s area of responsibility was quite impressive. In the interviews,
a specific question was designed to determine what department or service was seen as most vital to or collaborative with the interviewee’s specific area of work; however, the amount of cross-departmental understanding emerged and consistently appeared in many of the respondent’s remarks. The actual responses did not all generate a consensus response toward a single department. Some of the faculty responses identified student services, and some pointed toward the senior leadership team as most important. Some of the administrator responses indicated that it was the academic divisions, while other responses indicated that the workforce development units were most vital. The absence of a single facilitator as essential to success across the responses indicated that information and knowledge is shared across the units. The level of interdependence between and among units and people throughout the campus in pursuit of success was deeply woven into the culture of the organization.

**Organizing model.** The genesis of the Pathways reform that was initiated and that now drives how the college focuses the onboarding of students, and the scaffolding of programs and services that are provided to ensure greater levels of student success, has involved many participants. Comprehensive use of data has also driven the development of programs and services and the models that are currently in place. According to one assistant professor, “Broward College has always had a sort of very collaborative, collegial, messy-style of getting things done. Millions of people get input and involvement and seemingly come together in a consensus that gets things done.”

By putting data in everyone’s hands, rather than centralizing the data within the institutional research office, the registrar, or other administrative office, the nuances of the data’s meaning in context can be lost. Participants who serve on planning and
oversight committees and subcommittees have ensured the data that are collected and analyzed are more fully shared to be better understood and used throughout the institution.

**Educating and communicating.** Another key theme that emerged from those engaged in the Pathways initiative (and other related initiatives) was how this particular initiative helped foster communication across each campus. While it was clear that there were ongoing cross-departmental conversations on day-to-day issues, for something as new and comprehensive as Pathways, the college approached it as an instructional opportunity. The goals, purposes, and processes of Pathways were actually taught to the college constituencies. Beyond building awareness, helping individuals and groups understand the link between the assessments and the outcomes was essential to the goal of having all faculty and staff with the same minimum level of understanding. An associate professor, when asked about Pathways, shared, “Teaching and educating the whole institution about what assessment is, and what it’s supposed to do, and whether it’s formative or summative and getting people much more literate about assessment in general.” This was the approach they took. It was also confirmed that this approach was not limited to strictly the Pathways work that was done.

Purposefully establishing the way departments interact with one another also required intentionality behind the collaboration. Merely taking a top-down or bottom-up approach can work, but one of the reasons that Broward interviewees all seemed to credit an element of their institutions’ success was based upon the approach employed when it came to nurturing some of the intentional relationships across departments and divisions regardless of reporting lines. While there were many comments related to the
communication lines and data sharing, the interim assistant vice president summarized the creation of teams as needing to populate them with “someone there that [sic] speaks their language and understands, as that helps and is often 50% of the battle. There has to be a strategy and thinking behind these, and it cannot simply be random.”

**Policy and funding.** Process improvement for students, faculty, and staff certainly requires an institutional commitment. However, there are also federal and state policies that influence where institutions of higher education focus their priorities. The stimulus behind certain college initiatives for Broward College that was definitely shared in some of the interviews was the policy scrutiny tied to higher education outcomes in the State of Florida. While the institution has been extremely initiative-rich, one campus president shared that the reliance on state funding will factor into what the college does moving forward since

there are initiatives that you are not going to be able to fund at the same level and it will lead to pulling back on initiatives, and historically we try every initiative to the student’s benefit and our financial detriment.

The availability of funding will influence the prioritization of what the college does campus-wide, especially given that their overall credit enrollment has been flat despite increases in the number of students enrolling.

Functions and responsibilities across the college seem to be well known and are also being guided by the mindfulness of external factors. It is also the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit that seemed to be central to many of the conversations with college personnel. The number of initiatives being launched over the last few years spoke to the ability of the institution to be willing to try new things and be explorative. Numerous interviews referenced the establishment and evolution of the first-year experience that
had been launched to assist with any and all students beginning their collegiate pursuits. The associate dean shared that the framing of the college’s mindset on planning new initiatives required buy-in from multiple participants collegewide. He referred to this approach as a “sea change for the institution.” He continued, “It’s helping us focus on success, completion, retention, graduation as a whole, and of course that takes work, and it takes intentional planning and pulling people together, but this has helped a lot.”

**Reflection and redesign.** Numerous initiatives, and an entrepreneurial spirit that has led to new programs and an expansion of resources to larger student cohorts, were cited by many of the interviewed participants. The visibility that Broward’s success has brought to the college has executive leadership and managers continuing to review what is being offered to avoid merely resting on past successes. There did not seem to be any contentment with simply improving programs that have already proven to be successful. The feedback loop that the assessment data have offered the college has led to constant reengineering of many of the processes that have already worked. One assistant professor summarized it best by framing the college’s approach as

> the idea of maintaining both consistency and continuous improvement. The consistency is in the meeting in the shared goal and objective and the drive toward a more rich understanding so the focus of that understanding might be different from group to group. Everyone is trying to better understand within that group say the pathways objectives or the assessment objectives but then you need continuous improvement built into that too, working to say all right here's what's working here's what's not.

Looking at ways to address campus issues with a problem-solving approach is not unique, but the commitment to make those solutions better in each iteration was something woven throughout many of the observations.
The most revealing observation was that the institutions’ success has not led to self-satisfaction. A continuing focus on improvements to student success permeated the majority of the strengths that originally earned Broward College high praise from The Aspen Institute and other observers across higher education. The philosophical approach is one that is based on data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement. However, an executive director cautioned when she shared:

We have the focus from an institutional perspective that we care about the right stuff . . . but not everyone has the understanding as to what to do to help with the massive numbers of students that we deal with.

This statement reinforces the way the college looks to the future and the work ahead.

**Indian River State College**

Indian River State College has a history that dates back to 1960 when many community colleges within the United States first began to enroll students. At the time of inception, it opened under the original moniker of Indian River Junior College. In 1970, it merged with Lincoln Junior College and underwent a name change to Indian River Community College. This was during a time where a national trend emerged that had many public 2-year institutions opting to adjust the word “junior” to “community.”

In late 2007, Indian River Community College received state approval to begin offering select baccalaureate degrees to meet local workforce needs in addition to the associate’s degree options under the State of Florida’s legislation titled the State College Pilot Project. This legislation was a part of the Florida College System’s goal of expanding access throughout the state to students. It was with this expansion to the institution’s mission that the college was renamed Indian River State College in 2008.
In total, there were eight interviews completed with Indian River State College. The participants included the President, the Provost, a vice president, an assistant dean, two directors, the Executive Assistant to the President, and an assistant professor. The complete titles are contained within Appendix A.

**Primary Observations**

**Immediate assignment of advisors.** Acknowledgement of the socioeconomic status and the challenges facing many students who are first-generation emerged across many of the interviews. The level of knowledge related to financial aid terminology, household income, and the realities of how much federal and state grants pay toward tuition and fees was impressive since many interviewees were not directly responsible for or engaged in financial aid. Those interviewed were very conscious of the struggles that first-generation students encounter and illustrated a commitment to understanding the challenges of each student with whom they may work, either directly or in groups. When a student first enrolls at Indian River, there is an automatic assignment of an academic adviser, which provides an opportunity for students to establish rapport with their adviser. The assignments are not initially intentional, following a case management approach, so opportunities are provided for students to switch advisers to ensure a better fit. One assistant professor shared:

> You have to be whoever that student needs because sometimes a student is going to need you to be more nurturing and the next time they see you it may be just a matter of fact quick question and be in and out.

Knowing that their student population is made up of many first-generation entrants and that the students may not have a network of assistance to answer specific questions, this
approach allows for a best fit in advising assignments. Cognizance of different student and staff personality types was also a key identification within many of the interviews.

**A commitment to change.** The ability to recognize exactly how difficult it is to make improvements to student success came up across many of the conversations. Employing individuals who are committed to change and who also understand that their respective department is only one piece of a larger puzzle in efforts toward student success at Indian River emerged in multiple responses as well. A willingness to try multiple initiatives can promote important change, but this willingness runs the risk that some initiatives can fail or prove only modestly successful. The Executive Assistant to the President, when asked what type of support was provided from the college leadership, responded, “We have open minds and open ears to ideas that we believe can drive student success even if it’s the most fractional bit. Moving the needle is hard . . . but we have embraced that challenge.” Merely conducting business the same way it has always been done will rarely generate any positive outcomes, and the Indian River administration understands that change will require not only the introduction of new processes, but also the reengineering of existing processes.

**Results take time.** Although the finalist recognition by The Aspen Institute for 2017 is what led Indian River to being selected as one of the sites for this study, there has been continuous improvement to student completion metrics on their campus dating back multiple years. Developing a culture of student success that is embraced by the institution is intentional, comprehensive, and takes time. Not merely the recital of a mission or goal statement, genuine buy-in and commitment to the institution’s role in better serving its students was repeated throughout the interviews. Each interviewee stated in their own
words the commitment to student success and their role in promoting it; no one statement from strategic priorities or the mission statement permeated the interviews. One of the directors who was interviewed summarized the way ownership of student success existed on their campus:

It’s really about caring . . . keep the good of the institution in focus, operate on the principles of charity, give people the information they need, respect the dignity, interests, and needs of all members of the IRSC community, take the initiative, and don’t pass the buck.

While it is easy to have inspirational words like this published in a document somewhere, the adoption of this mindset requires that all employees discuss this approach openly and regularly, which seemed to this researcher to be an everyday occurrence on the Indian River campus.

**No single lever for change.** Neither The Aspen Institute nor members of the Indian River community who participated in these interviews would point to a single initiative that was behind the improvements in student completion that had been achieved. While there are formal programs that had been launched and supported within individual departments and campus-wide, it continually came back to cultural beliefs that the staff all had a student-focused dedication. Related to this, one director shared:

We have free reign to make recommendations and changes for the best. Our institution believes in questioning the status quo and that's just one of our principles. . . . You know the saying that if you continue to do it the same way you've always done it you will always get the same result and that’s why we're always trying new things to try to improve.

Understanding that change requires continuous improvement and that perfection will never be fully achieved can become enervating. Those interviewed described the culture
as one that will never be satisfied and shared that they believe there are other solutions to be found and new opportunities for success to be undertaken.

**Student engagement.** While decisions that get made at the administrative level will, or at least should, have the interests of students at their core, it can be easy for colleges to implement changes without understanding student behavior in full. The way policies get adopted and procedures get implemented can have the best of intentions, but not allowing students a voice in the decisions can also result in practices that are not fully informed. One issue that emerged in the interviews at Indian River was the need to become better informed on how best to schedule classes. While much is known generally about how best to schedule for different student types, it was discussed multiple times that students often have work responsibilities that need to be juggled over the course of a semester, which directly competes with how administrators want and often urge students to best map out the courses they need to take to meet program requirements. The courses that will satisfy the degree and transfer requirements are well documented, but too often community college students wait until right before a semester begins (and sometimes after the term has actually started) to ultimately enroll. One recent change that Indian River implemented will significantly alter how and when students register and establish the payment arrangements for their course load. The key takeaway with this example was not that the change was done solely based on the success data that Indian River compiled on the overall performance of “late” registrants, but rather that it involved student feedback prior to and during the launch of the revised policy. An assistant dean shared that change requires “always thinking about student success and making these hard choices.” The Assistant Dean continued, “That’s exactly what they’ve been, they’ve been
very hard decisions as we’re always thinking. ‘Is this in the best interest of students? Is it? Is it?’ Even if an unpopular point of view surfaced that might require a philosophical shift from what had always been done, staff were empowered to make changes if they were in students’ best interest, which allowed staff to own process improvement.

Understanding performance at a granular level and more sophisticated uses of data is something many colleges have embraced over the last few years. The prevalence and ease of access to the data exists not only for students who are enrolled or prospective students who may choose to enroll, but also for faculty and staff working with students throughout the college. The availability of data to policymakers and the media (through a variety of websites and, in many states, through right-to-know requests) can yield mixed results for institutions, particularly when numbers seem to be going up and down at the same time. What is the story? Having access to the data is helpful, but if there is not an explanation or translation of what the data really mean, then it can easily be mistaken by uninformed observers. One of the remarks that came up during a number of the interviews was the emphasis that college leadership placed on the communication of the data and the overall importance the data had to all corners of the institution. The President of Indian River makes it a point to share with all employees, in detail, the direction of the school multiple times each term. College leadership seemed to understand that the only way to ensure that improvement remained, not just an institutional goal but one for everyone throughout the college, was constant engagement. The ways employees understood the data were often discussed. Through the establishment of clear lines of communication, the college understood that changes would be better institutionalized through the sharing of knowledge. The Provost remarked that
the President kicks off every semester by “telling us where we’ve been, what we’ve accomplished, where we’re going and what our goals are.” The Provost continued: “We are a data-driven institution and are constantly mining that data, tweaking our course, and keeping everyone informed.” By involving everyone in the conversation, the President took transparency to a new level. The participation at these events approaches almost 100% of all college employees—so, by making it a priority to attend, the college has been able to achieve the improvements that it has.

Although there was an expectation that a single process implementation was something that would emerge across the interviews, the reality was that there was not one policy, program, or process that came up more than the focus on employee development. The diversity of those interviewed suggests a broad understanding of institutional characteristics, data, and the contributions of areas outside of each interviewee’s area of specialty. Either Indian River had employed a large number of employees with natural curiosity, or the institution was committed to ensuring that all staff and faculty were versed in initiatives to produce success. It is one thing for an institution to claim they use data to inform what and where to prioritize, but to invest in employee development with a focus on ensuring that ALL staff and faculty have a baseline understanding of the inner workings was surprising but not completely unexpected. This was one vice president’s response related to the establishment of the employee development program in 2000:

The idea being we're training our community but what are we doing internally to bring or take our people to the next level in their service to students? That commitment has never wavered and we invested into a facility just for faculty as a faculty sandboxing institute for academic excellence to learn new technologies try out new active learning strategies.
In Florida, there was a requirement in the 1990s for institutions of higher education to commit at least 2% of their operating budget to the investment of personal development opportunities; these went away by the early 2000s. Indian River estimates that in looking back, even with the elimination of the requirement, they continued to invest in their staff as an ongoing commitment to success.

The support of strong executive leadership, middle management, and front line staff with the same set of goals and a focus on student success came up in nearly all of the interviews. There were consistent responses related to where the majority of the changes were occurring. Given the range of respondents, participants could have easily revealed that there was either a top-down or bottom-up approach to change; yet, the one consistent response was that dependable results were materializing all throughout the organization. The President explained, “You have to work to have high expectations, empower the people to meet those expectations, and don't punish them for mistakes when they want to research or try something different to see if that would work better.” He went on to stress the importance that transparency has had on the culture too, that it takes a lot of communication between the higher administration and mid-management, the deans and the provost and the people that are getting closer to the front line can undo very quickly what you're trying to do from the top without an awful lot of communication so that you have an institutionalized belief in student success.

By approaching institutional initiatives with an understanding from all levels of the organization, Indian River has clearly attained a student-oriented culture.

**San Jacinto College**

San Jacinto College was initiated in 1960 when five school districts established the East Harris County Union Junior College to serve students from five nearby
independent school districts that bordered Pasadena, TX. Within a year, and coinciding with the enrollment of the inaugural class in 1961, the Board of Regents voted to change the name to the San Jacinto Junior College District.

San Jacinto College was recognized and certified for the first time by the Achieving the Dream organization in 2011 as a Leader College based on the improvements the institution had made in student completion rates. Each Leader College designation lasts for a 3-year cycle before an institution has to resubmit recertification documentation. The improvements that have been realized are based, in part, on initiatives in which the college has invested that have a direct relationship to increased persistence, retention, and completion rates.

In total, there were eight interviews completed at San Jacinto College. The participants included the Deputy Chancellor/President, the Provost, an associate vice chancellor, two academic deans, a department chair, an instructor, and an analyst. The complete titles are contained within Appendix A.

**Primary Observations**

While the positive gains that San Jacinto achieved with respect to student completion are impressive, one of the key areas of discussion was related to how these changes were ultimately implemented. Some participants responded that there was a lot of luck involved in the arrival of a committed faculty and staff, and one analyst dispelled the notion that San Jacinto’s success was an accidental fluke when he shared the following about the approach undertaken by the leadership:

They very deliberately kind of started cultivating our institution’s values and working them into everything. You can find any San Jac employee and ask them
what our mission is, what our values are, and what we are about, and they will tell you that they know what our mission is and they know what we are about.

Although the only confirmation of this polling was conducted with the original interviewee list, the semi-structured approach of the interview protocol allowed for this hypothesis to be tested. To no surprise, all participants did provide consistent answers that reinforced the focus by all employees on a consistent definition of what student success means on their campus.

**Academic and student affairs integration.** The integration the student service administrative units have with the faculty units at San Jacinto was an item of discussion in a majority of the interview responses. From the professional perspective of this researcher, it can often be a challenge when professional advising departments dictate the course sequencing for students based on the layout of the college catalog without consulting the faculty who are actually teaching the courses at many community colleges. Further, it is often observed that administrators tend to center success solely on progress toward degree completion and need to engage thoughtfully on supports, class schedules, and advising designed to improve success. One item that San Jacinto seemed to do a strong job of during the implementation of the Pathways model was to consult with and involve faculty when the major maps were being developed. One instructor who was intimately involved shared:

I was invited to participate in the sessions of the Pathways program, and administrators gave us an opportunity to dissect the certificate and degree plans to see where fat can be trimmed and use the data from student success, how often the course is offered, and even if the course is necessary to only offer classes that benefit the student.
By involving the faculty in the design of the program mapping, San Jacinto ensured that any impacted parties, which in this case would be faculty and the courses they ultimately taught, understood why scheduling changes were being implemented. The use of data on student enrollment patterns, course offering frequency, and overall linkage to both applicable degree completion and workforce needs was done in a manner that allowed participation from all employees to better guarantee a focus on student success.

Addressing complacency in the way certain roles were designed and what responsibilities employees were asked to perform was a topic that was discussed at San Jacinto as well. A thoughtful review of how to more effectively impact the role that department chairs served provided one of the faculty members, upon her arrival, to question and redesign the role of the department chair that she now holds within her department. When she first joined the teaching staff at San Jacinto, there were four department chairs within her unit. Evolution of the department chair responsibilities led to a consolidation of the four chairs into one with a more data-driven focus. She shared that the role “evolved a little bit to be more operational and with less instructional requirements and duties.” She continued, “It’s actually now into a lot more reports and a lot more data analysis.” By being more data-driven, the chair now focuses on assisting her faculty associates with some of the larger college priorities. She continued to expand on the way the college looks at problems: “Change is the new normal, and that was going to be our thing.” Some of the change was due in part to internal reorganizations. Some were dictated from the state level to ensure better transfer opportunities for students pursuing baccalaureate options, but by adopting the willingness and openness to change, the college staff understood the rationale behind the updates.
No bad ideas. Experimentation was a theme that was strongly encouraged and embraced at San Jacinto when there were noticeable pockets of success across numerous conversations. The latitude that an entrepreneurial approach provides allows for faculty to be empowered enough to attempt new approaches within their classrooms. The reward is that, with an administration that pays close attention to these types of changes, there can be college-wide adoption if a strategy proves to be impactful. The provost shared:

We’ve encouraged the faculty to experiment and it’s one of the things that if you experiment and have great success, wonderful, what can we do to ramp that across the campus or across the district? If it’s not been successful, that’s just as enlightening to us because we know, OK, we tried it and it didn’t work. Let’s try something different.

Not being afraid to experiment and finding takeaways that lead to continued process improvement is important for faculty to stay engaged with their work. Because the genesis for change is originating within the faculty and their approach to courses rather than them simply responding to leadership decisions, the hope is that this adaptative approach will continue to permeate within the academic departments.

Efforts to improve student success are not always as organic as allowing faculty to experiment with different styles or approaches. One area that San Jacinto credits with a lot of the success they have enjoyed is the redesign the developmental courses have undertaken. Developmental courses are an area with which multiple community college students and institutions across the country struggle. Lack of preparation or time away from college are just two possible explanations for why so many students find themselves needing the remediation that developmental courses in English and math provide for students to eventually enroll in college-level courses. One approach that has gained traction in community colleges is a corequisite approach that allows students to enroll
simultaneously within both the college-level course and the developmental course; this is referred to as the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP). While this form of mainstreaming students into both developmental writing courses side by side with the entry-level English course has proven to increase overall success rates, one drawback is that there are cost concerns. In speaking with San Jacinto’s academic leadership, the awareness of the costs was present, but the ultimate opportunity for improved outcomes related to student success made the investment well worth it. One academic dean shared, “This program has been extremely successful but it’s very expensive . . . but our success rates have been phenomenal.” The acknowledgement that these courses count as two classes toward each instructor’s term load is understood, but the college felt strongly enough about this approach to make the investment, since the return on investment can be quantified provided students respond accordingly and are academically successful. The dean shared that the college investment did not stop there and expanded on this topic:

Our college pays so much money for our student success centers, and we have the tutoring, we have supplemental instruction, which a lot of schools do. We have a computer lab that’s available to the students, for the online courses we have Turnitin Atomic Learning and Smart Thinking. These are all ways that the college does pay for those things.

**Supporting change.** Nowhere in the conversation with the dean, or any of the interview participants, was there any second-guessing of the investments the institution makes related to student success. Although there was an optimism that there would be consensus behind one key initiative the institution felt was responsible for critical changes, the fact that San Jacinto was willing to devote resources to everything that had positive results was telling. One specific protocol question was related to the support the college provides and whether there were any examples of a student success effort being
eclipsed in favor of a different college priority—there was not one example from any of the respondents that provided an example of where this was the case. The above example was one of many where different improvements were cited based on the cumulative results that were observed.

The integration of change through a reorganization of staff is one with which San Jacinto interview respondents also had direct experience. In an attempt to get a better understanding of how the institution identified whether or not their staffing was appropriately positioned and with the best membership, there were conversations on how the institution “right-sized” their personnel. During an exercise related to the investigation of their staffing, the topic of how employee assessment was done revealed an interesting observation. One associate vice chancellor summarized it succinctly:

The only way you learn how to have those difficult conversations with people is to have the difficult conversations with people. That’s not something that all the “thought process practice” in the world is going to get you through. You’ve got to do it, and once you get it with one, then the next one will come along and it’ll be a little bit easier and a little bit easier.

The way management approached staff was clearly an iterative process, and by being permitted to review the makeup of a departmental team, managers took the necessary steps to ensure that suitable employees were in the appropriate roles. From the professional experience of this researcher, management is all too often made up of staff who outlast the rest of their peer group. With a focus on their students, San Jacinto recognized that, to achieve the goals of the institution, staff were provided the freedom and opportunity to take steps to construct a team that committed to the same purposes.

Supporting change with different campus constituents requires a clear commitment not to waiver when there is opposition to some of the change initiatives that
are being attempted. Since disagreements are bound to materialize when large-scale changes are being discussed, champions of the change must try many different approaches to obtain the required employee consent. When San Jacinto was originally attempting to integrate the Pathways work into the academic planning for students, it was initially met with some opposition from faculty who had strong convictions about courses that were taught. One dean shared the progress:

We have gotten to the point now where there is not that pushback. We have continued to have the same theme over and over, year after year, to where people are finally worn down to that point, “No, OK. I guess this program of study thing and pathways thing is not that bad.” And they know it’s not going to be the end of the world or the end of anyone’s program.

Remaining consistent and committed to the needs of students for completion, transfer, and workforce preparation requires resolve. The dean went on to share that, as long as it was backed up by the data, the college obtained more and more support from even the loudest opponents. In fact, the dean had a memorable example that helped punctuate the case even though it required an obligation to invest serious time:

I would say one of our biggest critics that we had in one particular area went from being one of the biggest critics to the one that was like, “Why aren’t we doing? This is the best thing for our students” by the time we were finishing the conversation about a year and a half later.

The takeaway from this illustration is that, even though there was a significant amount of time spent on getting the appropriate agreement, a vocal critic who was against the changes the Pathways model would require ended up becoming another supporter. By taking the time to get the faculty member on board, the division now possessed an additional supporter who could be used in future conversations the next time a detractor voiced any concerns. The college was committed to the progress that Pathways
programming could accomplish for student success, and this points out that sometimes patience pays off.

The approach San Jacinto has taken in their focus on student success, while balancing the challenges associated with institutional change, created some interesting conversations during the course of the interviews. It was apparent from the interviews that there was a clear commitment from college leadership to supporting change. The deputy chancellor provided a perspective that summarized the view on student success:

I think about this often. There is no end to this work. We assess and look at our assessment results constantly and we get into the weeds on looking at data. We break it down in every way imaginable. We’re always trying to identify students who have difficulties, what are the difficulties, how can we intervene and what are the strategies that we can put in place to support these students?

The genuine belief that there is no end to the institution being satisfied with results was truly remarkable. By continuing to question the processes and to never stop looking for ways to build upon previous successes demonstrated how San Jacinto has made the advancements that they have related to the success of their students. The increased promise to continually be looking at different ways to solve the problems students face has positioned the college to continuously be looking for improvement opportunities through voluntary participation.

**Conclusions**

The improvements that these three community colleges have realized in their completion rates had enough in common that they all garnered Aspen Institute recognition. They each were considered finalists, and of the three campuses, two were Finalists With Distinction and one received the Rising Star distinction. Even with the AACC Pathways Project participation allowing independence on the implementation of
how the Pathways reform was achieved, there was much more commonality in how the change processes were adopted within these large, diverse community campuses to generate the progress to student completion goals that they have each, in their own way, been able to advance.

Despite the differences to the methods employed, there were some institutional characteristics that were quite similar across all three institutions. The culture and leadership at these selected sites all had a lot of parallels. Executive and senior leadership was supportive of all levels of their organizations, but the reciprocation from the rest of the campus constituents, back to the top, provided a living feedback loop that encouraged communication, transparency, and investment. There did not appear to be any work or information silos, and the knowledge that many interview participants shared with respect to the work colleagues were conducting provided a glimpse into campuses that really understood their institutional priorities, individual goals, and how these two could coexist. An extension of this was the embracing and strategic usage of data to monitor, baseline, and identify gaps in student performance. All too often, data are either “black boxed” and not shared with appropriate members of an organization, or they are not collected or used. Each of these colleges was extremely supportive of the data collection and dissemination to the campus community. What was clear throughout each of these conversations with faculty and staff at the three colleges was a strong culture of support that encouraged the use of data to accomplish calculated concentrations on improvement.

The role and success that the guided Pathways adoption had on these campuses was also a key analog that presented itself during the interviews, as well as the importance it had on each of the campuses. The reality that all three of these institutions
were original pilot members of the AACC Pathways Project was actually a coincidence, as the initial site selection was more focused on The Aspen Institute and each college’s finalist status. While the implementation timing may have been coincidental, the similarities that the interviews all shared spoke to the larger theme at play. Since all three schools began their rollout of the Pathways model in late 2015, there was not too much structure provided by the AACC or even the CCRC. As early-adopters and even innovators, the research that exists now was partially informed by the identified strengths and weaknesses that were shared by the original participant schools. The framework the schools employed was strategic, but it was the integration throughout the entire institutional ecosystem that proved to be the vital lynchpin that helped make this work. It was impactful to both of these institutions and to the schools that followed their lead. The interview respondents acknowledged that it was not an off-the-shelf or even a one-size-fits-all policy panacea. It was informed by research and best practice, but it was through the engagement of numerous campus constituents, awareness of the larger community college completion context, and no false sense of delusion about the time commitment that a reform such as this would take. The absence of an expectation for immediate results was coupled with the cognizance that reengineering the weaknesses while also doubling down on the pockets of success were central to all three schools. There are multiple failed attempts at strategy adoption that college administrators can share from direct experience, and part of what was consistent in the interview responses was how these colleges experienced their pathways work—the culture change that accompanied the programmatic adoption relied heavily on strong leadership from numerous levels of
the college, including highly engaged staff and faculty focused on the long-term success of the initiative.

An extension of the communication theme was also present in different ways on the campuses, but each campus interview participant, whether conscious or deliberate, shared how an extensive pledge could galvanize campus faculty and staff to support an agenda for action. There were numerous examples of how much educating peers and colleagues about the work individual departments were conducting and seeking opportunities to partner with other divisions had taken place. This often required training and defining complex topics for groups that may only peripherally be involved. The acknowledgement by these schools of the importance of helping other departments understand barriers faced by students and what each department contributed to addressing these barriers was extremely useful in obtaining the necessary engagement of campus stakeholders that allowed the larger focus on student success to be realized.

Finally, there was not one comment, remark, or reply that seemed to imply that these institutions had either set out to gain recognition from The Aspen Institute or any other external agency, nor was there a goal to merely create an artificial improvement to graduation rates. Many respondents made reference to or acknowledged some of the shortcomings that the IPEDS calculation presented, which both confirmed a portion of the literature reviewed in preparation for this study, but also spoke to one of the possible reasons these colleges had been so successful in the completion and graduation rate results they had been able to improve. There was no stated goal of creating procedures that merely would or could artificially boost rates to an acknowledged and flawed calculation. Instead, these college leaders were looking for ways to truly have a deep
commitment to the student population they had a sincere and genuine interest in helping to succeed. By adopting practices that prepared students for degree completion, transfer opportunity to senior institutions, or entry into the workforce through a broad array of initiatives, improved graduation rates began to emerge. There could have been easy shortcuts that these schools employed to game the way students registered to prevent students with characteristics that implied a low probability of graduating on-time from being included within their calculation cohort, but there is no way approaches like this will ever be sustainable in the long-term. Instead, these institutions found a way to position and empower their employees with approaches to redesign practices in a deep and meaningful way and with a commitment to student success strategies.
CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that there is no single explanation for how the three community colleges made significant progress in student completion and graduation rate improvements. With any reform, it could be that student success is not substantively influenced by program adoption, pathways to graduation, or redesigning the onboarding process. However, the optics around such a reductive point of view fails to encapsulate the outcomes data that show how these three community colleges have not only outperformed peer schools and national averages, but also have managed to continue to improve. Student success, as viewed through completion and graduation data, was achieved at these three institutions through the coupling of institutional modifications with strategic planning, tough academic and management decisions, and the awareness of the role the characteristics of community college students have on degree completion.

While there is an emphasis placed on accountability within higher education and numerous deficiencies and criticisms related to the IPEDS calculation of graduation rates, these three institutions have made substantive progress related to the development of increased completion rates. So, while there may not have been a single solution that emerged as a primary driver behind the institutional improvement, that is not to say there are not takeaways from how these institutions changed internally to have the impact on student success they did. One of the primary justifications for focusing on colleges identified by The Aspen Institute as excellent was based upon the belief that there were programs and services that were adopted that were replicable. There was a realization that, while the completion rate improvements were present at these three colleges, the ability to replicate was not going to be as simple as porting their effective processes onto
another campus. To effect change, there are takeaways from how change theories were present across all three institutions in their quest to improve student completion outcomes.

**Research Question #1**

The first research question was: What institutional characteristics do community college leaders, administrators, and faculty view as the most important predictors of student success that warrant fiscal and human resource investments?

As discussed throughout the various findings, the interview responses failed to provide a single predictor of issues that prevented the majority of students from being successful when it came to degree completion. In fact, the majority of responses spoke to the diversity of the student population that, as open-access institutions, these colleges served. Obviously, the students who choose to enroll in community colleges do so for a variety of reasons that include affordability, convenience, proximity to home or work, workforce needs, and overall college preparation. One of the items that did emerge was the overall financial concerns that students face that often require them to have jobs outside of their school commitments. If there was a single item that did have consensus across the participants, it was a focus on affordability. Each interview participant who referenced finances did so in a context that acknowledged the full cost of attendance for students. At community colleges, the tuition and fees are already significantly lower than most 4-year institutions, but the complete cost of attending college involves textbooks, transportation, and housing concerns. Time in the classroom means that a student cannot be working. While this emerged numerous times as a topic, there was not an easy suggested solution for these institutions to work on implementing.
Since this understanding of the student populations served at each respective college consistently emerged, this is considered an institutional characteristic referenced across the interview responses that merits expansion. The awareness by faculty and staff of the challenges their students faced encouraged them to explore shortcomings within the current processes that required the most focus to transform and that could ultimately have larger and broader implementation. There was an understanding that, to achieve improvements to any student outcome (not just graduation rates), these colleges would need both empower staff to redesign certain procedures that crossed functional divisions but, at the same time, make a conscious effort to start somewhere. The “somewhere” where these institutions chose to begin was to serve students who had financial and educational concerns upon entry. These concerns were not enough to deter the colleges from investing in areas with the most opportunity for impact. The participants acknowledged that there was a connection between each individual student and larger measures of program and course performance that, in turn, had an impact on the overall institutional success.

The majority of respondents also pointed out that the services in place were sufficient to provide a guardrail to properly ensure academic success, but the biggest disappointment was the low use of tutoring, advising, and academic support. Many of the respondents had hopes for higher usage of the existing support opportunities since there were anecdotal examples that students who did use these services were the students who were more likely to be successful in the first place. The support from senior leadership also empowered all levels of staff to continually explore opportunities that could benefit students. This is not to say that employees were provided carte blanche to invest in
anything they wanted. Fiscal pressures and finite funding make it impossible to invest in every initiative that is presented, but through a focus on the student and sticking to things that have proven to work, these colleges made great strides on the completion front.

**Research Question #2**

The second research question was: What institutional practices (programs and services) did these community colleges adopt to support college completion (measured by graduation rates) for their students?

The response that generated the most data related to institutional practice adoption was the Pathways reform—in numerous ways, shapes, and forms. While the Pathways adoption did not come with a sticker price to implement, there was a need for both the academic plans and the curriculum to be thoroughly reviewed, as well as a reexamination of the mode in which many student services were conducted.

By mapping programs of study with a link to meta-majors or careers, colleges have to invest the time and resources into examining all of their current degrees, course offerings, and delivery methods. This is no small task, and it will vary wildly given the depth of review needed at any school looking to implement a Pathways model. In addition to the academic plan development, colleges also have to adjust the process by which students enter an institution and the role admissions counselors and onboarding processes are designed. These redesigned major maps are rarely going to be written in stone, so there will be a necessary commitment of colleges to understand how dynamic and fluid they may be, especially for specific majors and fields. They will need to continuously monitor student progress and understand the importance of continued discussions to both internal and external groups of an institution.
Research Question #3

The third research question was: How do institutional leaders, administrators and faculty describe the changes that occurred on campus? Was the change process successfully managed or not?

The similarities across and within the three participant institutions and how they each spoke about student success, both as an abstract term and with specific examples, was uncanny. The reality is that they each were identified by The Aspen Institute based largely on their graduation rates (and other outcomes data), so the answer to whether the change process was successful or not is an emphatic yes. However, there were clearly examples within the interviews that confirmed the change process was not always a smooth one. The replies related to the challenges encountered did contain consistent messaging on the rationale behind the changes and how, by not wavering from these implemented recommendations, eventual buy-in and support was eventually obtained in the cited examples of resistance.

The key commonalities, when actually defined and mapped out, centered on the emphasis these institutions placed on data collection, data-informed decision-making, and performance management. By allowing individuals to have direct access to data, coupled with internal accountability systems, all layers of the colleges could see areas of strength and weakness with a focus on both to continually strive for improvement. Since there is still improvement opportunities for student completion, these colleges have an established track record on which they hopefully will continue to make progress.

Through the evaluation and coding process of the interview responses, it is worth noting that there was no single agenda adopted at each institution. This absence required
the aggregation of data that included preexisting efforts and conditions as well as strategies that interview respondents were directly involved in implementing. While there was a clear commitment to improving departmental procedures that focused on student success, there was not a single agenda adopted at each college to merely improve graduation rates. The majority of responses all referenced where each interviewee and their individual contributions were instrumental, even though their contributions were not part of a defined campus-wide initiative. The selection by The Aspen Institute as a finalist could be viewed as a success related to how the overall process was managed by each school, but it is important to recall that not one response mentioned only improving the current graduation rate. The process improvements and reengineering of existing procedures within each campus clearly showed that synergies did evolve since the college leadership teams at all three colleges set the core focus on their student populations. It was the collective production of each departmental contribution that led to the successful implementation of practices that had the biggest impact. Campus culture was what was changed, and the support of the executive teams that was shared and embraced by all levels of administration and faculty was how this was accomplished despite no one single objective across the schools.

**Implications for Change Frameworks and Theories**

The macro framework Kezar (2014) developed (see Figure 1), which is referenced in Chapter 2, explains the change process and has four features that appeared to manifest across all three institutions in this study. Each feature of the framework is grounded by six change theories that include: (a) scientific management, (b) evolutionary, (c) social
cognition, (d) cultural, (e) political, and (f) institutional and neo-institutional (Kezar, 2014).

While there were no singular change initiatives that were advocated for adoption by community colleges seeking to improve their graduation numbers, the similarities observed at Broward College, Indian River State College, and San Jacinto College through a crosswalk to Kezar’s (2014) model reveal the possibility for change implementation guidance. As each feature is analyzed, it provides entry into the next feature until, eventually, the first three features are combined to determine the appropriate approach on which change agents should focus.

Types of Change

The first feature of Kezar’s (2014) change framework—Types of Change—contains five primary concepts: (a) content of change, (b) scope of change, (c) levels of change, (d) focus of change, and (e) forces and sources of change.

The first observation that emerged across all three institutions was that there was not a single response among any of the interviews where the explicit goal of graduation rate improvement was mentioned as an initiative. While there may have been pockets of initiatives that took graduation rates into consideration, the majority of responses all referenced the shortcomings with the IPEDS rate calculation. Acknowledgement of these aside, none of the institutions set out to obtain recognition by The Aspen Institute or any other national organization. The reality is that all three colleges have demonstrated growth in this important metric.

The actual content of the change makes sense to be the first listed feature since the approach each school employed was a focus on overall student success. Political
theories often speak to how different ideas and initiatives appeal to different audiences. By embracing an overall student success focus, these institutions provided opportunities for all divisions and departments. Sometimes, when there is a single department championing an initiative, it can easily be met with resistance by external departments. The simplification of a topic as simultaneously comprehensive and undefined as student success allowed all employees to look for ways to participate. One benefit of this philosophy was the improvement to graduation rates. If the schools leads with something that is merely graduation focused, it opens itself up to criticism or disinterest by constituent groups that either do not understand the topic, believe they are already contributing to it, or do not see how their work is important to the goal. A holistic view provided stakeholders an opportunity to find a way for their department and their contributions to be part of a larger college-wide initiative.

According to the participants, many of the institutional efforts that transpired on their campuses were influenced by the scope or degree of change, too. The scope can include either first-order or second-order change. First-order changes are typically minor adjustments to processes or staffing, whereas second-order changes usually involve more significant addressing of processes and structure. A focus on a broad topic of student success may have acquired the necessary participation from the majority of staff and faculty, which is consistent with theories that predict that first-order change is easier to attain. The interview responses related to the difficulty around procedural updates or the staffing reorganization that these campuses underwent were all second-level, which confirms why they were met with more resistance.
Implementation of change typically involves multiple levels that include everything from the individual employees, the divisional and departmental levels, the entire institution, and the entire sector. While a statewide initiative to improve graduation rates may draw public attention, it is imperative for colleges to understand what an initiative like this means, all the way down to the individual employee level. All respondent interviews felt their individual contributions to students were not only impactful, but also, each understood how their contributions were linked back to the larger goal. A specific program might alienate departments that do not feel they have a place. Each college understood the importance of the levels of change and worked to ensure that strategies were matched accordingly.

Kezar’s (2014) framework approaches the definition of focus as involving either structure, process, or attitude. This model suggests that leaders often focus on one of these since it is difficult to focus on all three simultaneously. It is suggested by cultural theories of change that structure and process are the easiest of the three to approach, “but hard to do unless one evolves a culture that supports such attitudes” (Schein, 2010, p. 62), and this research demonstrated that the three participant institutions actually had the most success on the attitude of each interview participant. The commitment to the students on these campuses suggests that the individuals interviewed were so committed to students being prepared for their coursework, transfer opportunities, and future employment that their values had already changed toward a student-centered focus.

The fifth and final concept of the Type of Change feature examines the forces and sources for why change is necessary (Kezar, 2014). While state and federal policy were referenced in some interviews, the identification by these institutions of their core
mission seemed to have had the biggest influence on why they each dedicate themselves to student success. Use of data and institutional-wide sharing of the data related to completion seemed to have considerable impact on the faculty and staff. While the role community colleges have in increasing the percentage of adults holding a postsecondary credential has experienced an increase as a topic in national conversations, the acknowledgement of how some of the data can be viewed by external audiences falls on the colleges to take strides to improve where they can.

Elements of each concept appear throughout the interview conversations, and there were clear elements that carried more weight on these campuses. The foci of participants stood out in their genuine responses and the commitment they demonstrated to their work on student success and across the campus. The synergies across campus were achieved through every employee being aware of campus-wide initiatives, which provided an opportunity to link their divisional, departmental, or individual contributions to the larger picture that is revealed in each of their outcome measurements.

**Context for Change**

The second feature of Kezar’s (2014) change framework contains four primary concepts: (a) social, political, and economic factors; (b) external stakeholders, (c) higher education as an institution, and (d) institutional culture.

For Indian River State College and Broward College, which are both in Florida, the state legislature established performance funding requirements in 2016. For San Jacinto College in Texas, performance-based funding was implemented in 2013. Performance-based funding within higher education allocates state budget dollars to performance measures (e.g., course completion, degree completion) as opposed to
funding based largely on enrollment figures. While higher education budgets are partially dependent on state appropriations, all three of these colleges’ observed retention and completion rates had been improving prior to the establishment of performance funding. While the first concept of the change framework would indicate that political factors can influence why changes are implemented, these institutions appeared to have placed less emphasis on this. By recognizing their own shortcomings with respect to student completion and making a commitment to improve, they each positioned themselves to be responsive to state policy as opposed to being reactive to it. While the economic benefit of change implementation could also be seen as a primary driver within the framework, not one interview response made reference to the tuition revenue or performance-based funding benefit. The financial benefit could have been a behind-the-scenes driver, but it seemed that the genuine approach was to begin with improvements that had a focus on completion; these improvements would grow from improved retention initiatives that would impact the bottom line financially. Regardless of the impetus, it appears there was not a lot of emphasis on this concept of the framework feature as it pertains to context of change.

The external stakeholders with influence over higher education institutions have also had influence on how the social, political, and economic factors influence changes to policy adoption. Accrediting bodies have seen a shift in recent years to outcomes, but again, like governmental influence, they were not identified as an influencer in why these schools had adopted programs and processes focused on their students and community being successful. Even The Aspen Institute could be viewed as an external stakeholder in these examples. Not one interview response mentioned conducting the work they did on
student success as a means to receive the national attention the Community College Excellence Prize brought. Interviews with the participants suggested that the improvements that gained Aspen Institute recognition seemed to have been for the benefit of the student body first and foremost and not to address or satisfy any external requirements.

Evidence of a focus on the first two concepts was not prevalent across the conversations, nor was there evidence of much attention to the higher education sector as an institution. There were clearly instances of some participants having worked at their respective institution or in the higher education sector for some time. However, there were also participants who had come from industry and recognized similarities from a business and customer-service lens to the work they do on their campuses. One exception was the involvement that the boards of trustees had with relation to senior administration. The executives participating in the interviews all made reference to having involved boards that were versed in what was being conducted at the campus level. The most relevant item from this feature was related to the long-term commitment of employees that was present across the interview participants’ lengths of service. According to Kezar (2014):

> Historically, a common facet of higher education institutions that has made them unique has been the long-term commitment of employees, both faculty and staff. In the past, faculty tended to work for the same institution for their entire careers. (p. 97)

Although there have been shifts across higher education away from this stability within organizations to a reliance on more part-time staff, many of the interview participants had been with their respective organization, usually in different roles, for
over a decade, with some having been at their schools for over 20 years. One of the positive benefits these colleges realized through a committed faculty and staff was that new employees were being recruited, interviewed, and onboarded only if the applicants would be a true fit within the prevailing culture and values of the institution. This could easily backfire if the wrong type of values were in place, but it appeared through the interviews that the commitment to student success was a pure one on these campuses. Some of the institutional characteristics that were raised in the literature review, which includes the Alon and Tienda (2005), Jacoby (2006), and Tincher-Ladner and King (2014) research, all made competing references to the different impacts that full-time faculty, as opposed to adjunct faculty, could have on overall student completion rates, but this specific topic did not present itself in the interviews.

**Agency/Leadership**

The third feature of Kezar’s (2014) change framework contains three primary concepts: (a) top-down versus bottom-up, (b) collective leadership, and (c) shared leadership. The role that leadership holds in influencing change is obviously important, and the placement of this feature as the third and final component of the framework is supportive of its importance. For college administrators to understand leadership in higher education, an acknowledgement of the importance of shared and collective leadership, and an acceptance and tolerance for initiatives to emanate from both the bottom and the top of the organization, is required. A broad understanding of leadership from this framework led to specific protocol questions that were designed to focus on this exact topic. By selecting participants from institutional leadership, middle management, and faculty and staff from other areas of the colleges, this study intentionally sought to
understand how leadership traditions in higher education influenced change. The inclusion of individuals in positions of power was intentionally central to allow for a comparison of responses to these questions against the individuals without the higher rank or appointment. In this study, participants did not view top-down and bottom-up leadership as a single concept. All respondents acknowledged the importance of the executive-level staff (president, campus president, deputy chancellor), but the executive-level staff all provided responses about the successful initiatives that had been spearheaded from all levels of the organization. A commitment to core values related to the importance of each student permeated the responses related to leadership within the interviews, but there was no consensus from any of the responses that it was strictly a top-down or bottom-up approach that led to these institutional improvements. Staff development and funding support clearly came from the top, but the empowerment these two items provided to all levels of the colleges clearly revealed an impossibility to safely conclude that one leadership element was more important than another.

If there were challenges in attempting to select either top-down or bottom-up approaches in the responses across the interviews, the remaining two concepts of collective and shared leadership also had enough replies to indicate that the change process related to student success within these three institutions contained elements of both. The participation of faculty, student services staff, and senior leadership members in completion initiatives was evident in the number of individuals who ultimately were participants within the improvements these schools achieved. Shared leadership, as defined, is in direct opposition to the top-down approach since it provides greater buy-in prospects from multiple levels of the organization. Although Kezar (2014) argues that
there are clear, stark differences between collective and shared leadership approaches, the observations from the conversations with Broward College, Indian River State College, and San Jacinto participants clearly demonstrated key pieces of both types.

**Approach to Change**

When the first three features are analyzed and combined, the result is a strategy for change that can be accomplished and that includes a heavy emphasis on the six change theories and how change agents may best incorporate them into any planning that is being conducted. The six theories include: (a) scientific management, (b) evolutionary, (c) political, (d) social cognition, (e) cultural, and (f) institutional (Kezar, 2014).

The original focus of this research was to review three institutions that have had significant success related to student completion to potentially make a case for program adoption at schools that have struggled to move the needle on their graduation rates. A review of what factors institutions had control over and items outside of their control were examined as well. Through the adoption of Kezar’s (2014) change framework, it was evident that, at least for these institutions, it was less about specific situational circumstances and more about the approaches to change adopted on these campuses. The primary takeaway was that, through the appropriate adoption of a combination of change theories, institutions can position themselves to experience improvement in whatever it is they are seeking to improve. Administrators need to heed the caveat that there is no implied guarantee in the observed change theories, but that through the appropriate combination, there may be a blueprint to follow to achieve the intended results.

Kezar (2014) acknowledged that certain theories may have greater use in understanding the change process than others. The highlights that emerged at these
institutions that gained the attention of The Aspen Institute and other national observers seemed to fit more clearly with certain theories in certain ways.

The examples of professional development, vision setting, and organizational structure of staff and departments that were described in the interviews are best understood by management theories of change. The apparent empowerment of all employees to be entrepreneurial when it came to student success initiatives and to take proactive measures to address the challenges their students face—as opposed to a reactive stance—leans heavily on evolutionary theories of change. The transparency and frank conversations in this study all contained responses that linked back to the vision these institutions possessed for both their role and place in serving their student population. The continued efforts to raise the consciousness on the transfer, completion, and workforce needs of their communities were all elemental of political theories of change. With an eye to the national and state conversations on the role community colleges play in higher education, coupled with an understanding of the way that external forces can influence the agendas deployed on their campuses, borrows heavily from institutional theories of change.

The two theories of change that seemed to explain what this study found in the interviews were: (a) social cognition theory of change, and (b) cultural theories of change. Social cognition theories are heavily reliant on data that include the collection of, real-time use of, and embracing of the power data can bring. Each interviewee relied on outcomes data to build consensus across their campuses and to continually look for ways to make sense of the data to better inform all levels of staff.
On the other hand, cultural theories of change employ the appeal of values to the institutions and the individuals who work there. One shortcoming of cultural theory is that it is one that does take time. All three institutions would agree that there is not a panacea to assist with success initiatives and that the colleges only achieved the progress they did through a long-term commitment. The evidence is in the results, but any college hoping for a quick reversal or improvement would be wise to acknowledge that it took these institutions years to get where they are.

**Limitations**

This section discusses some of the limitations that arose within the research design and methodology of the study, as well as some suggestions that directly address these limitations. Recommendations for future research and practice are presented in the concluding section.

While The Aspen Institute Prize for Community College Excellence was centrally used in the initial selection of potential research sites, characteristics arose that are worth mentioning that, upon completion, could warrant future review. Since the inaugural prize was awarded in 2011, The Aspen Institute has announced the grand prize winner, Finalist(s) With Distinction, and Rising Star(s) every 2 years, with the next award cycle set to be announced in 2019. With the 2017 award cycle announcement coinciding with the initial research being conducted, the three institutions that were approached were all eager to continue to speak to their recent success and selection. One concern for any similar study would be the timing associated with the announced finalists and faculty and staff participation. Since it was clear that these institutions did not achieve improvements to the graduation rates in a short period of time, it could be entirely possible that the key
personnel who were intimately involved in any campus change may not still be associated with an institution by the time any recognition by Aspen is realized.

An extension of the faculty and staff participation was the approach used to ultimately gain access to each institution. Initial inquiry originated with contact to The Aspen Institute for a recommendation of key staff at each potential campus who could potentially assist with access to other on-campus personnel. Although The Aspen Institute provided recommendations for staff and faculty to contact at each campus, and the fact that these individuals were all invested in responding to the access that was requested, there is no guarantee that this level of luck would be easily replicated by any future researcher. The assistance provided by the initial outreach was so vital to these qualitative interviews that it may be difficult for a future study to use the same sites or same interview participants.

A third limitation was related to the absence of specific data requests. Since the conceptual framework was centered on institutional change and the use of qualitative interviews, the design of this study was not reliant on any specific data requests through each college’s institutional research unit. Since it was learned after the interview participants were all in place of how each college had been an AACC Pathways Project cohort member, this is one element that could have been further stressed in the interview protocol design phase. This adjustment would not have drastically altered what was sought through the interviews; however, it would have forced specific data questions to have been built into each site. Additionally, there would have been specific questions embedded in the protocol to see how each interview participant assessed the Pathways
work as opposed to relying on the Pathways theme during the coding process of the interview transcripts.

An additional limitation that emerged was related to Kezar’s (2014) framework and how it was applied to the three institutions. While the model within this research extended to the multiple theories related to change, there were difficulties in clearly seeing the ways in which the decision-making processes and changes to institutional culture could lend themselves to other schools seeking similar results. Future research seeking to adopt a change strategy at another campus can learn a lot from the application of this framework, but campus leaders will need to be prepared to conduct a synthesis of the model, since it does not follow a linear process flow. There are clearly complexities that make each college campus unique across a range of dimensions, but the framework as it is currently constructed lacks a recursive ability for colleges to adopt it writ large. The framework could be enhanced to allow for the type of change being sought to also take into consideration the environmental and cultural circumstances that would extend to a more mechanical application.

Change, as evidenced by both the improvements realized by these three institutions on their student success initiatives and across the numerous theories, will show that it often requires the application of various theories to yield results. Kezar’s (2014) framework uses the appropriate change theories that have wide applicability to higher education, and there is clear transferability for institutions and leadership seeking organizational change. The framework seems to imply only main theories of change will emerge. One disagreement is that readers should use the framework for consideration, but since concepts from all the theories ended up having relevance to these three institutions,
it is critical to reference all six. Some theories may have been more visible, or may even be easier for leaders to understand, but a reworking of how the framework can be applied to colleges either seeking change or an understanding of changes that have occurred would require acknowledgment of all six or even a ranking of the theories for users. The Type of Change pillar within the model, while not the same for all changes, does encompass many, if not all, of the elements listed. As the analysis gets added to each pillar in the current design it, does not allow for a feedback loop to previous pillars. The framework clearly has dynamic pieces, but it also appears to be linear. After the application in this study, it appears it should more closely resemble a nonlinear flow.

Finally, it is worth stating that Kezar’s (2014) framework employed within this research was neither shared nor discussed within any of the interviewees. The reason this warrants statement is that the analysis of the framework application to the change that occurred on each campus was done through the framework mapping after the conclusion of the data collection. All three of the participating institutions are contenders for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence based on their respective efforts to enhance student success that exceeded the completion, access, and affordability initiatives. The importance of Kezar’s framework is tied to seeking similarities and differences in how these community colleges successfully navigated the change process despite not following a standard formula.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

This study provides considerable insights on the change process necessary to tackle one of the most important issues in higher education: improving completion rates. Highlighting successful community colleges with the Aspen Prize as exemplars is one
thing, but this study has been important to begin to understand how successful institutions achieved their results. Shortcomings in the way the federal graduation rate is calculated aside, these colleges generated increased rates. A deep dedication to focusing on ensuring students succeed in either transfer or employment outcomes starts with strong contributions from impactful employees, which was evident throughout the interviews. Possible future research considerations that emerged as a result of this study revolve around the degree of similarity that institutions that have been recognized by their consistently high graduation rates all possess. So, while there may not be a single policy adoption to explore that can be implemented within a campus struggling with low completion rates, a closer review of how the values are prioritized across institutions that have experienced similar success warrants further exploration. The communication processes that were in place at each college are also worthy of closer examination. The way in which departments were knowledgeable of peer departments clearly spoke to how information is shared and distributed across campus. Part of the meaningful responses within this study was the fact that the interview participants all had enough institutional history to have been either directly or peripherally involved in the changes that occurred. If an attempt to replicate some of the process improvements were to be conducted at a college that did not possess the same amount of historical context, it might be difficult to yield the same level of consensus.

All three campuses were part of the inaugural AACC Pathways Project cohort, and after 24 interviews, it was evident how important this coincidental timing was. The role and importance of this timing is an item worthy of future research. The importance is less on specific Aspen Institute finalists that were also members of the initial cohort of
Pathways schools; rather, the larger takeaway is that, through data compiled by the AACC, the CCRC, and the schools that participated in Pathways implementation on their campuses—whether through the original launch or on their own—the next decade of data will warrant a closer review. One shortcoming is that there is so much variance within the Pathways adoption occurring on community college campuses, but the overall identification of these three schools’ graduation rate improvements, compounded by the backdrop of the Pathways work, is worthy of a deeper dive. One way future college administrators could frame research would be to look at community colleges that have demonstrated improvement to their federally reported graduation rate and apply any Pathways adoption to this review.

The Limitations section of this study also provides both a piece of advice and a caveat for future practice review. The additional element that should be included in a review of practical recommendations for colleges seeking to improve their completion rates would be to seek, to the best possible extent, specific data related to impact. Each school, as identified by The Aspen Institute, had increases to their overall institutional rates and the rates for the minority population. As one of the findings revealed the absence of a silver bullet responsible for institutional improvement, a closer review of the individual cohorts (e.g., by gender, age, and/or race) through a college’s institutional research unit may have pointed to areas that were responsible for larger contributions to the overall increases. Armed with this granular level of data, the personnel selected for further interviews may be informed differently than the participants in this study.

College leaders who are seeking ways to create, implement, and sustain improvements on their campuses can learn a lot from the application of Kezar’s (2014)
model to their initiatives. As evidenced by the interviews within this study, the development of pioneering practices was not enough to gain traction enterprise-wide, and the real innovation that occurred was done with the support of the entire campus community through fundamental changes to the campus culture that was aided by support of college leadership. Despite these participant institutions not singly seeking improvements to their graduation rates, there was recognition that, to truly be committed to student success, a tangible outcome that is reported annually was a measurement that could track progress. When it comes to how organizations often change with limited intentionality, Kezar (2014) stated:

While implementing changes that leaders see as necessary is critical, change agents cannot ignore alterations that are happening around them, as well. They also cannot ignore the enterprise by always focusing only on their own campuses. (p. 5)

The value for future practitioners at any type of institution of higher education to apply the Kezar (2014) framework to aid in planning their change efforts is that, while it is linear, it is not too rigid to accommodate large or small types of change. Through the identification of the type of change within the first pillar (Type of Change), campuses seeking change can define this before proceeding into the context, leadership, and approach. Within Kezar’s book, and within the application to the three campuses profiled within this research, the analysis was done after the changes had taken place. For anyone that is seeking change, applying the framework upfront should prove to be extremely beneficial. Campus faculty and staff who apply the framework prior to the execution of any programmatic changes should identify the variety of options available and address
the processes available to them, with an emphasis on adding the analysis through each pillar before combining a focus on the ultimate approach to change that is adopted.

In summary, these institutions had positive progress as measured through the increased completion rates that were in motion prior to their Pathways adoption and prior to their Aspen Institute recognition. Two final observations from interacting with these three exemplar community colleges is that the commitment to their students being successful was adopted regardless of whether there was any national recognition or prize, and that the campus stakeholders who participated all shared a common goal of doing whatever was necessary to place students in the best position upon completion, transfer, or graduation.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broward College</th>
<th>Current Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yolanda Brown</td>
<td>Associate Dean, Academic &amp; Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mildred Coyne</td>
<td>Executive Director, Workforce Education &amp; Economic Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolando Garcia</td>
<td>Campus President, South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua Kimber</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, History &amp; Political Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Kurz</td>
<td>Associate Dean, Student Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Lindeblom</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Business Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esmeralda Sweeney</td>
<td>Interim AVP, Student Achievement Initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyce Walsh-Portillo</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Business Administration</td>
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<th>Indian River State College</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harvey Arnold</td>
<td>Provost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Hart</td>
<td>Vice President, Enrollment and Student Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dale Hayes</td>
<td>Counselor/Assistant Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flossie Jackson</td>
<td>Director, Student Success Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin Massey</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sera Serafini</td>
<td>Director of Employee Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen Storck</td>
<td>Assistant Dean of Educational Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Treadwell</td>
<td>Executive Assistant to the President</td>
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<tr>
<th>San Jacinto College</th>
<th>Current Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matt Lewis</td>
<td>Analyst, Qualitative Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick Luna</td>
<td>Instructor, Welding Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffreyy Parks</td>
<td>Dean, Business and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Potts</td>
<td>Department Chair, Arts and Physical Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann Tate</td>
<td>Dean, Liberal Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Wigginton</td>
<td>Provost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurel Williamson</td>
<td>Deputy Chancellor/President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna Zimmerman</td>
<td>Associate Vice Chancellor, Student Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Institution:
Interviewee (Title and Name):
Topics Discussed:
   - Interviewee Background
   - Interviewee Observations about student success
   - Observed interaction with other departments
   - Recommendations
Other Topics Discussed:
Documents Obtained:
Post Interview Comments or Leads:

________________________________________________________________________

Interview Questions

1. What were/are the major issues facing students on your campus from graduating?
2. What types of assistance do you believe students need to be successful on your campus?
3. What services are you directly involved in offering?
4. What are the strengths of these services? Any weaknesses?
5. How involved were you in the creation of services for your particular unit?
6. How have these services evolved over your time with the college?
7. Any recommendations that you would make to alter or improve what is currently being offered?
8. Are there any barriers to improvement or concerns that you believe could negatively impact that services you’re currently working on?
9. Do you feel the college supports the initiatives that you are involved in (either through personnel, technology, or other means)?
10. Who is involved in decisions about improving student success?
11. Is there institutional commitment at the highest levels or simply good people in middle management making things happen?
12. How do institutional leaders talk about student success?
13. What might happen to efforts if key people leave?
14. Is there an example of where student success efforts lost out to or won over other college priorities?
15. Which department would you say has been the most important to your work?
16. Last question: If there was one more thing they could do to promote success, what would it be?
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