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LEADERSHIP FOR STUDENT SUCCESS OUTCOMES: A CASE STUDY OF PRESIDENTIAL AND COMMITTEE ACTIONS AT EASTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

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LEADERSHIP FOR STUDENT SUCCESSS OUTOMES: A CASE STUDY OF PRESIDENTIAL AND COMMITTEE ACTIONS AT EASTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family that was just blossoming when I started this journey. To my husband, Terry, who has been a constant partner in this process. You believed in me when I did not believe in myself, thank you for that strength. To Myles whose life began as this journey did and could pronounce "dissertation" by age four, I'm proud of everything you do. And to sweet Maris who has the kind of personality that brings light instead of darkness into every hard place in life, you are a gift. To our surprise addition, Margot, who was with me during the defense of this good work. We are so excited to add to our family with you.

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Abstract

In American Higher Education, retention and graduation rates have grown in their prominence as institutional quality indicators. Yet, when measures are interrogated for parity across racial groups, inequity in outcomes is apparent. The purpose of this study is to examine how leadership plays a role in encouraging the attainment of equitable student success outcomes for minoritized undergraduate students at a public-liberal arts university. The single, instrumental case study investigated one institution where equitable outcomes exist. To understand this particular phenomenon, decisions and actions of a president and a presidentially appointed planning committee were analyzed using Astin and Leland's (1991) leadership model as a theoretical framework. Findings highlight that institutional health, a student-centered strategic plan, a clear presidential narrative, and collective action through effective shared governance were relevant for understanding how improvement occurred. The findings reveal that focused leadership processes centered on improved student success outcomes can propel progress toward equity. By viewing, the leader, the context, and the process that contributed to the student success outcomes, the study contributes understanding of what makes a difference in successfully leading institution toward equitable student success outcomes.

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter one begins with an overview of the nature of the problem surrounding the research study. Following this important contextual information is the problem statement, purpose statement, and the guiding research questions. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the rationale and significance of this study as well as a brief overview of this dissertation research.

Problem Statement

Enthusiasm for higher and postsecondary attendance is on the rise, yet, there are still problems in the outcome realities for students as measured in retention and graduation rates. This point is underscored in record enrollment trends of more than 17 million undergraduates enrolled in degree granting postsecondary institutions in the fall of 2016 and an expected 20.5 million undergraduate students enrolling in the fall of 2017 (Kelly, Howell, & Sattin-Bajaj, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). According to NCES (2017), these records demonstrate a thirty percent increase in undergraduate enrollment since the year 2000. Emphasizing student perspectives in this trend, Ruffalo Noel-Levitz (2017) reports that more than 90% of first-year undergraduate students begin college with strong intention to graduate. However, student desire does not manifest itself in year-to-year institutional retention trends. On average, forty percent of first-year undergraduates across all institutional types do not return for their second year, a reality that is more pronounced for institutions with lower admissions profiles (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Kurlaender & Flores, 2005; NCES, 2016; Tinto, 2012). Six-year graduation rates reflect this loss over time as the national graduation rate for first-time students at all four-year institutions

increased most recently to almost 60% for the fall 2008 entering cohort. This statistic, however, masks institutional differences and any demographic distinctions among students (NCES, 2016).

Aggregate data reveal room for improvement in graduation rates for students of all backgrounds at every institutional type; however, when these rates are disaggregated by race, lack of equity in completion outcomes is clear. Asian and White students outpace all other ethnic populations in national graduation rates for undergraduates at four-year institutions when data are sorted by racial category (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; NCES, 2016). Recent research reveals that Asian and White students graduate within six years from four-year institutions at a rate of 66.2% and 57% respectively. For Black, Latinx, and Native American students, the measures reveal 32.2%, 45.2%, and 33.8% for each group, respectively (NCES, 2016). There are a few notable exceptions where Black students outpace their White counterparts in graduation rates at particular institutions. One such example is Mount Holyoke College where Black students graduate at a rate of 82% and their White peers hold a 78% graduation rate. It is also true that Black students outpace White peers at Wellesley College, Swarthmore College, and Bryn Mawr College. Notably, three of the four of these colleges are women's colleges and each have low student to faculty ratios which contribute broadly to student success. It is undetermined why Black students at these institutions outpace White students in graduation rates (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2013). However, for the majority of colleges and universities, the representation of who graduates from college is highly inequitable when viewed across racial categories.

When the lens of socioeconomics is applied to graduation rates, the picture is

even more dismal. The dropout rate for the poorest students in America is almost six times that of the most affluent students (Nichols & Clindinst, 2013). Rising out of poverty into a place of economic safety is increasingly linked to the ability to attain some form of post-high school training (Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013; Kuntz, Gildersleeve, & Pasque, 2011; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998; Tinto, 2012). The attainment data report that disadvantage is magnified for persons who are already at an economic disadvantage (Nichols & Clindinst, 2013). This data suggests that students may continue to be minoritized by the educational system regardless of numeric representation in enrollment trends. The prolonged and widespread condition of minoritized students and families in generational poverty will continue to grow unless educators are able to build a bridge to year-to-year undergraduate student retention and ultimately, degree attainment (Mayhew, et al., 2016; St. John, Bigelow Millazzo, Callahan Ljana, & Masse, 2015;).

Inequity in retention and graduation rates is likewise displayed across institutional type. High retention and graduation rates align with types of institutions to create a profile of separated success across racial/ethnic categories, advantaging some students over others (Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013). When these data are laid over enrollment trends by ethnicity, the data suggest that where a student matriculates is particularly relevant for minoritized students. For example, for the fall 2008 cohort, Black students who enrolled at open enrollment institutions graduated at a rate of 36% while Black students who enrolled at highly selective institutions had a graduation rate of 88.7% (NCES, 2016). Carnevale and Strohl (2013) critique enrollment trends as being systematically unequal, noting that minoritized students are

much more likely to enroll at institutions with a lower admission profile, regardless of their personal academic qualifications. They describe this inconsistency as racial bias, pointing out that it is not college readiness in students that creates the disparity in enrollment patterns (2013). Some view this enrollment activity as primarily related to student choice making; however, Carnevale and Strohl (2013) question the role institutions play in this process, implying that the issue of equity is not a student problem, rather there may be an institutional influence.

Institutional action may hold the most promise for making an impact in improving retention and graduation rates because of their proximity to students (McClenney, 2013; McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald, & Major, 2016). As institutional retention and graduation rates continue to languish (NCES, 2016), administrators attempt to address these rates through programmatic solutions (The College Board, 2009; Fain, 2014). Yet, none of these programs have surfaced as an adequate answer for the inequities that remain for student success outcomes across racial and socioeconomic classes at various institutional types (Chang, Sharkness, Hurtado, & Newman, 2014; Tinto, 2012). As Calahan and Perna (2015) note, the solutions for improving inequities must be complex as the problem is multifaceted and notably involved.

Without a complex understanding of lack of parity in student success outcomes, solutions may be shallow or ineffective, unable to make substantial, equitable change for students. Reason (2009) cautions that research and institutional decisions made with an intention of improving student retention, should be evaluated and implemented with a deep understanding of local, organizational conditions. Institutional conditions greatly

impact the effect of particular interventions. Likewise, institutional efforts to create retention improvements are situated within institutional culture; requiring leaders to be aware of their own environment (McNair et al., 2016). This reasoning is in line with the fact that students are highly influenced by the environmental conditions at the institutions into which they enroll (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005).

One-way leaders influence retention and graduation rates is their role in making critical decisions that filter what programs and policies are chosen for funding and implementation. Researchers note that institutions dedicate variable resources to programs that are intended to improve student retention, a truth that influences outcomes (The College Board, 2009). Leaders with power inside of an organization have increased influence over which projects are chosen, funded, and implemented. A determined and informed effort by institutions' most executive leaders, presidents, must be made to improve retention and graduation rates for minoritized undergraduate students. Pasque (2010) argues, "leaders cannot afford to be complacent in this climate of educational inequity" (p. 7). Presidents and those whom they empower may be the key to making the largest change in retention and graduation rates for the majority of minoritized undergraduate students. As Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, and Arellano (2012) urge, institutions must adopt ways of "assuring equitable degree attainment across diverse student groups" (p. 56). There can no longer be an equal access versus equal outcomes view of higher education (Noftsinger & Newbold, 2007). The input characteristics of students enrolling in higher education must be reflected in the output profile of college graduates. It is lack of parity in student retention and graduation rates for minoritized undergraduate students that creates the greatest need for

change. For this reason, presidents must turn their agendas to focus on the problem of remedying inequity for students at their institutions.

Higher education leaders have a responsibility to make issues known and to call for change. However, change must be localized and effective in the institutional contexts (Reason, 2009). While the problem of racial disparity in degree attainment has multiple causes and change must be made on many levels, institutional leaders must make change where they are while advocating for improvement on a larger scale. As Pasque (2010) asserts, "In the field of higher education, it is university presidents, legislators, faculty, administrators, funders, and national association researchers who hold knowledge around higher education's multiple relationships with society and are the leaders in the field" (pp. 6-7). Those with the knowledge and position are most responsible to make change. "It is not enough to educate *for* the public good; higher education must also operate *as* a public good" (Pasque, 2010, p. 25, italics in original). It is therefore, imperative that leaders find a way to correct this disparity in success outcomes.

Presidents are powerful leaders in the context of every type of institution though latitude to act may differ (Legon, Lombardi, & Rhoades, 2014). While there is a discussion on the impact of presidents on retention and graduation rates, none of these studies explore the impact of their direct involvement in program creation or the influence of their leadership approach as a way of understanding improved student retention rates for minoritized students (Ewell, 2005; Whistle, 2014;). Moreover, the existing studies are more focused on the role of the president rather than his or her leadership decisions and actions. As Ewell (2005) discusses, student success is a matter

of both culture and leadership.

Existing research that explores successful implementation of retention programs points to leadership as an important part of improved student retention (Cabrera, Miner & Milem, 2013; Ewell, 2005; McClenney, 2013; Schreiner, Nowel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). In a report conducted for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Ewell (2005) discusses the relationship between presidential leadership, institutional culture and best practices in student retention. The author cautions that plugging in best practices with the goal of improved student success outcomes does not create sustained improvement. Rather, better outcomes are a matter of a caring and intentional culture focused on student success. The report continues to describe the important role that compassionate faculty and staff played in carrying out this cultural focus (Ewell, 2005). These findings echo the pivotal work of Kuh et al. (2005) who described the critical role institutional conditions play in tackling the challenging issue of student retention. Taken together, these studies highlight the important role that people play in leading and carrying out institutional efforts. It is notable that students experience institutional culture through their interactions with people at the institution. In short, human relationships are an important conduit through which students experience our institutions. Often, leaders set the tone for this experience.

As the literature discusses, the personal values of leaders influence the environment of an organization as well as the programs that are funded and implemented (Hambrick, 2007). Moreover, the retention literature reveals an important connection between the way students experience the institutional environment and their

likelihood to graduate from college (Kuh et al, 2005). Decisions aimed at improving student retention and graduation rates are situated within the environmental context of an institution (Reason, 2009). Taken together, these concepts create an important opportunity for inquiry to better understand how institutional leadership influences the outcome of improved student retention and graduation rates for minoritized students. Following Astin and Leland's (1991) framework for leadership, this study views institutional leadership as a process through which outcomes are achieved and where a catalytic leader, within a given context, moves the institution toward desired outcomes.

Statement of Purpose

While improving student success outcomes for minoritized students is only a smaller part of a greater societal problem of mobility, focused improvement is an important priority for institutions seeking to remediate the equity issue where access to opportunities and income are not possible without a college education (Gladieux, 2004). Therefore, using Astin and Leland's (1991) leadership model as a theoretical framework, the purpose of this study is to examine the role of a catalytic leader, the institutional context, and the leadership process that resulted in the outcomes success of minoritized undergraduate students at a single institution. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions are explored:

1. As environment is related to student success outcomes, what is the institutional context at Eastern Connecticut State University?
2. In what ways did the leader (president) serve as a catalyst for improved student success outcomes?
3. What leadership process was enacted?

a. How were decisions and actions toward outcomes improvement empowered?
b. How did collective action occur?
c. How did communication occur?

Conclusion

As access to higher education has increased for minoritized undergraduate students, successful outcome measures (retention and graduation rates) have not kept pace (Kelly, Howell, & Sattin-Bajaj, 2016; Tinto, 2012). Research indicates that the reality of who completes college is highly stratified across race and socioeconomic class (Braxton, 2000; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Cox, 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Montalvo, 2013; NCES, 2016) Despite personal drive to obtain a degree and gaining access to higher education, the data reveals that students continue to try for a degree and fail to achieve their goal of educational attainment (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017; Tinto, 2012; Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2014). Attrition is most pronounced for racially and socioeconomically minoritized students. Not all minoritized students are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, however, when both target identities of class and race are considered, likelihood of degree attainment is very low.

Student success outcomes have lagged for too long and those rates are more perilous among minoritized student groups. The literature indicates that while this issue is complex, improvement is possible. Viewing this issue through the lens of institutional leadership may provide new insight into the issue of equitable educational attainment, thereby providing scholarly, yet practical guidance toward improvement. As this study

will demonstrate, leaders, within their context have a role to play in ensuring equitable outcomes occur.

Definitions of Key Terms

Discussed below are the relevant terms used in this research. This section provides clarity for those terms that are used most often throughout this study in order to establish lucidity and transparency for the reader related to the author's intended meaning.

Minoritized Students- This research study uses the term "minoritized" students to represent the notion that students may continue to be suffer from institutional racism regardless of their numerical representation in enrollment trends. The use of this term was inspired by Shaun Harper who used the term (2012). He used it to signify, "social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities" (p. 9). Harper was one of the first researchers to apply this term in the U.S. Higher Education context. This term first emerged among Canadian scholars studying inclusivity in Canadian education (Dei, James, Karumanhery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000).

Student Success Outcomes- This term is used to refer to the grouping of terms (retention, persistence, and completion (graduation) rates), when discussed as a related phenomenon. When they are discussed separately, where one or more concept is not intended, the specific terms may be used separately.

Retention Rates- When percentages are noted, they refer to the number of first-time, full-time students who have never attended college and enroll for a fall term and return

for the following fall (NCES, 2016). When discussed in the literature, this term is expanded to refer to all students who enroll at an institution and continue enrollment with that institution.

Graduation Rates- This research study uses graduation rates as defined by NCES. These rates reflect the statistics for first-time, full-time students and their graduation from the institution where they started. Graduation rates are measured at 150% of time to degree or 6-years after a group of first-time, full-time students begin their degree.

Institutional Environment- Institutional environment refers to the collective literature of institutional habitus, organizational culture, or institutional climate within the higher education framework. These terms were used interchangeably in multiple articles referring to environment within higher education.

Presidents- Presidents are the highest-ranking officer within a single institutional context. Presidents many times function as CEO of a campus and answer to boards at the State level when they are in a public university setting.

Leadership-This term refers to those leadership efforts that are focused on helping students achieve their student success outcomes. In line with Astin and Leland's (1991) framework, this leadership is concerned with helping people "work toward a common goal or vision that will create change, transform institutions, and thus improve the quality of life" (p.8). The improvement goal of leadership in this research is that of improved and equitable student success outcomes.

Decisions and Actions- Decisions and actions in this study were not defined for the participants, rather participants determined what they considered to be decisions or actions within the institutional environment that most influenced student retention. This

open definition of decisions and actions allowed for a broad range of responses to emerge from participants at various levels within the organization. From this view, decisions and actions may have been macro or micro-level decisions within the organization. This is included in key terms to assist the reader in understanding the interview questions.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter Two focuses on the literature that informs the study. This literature expounds upon the critical literature that shapes the problem and motivates the design of this study by tying together the notion that institutional leaders play a key role in influencing the environment and thereby student success outcomes. The review discusses concepts that help elucidate the understanding of dynamics relevant to the findings of this study.

Chapter Three develops the theoretical framework and covers the various theories that informed the conceptualization of this study. In conceptualizing the topic, a relationship between retention and leadership emerged around the particular influence of environment for effectively improving student success outcomes and the notion that leaders shape what occurs within environmental contexts. Astin and Leland's (1991) model of leadership provides the lens through which leadership is to be understood as a process, involving a catalytic leader within a particular context that moved the institution toward desired outcomes.

Chapter Four provides the research design including the methodology and methods for the study. This chapter describes the philosophical approach and rationale for this study's methodology. Additionally, this chapter provides a description of the

tools for analysis and account of the vast data that contribute to the findings for this study.

Chapter Five offers the findings of this study. The findings were 1) presence of institutional health 2) a clear and defining presidential narrative shaped action 3) empowerment transpired through an elevated strategic planning process 4) collective action occurred effective shared governance. This chapter describes the experiences of the participants and provides important context for the study.

Finally, Chapter Six discusses an analysis of the findings and the implications regarding the connection between leadership and student success outcomes. The chapter concludes by discussing these findings in light of previous research. Moreover, this chapter offers recommendations for future research and provides implications for practice regarding the connection between leadership and outcomes improvement.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Chapter two covers relevant literature related to student success outcomes. After a discussion on the literature pertaining to this topic, the chapter reviews pertinent concepts related to leadership within higher education. These two topics are linked by a common theme of the role of the institutional environment and the way leaders shape environment and organizational outcomes. Leadership dynamics within the academe are discussed as a way to narrow the discussion that frame the dynamics of making equitable change toward student success outcomes. Shared governance and presidential leadership are explored as a relevant way to understand institutional actions that improve student success outcomes.

Student retention, persistence, and completion have emerged as outcome measures of institutional effectiveness. These products are considered outcomes of higher education and are equated with institutions doing what they *should* to contribute to student success. Perna and Thomas (2006) describe student success as the linear progression of a student from college enrollment through graduation. While a smooth, uninterrupted pathway is the ideal for all students, the student journey toward graduation has been described as winding by some scholars and as gapped by others (Cox, 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Perna & Thomas, 2006). It is important to note that this phenomenon is experienced differently for minoritized students than for White students, requiring particular interventions.

High student retention and graduation scores are strongly correlated with the pre-college characteristics of students such as academic preparedness and personal motivation (Kuh et al., 2005). Unfortunately, not all students who plan to go to college, graduate from high school "college ready" according to national test results. ACT

(2004) defines college readiness as, "the level of preparation a student needs to be ready to enroll and succeed –without remediation—in a credit bearing course in a two-year, four-year, trade school or technical school" (p. iii). The benefits of attaining a college degree, both for the individual and for society, are well documented (ACT, 2004, Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Gallup, 2014; Pasque, 2010). For this reason, robust programs and tiers of institutions have been created to provide access to college for students who are less prepared for a rigorous educational program. While programs cannot amend pre-college characteristics, particularly academic preparedness, interventions can be designed to offset the deficit from which many students operate (Reason, 2009).

This review provides definitions of important terms connected to student retention, persistence, and completion while identifying theories in the literature relevant to this study. Moreover, this review connects leadership literature and student retention, persistence, completion literature. This literature informs differentiated student success outcomes as described in the introduction. The research study is well situated to offer additional insight into the connection of leadership toward student retention as a means to making impactful change in the field of higher education.

Student Success Outcomes: Retention and Graduation Rates

The topic of student success is one that is broadly expressed and studied. George Kuh et al. (2011) define student success as "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence and attainment of education objectives" (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007, p. vii). This definition of student success is

comprehensive in that it takes into account student achievement and activities as well as their views of institutional experiences, acknowledging that student success is a multifarious issue. This research study focuses on the last portion of the definition "persistence and attainment of education objectives." Retention, persistence and completion measures, or student success outcomes, are relevant because of their status as institutional performance indicators. As this definition suggests, however, retention, persistence and completion are outcomes of student success, not pure indicators of institutional quality in themselves. In other words, student learning and other benefits of education are critical measures of success (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014). As the chosen literature will reflect, these other elements of this definition may be means to achieving student success outcomes that are discussed in this paper, namely student retention and graduation. This research study takes a more limited view of student success, referencing (primarily) retention and graduation rates, when referring to the term student success outcomes. However, the more holistic definition is important to understand due to inherent alignment with the perspective of this paper, which takes the view that institutional leaders must find means to ensure students succeed.

Reason (2009) describes the interchangeable use of persistence and retention as "erroneous" due to the varying goals involved in the two terms. Distilling the difference between student and institutional goals, Reason (2009) states, "Retention is an organizational phenomenon—colleges and universities retain students. Persistence on the other hand, is an individual phenomenon—students who persist to a goal" (p.660). Notably, Reason discusses "retention" not as the National Data Center on Education

Statistics has defined it, pertaining to fall to fall measures of returning first-time, full-time freshmen. Rather, he uses the term in a general sense, to be encompassing of an institutional occurrence. Palmisano (2012) similarly categorized these terms by labeling institutional activity, programs, administrators and departments as involved in retention while the term persistence is related to student needs and goals. Where institutional activity and student goals align, both parties experience success.

Further, Hagedorn (2005) described the measures as "complicated, confusing, and context dependent" (p. 89). Distinction in terms highlighted by scholars, signals an important locus of control differentiation (Hagedorn, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) define persistence as "The progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed" (p. 374). Students must actively choose re-enrollment, thereby signaling continued interest in pursuing a degree. Hagedorn (2005) refers to this distinction "institutions retain students and students persist" (p.92). In this understanding of persistence, the student controls his or her progress toward personal goals. Bean and Eaton (2001) regard the voluntary nature of student enrollment as central, noting that individual students decide to stay or leave college; the college cannot decide that for any student.

Sustained positive retention, however, remains an institutional goal; it is an aim toward which colleges and universities set benchmarks and are held accountable by boards and accrediting agencies through federal reporting requirements. Moreover, positive retention measures are a short-term measure of the longer-term completion measures, or graduation rates. It is important that colleges are intentional and strategic in understanding which of their programs and institutional actions actually contribute to

student retention and graduation. “Institutional policies and practices do affect rates of student retention and institutions are far from helpless when it comes to creating programs and environments that attract or repel students” (Bean & Eaton, 2001-2002, p. 73). The relationship between retention and persistence is perhaps best understood as two measures with an inherent connection with a *shared goal* of *graduation*. This understanding concentrates the ability of colleges and universities to influence the decisions of students to continue to enroll at their college or university by the decisions they make and the actions they take as an institution.

Retention and graduation rates are often interpreted as a proxy for institutional quality (Reason, 2009). However, the assumption is problematic because the inputs for this formula are inherently flawed. The formula only includes first-time, full-time freshmen in the measurement for retention and graduation rates. These figures, therefore, clearly do not account for the numerous non-first-time students (i.e. transfer students, degree completion students) who are enrolled at an institution. While research encompasses many non-traditional populations (i.e. students who are single parents, students who have delayed enrollment after high school or students who are financially independent, etc.) the measurements for which colleges and universities are held accountable remain insufficient in design. In 2016, however institutions were required to report transfer student data for the first time to the United States Department of Education as a part of their regular Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) report. This reporting may indicate a future change to a more holistic measure for institutional performance.

Institutional retention and graduation rates are also highly related to the level of

institutional selectivity (Mayhew, et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Hagedorn (2005) comments that some colleges improve their retention rates by limiting their fall cohorts to only the highest scoring group of students on admission standards and allowing another group of students to enroll in the spring semester, an unreported entry group of students. Yet, despite unaccounted for students in the figure and lack of public knowledge about what factors impact the rates, retention rates are communicated broadly to an audience that has no background for discerning their inadequacy. This reality makes it all the more exigent that institutional leaders scrutinize the complexity of environmental conditions and organizational decisions, beyond impactful programs and practices (Fain, 2014; Mayhew et al., 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) that influence a student's desire to persist at institutions in which they enroll.

Graduation is the natural progression of successful retention and persistence throughout the course of study. Graduation is the aspirational goal of most students who enroll in institutions of higher learning. Graduation rates are the measure by which institutions measure institutional success on cohorts of students that enroll. Primarily, these rates are indicative of how successful institutions are in helping first-time, full-time freshmen progress from enrollment to degree completion after 150% of time or 6 years after enrollment. The government is beginning to solicit information on other populations such as part-time students and transfer students. This more robust data will differently describe student success at institutions as it is more in line with student enrollment behavior at multiple institutions. Moreover, this full-bodied measure may call for different institutional actions to support these diverse populations to successful degree attainment.

The Role of the Environment

The role of the environment to influence a student's decision to persist to graduation is well documented. Many studies highlight the interaction of the individual student and his or her environment (Gilbreath, Kim, & Nichols, 2011; Museus, 2014; Sidanius, Levin, van Laar, & Sears, 2008; Simmons, 2013). There are many ways students experience an institutional environment including, academic settings, co-curricular programs and services, and interactions with campus personnel. Data indicate that the quality of these interactions is influenced by what institutions value and do, as evidenced by institutional decisions and actions and their proximal relationship to student success. "Students perform better and are more satisfied at colleges that are committed to their success and cultivate positive working and social relations among different groups on campus," (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 241). In other words, students sense environmental conditions throughout their interactions with the institution. Cole and Korkmaz (2013) found that institutional and classroom engagement mediated the success of students in their study, cancelling out the effects of pre-college characteristics, an often-cited reason for student failure in college. "Results of this study provide additional evidence that the environment matters and that institutions should continue to focus on creating supportive, positive environments that foster engagement," (p. 567). Institutional environment however, is not limited to the classroom. Rather, environment is likewise manifested in residence halls and living-learning communities where students experience social integration and engagement. These experiences are linked with improved academic outcomes, intellectual engagement, racial sensitivity, sense of personal safety, institutional commitment, and

improved student retention (Braxton et al., 2014; Long, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pasque & Murphy, 2005; Schudde, 2011).

Tinto (1975) famously established the idea of academic and social integration as an important dynamic for whether or not students successfully continued to graduation or not. Revising Tinto's (1975) model for residential colleges, Braxton et al. (2014) find six factors that are qualifications to social integration for students: ability to pay, commitment of the institution to student welfare, communal potential, institutional integrity, proactive social adjustment, psychosocial engagement. When these factors are established for students at residential colleges, Braxton et al. (2014) maintain that social integration is possible. From this perspective, improving and increasing residence life is often something that is considered in how colleges and universities might improve student retention. It is assumed that additional engagement with the environment through on-campus living will improve student retention and thereby graduation rates.

Similarly, Kuh et al. (2005) found that the environment plays a critical role in student retention. Their seminal work documented institutions that have performed exceptionally well on measures of student engagement as gauged by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and graduation rates. This project is known as Documenting Effective Educational Practice and the selected institutions came to be known as DEEP schools. The institutions that emerged as qualified for study were institutions whose enrollment profile did not provide built-in enrollment selectivity advantage toward positive graduation rates, rather, these institutions performed better than their enrollment profile would predict and thus were selected as a DEEP institution. The DEEP Project firmly establishes that colleges and universities can create

conditions that positively impact retention and graduation rates by focusing on student success as an environmental norm.

There is a clear link in the research between creating environmental conditions within an institution and their important influence on improved student retention and graduation rates (Kuh et al., 2005). One of these environmental conditions has been termed a "culture of improvement" and has been a presidential focus at some institutions (Ewell, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005; McClenney, 2013). Presidential focus on environmental conditions motivates the institution toward action. McClenney (2013) asserts, "when college leaders, supported by boards, begin to lead a process to look at student progression through college, it becomes possible to identify gaps in outcomes on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and Pell Grant status" (p. 10). This statement reflects the reality that *leaders* have a powerful role to play in improving retention and graduation outcomes for minoritized students. In line with that reasoning, multi-disciplinary leadership research reveals the central role of leaders in shaping conditions or culture within a given environment (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Tsai, 2011). In other words, top organizational leaders may serve as catalysts for environmental change that relate to desired outcomes upon which they focus.

Sense of Belonging

How a person engages and experiences an environment is often referred to as "sense of belonging." Sense of belonging is the psychological experience whereby a person feels that they connect well with their environment and has been determined to be an important element of student enrollment behavior. In describing its importance,

Parks states, "everyone needs a psychological home, crafted in the intricate patterns of connection and interaction between the person and his or her community" (2000, p. 115). Gaining a sense of belonging influences student perceptions of their environment in favorable ways. Hausmann, Schofield and Woods (2007) record "sense of belonging was found to predict intent to persist, controlling for background variables, including race, and other predictors of persistence," (p. 830). Sense of belonging has been implicit in the understanding of social integration, drawn from Tinto's model. Baird (2000) notes, "Students' personal interpretations of their institutions' opportunities and challenges shape their decisions and behaviors" (p. 65). Notably, an encouraging and supportive environment in which students gain a sense they belong undergirds their success (Gilbreath, Kim, and Nichols, 2011).

Sense of belonging and social integration is greatly impacted by increased positive interactions with peers, faculty, parental support, and knowledge of college resources (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hunt, Boyd, Gast, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2012; Perna & Lundy-Wagner, 2010). According to Baxter et al. (2014), "the more a student perceives that their college or university is committed to the welfare of its students, the greater the student's degree of academic and intellectual development" (p.117). In other words, demonstrated institutional care improves students' sense of belonging, thereby improving student success. Sense of belonging is a psychological manifestation of environmental characteristics.

> To fully and effectively address student persistence, any intervention must consider the local organizational context and the local student peer environment. Individual student decisions about whether to persist are made within, and

influenced by, these two proximal contexts (Reason, 2009, p. 678).

While programs designed to influence social integration are impactful, considering the way students experience their environments is vital to the strength of that impact. This is especially true for minoritized students in the way they experience an institution's racial climate.

Racial Climate

The way minoritized students gain a sense of belonging in the college environment is of particular importance. "A chilly or hostile racial atmosphere on campus would result in a clear sense of minority students not fitting in or feeling alienated, and this lack of fit or alienation leads to leaving" (Bean, 2005, p. 216). This chilly sense may be overt or less obvious. If students experience racial microaggressions (Huber & Solóranzo, 2015; Pierce, 1970) or other racism in a college environment, student engagement as well as continued enrollment may be interrupted. Chang, Sharkness, Hurtado and Newman (2014) note that for underrepresented minority students in STEM, pre-college characteristics are impactful but the college environment is even more of a factor for persistence. Simmons (2013) observes the interaction of underrepresented minority students and their environment. This study finds that students attribute their pre-college characteristics (personal backgrounds), social relationships on campus and their higher education institution as factors for their persistence. Additionally, participants note that developing high educational aspirations (post-baccalaureate), having a relationship with minority faculty, and involvement in student organizations were important to them in their decisions to persist toward a degree. It is notable that the student organizations in the study are comprised of

ethnically based student groups. These studies contribute to the idea that creating a supportive environment is important for overcoming negative pre-college attributes of university success.

Just as research demonstrates that positive social engagement impacts persistence, the inverse has also been studied. Lack of social integration within an institutional environment has also proven to be a major issue impacting student attrition. This is particularly true for students of color and immigrant students, who encounter hostile or cold campus climate, (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, & Yonai, 2014; Kim & Diaz, 2013; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013). Sidanius et al. (2008) in studying intergroup relations as a way to understand time to degree determined, "it appears that black students had set up other in-group-based support systems that buffered them from negative effects of low belonging" (p. 282). As Tinto (2012) discussed, students must "see him- or herself as belonging to at least one significant community" (p. 67). For minoritized students, according to Sidanius et al. (2008), these meaningful communities may be self-defined. However, students must not be left to create survival communities on their own. Rather, practitioners must be sensitive to the climate of their institution toward minoritized students and alleviate the alienation that is present in the environment. "Experiences of discrimination are unique in that they a) are present only among minority students and b) heighten the feeling of not belonging at the institution with spillover effect on student academic performance" (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999, p. 135). Students facing such barriers as racial discrimination, lack of cultural capital and downward acculturation struggle to persist at rates that are similar to their White counterparts (Strayhorne, 2012). Leaders must

acknowledge what is working and find a way to make a difference through decisions and actions (Sidanius et al., 2008).

Museus (2014) calls for particular attention to be paid to the way that colleges can cultivate a culturally engaging environment in sharp contrast to a racially hostile environment. Museus (2014) discards the idea that college environments are culturally neutral, rather, he calls for campuses that incorporate cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, and cultural community service, among other cultural engagement strategies for improving the campus environment. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) model offers two pillars of rationale, "undergraduates who encounter more culturally engaging campus environments are more likely to (1) exhibit a greater sense of belonging, more positive academic dispositions, and higher levels of academic performance and ultimately (2) be more likely to persist to graduation" (Museus, 2014, p. 210). It is from this perspective that Museus (2014) calls for an entirely new body of research to be formulated and empirically tested that is inclusive rather than exclusionary for minoritized students. With his work, Museus not only strengthens the research on the importance of environment on student retention but also opens a visible pathway for making improvement as his theory is tested through future research.

Linking Student Success Outcomes and Leadership: Environment

With the importance of campus atmosphere well established as an influence on retention, a question lingers. "Why do organizations act as they do?" (Hambrick & Mason, 1984, p. 193). Baird (2000) suggests that organizational action is related to the human aggregate. In other words, organizations can take on human-like characteristics

by adopting the social characteristics of its most common members. This phenomenon is called the human aggregate (Baird, 2000). Upper Echelon's Theory points to executive leaders as particularly important as a means of understanding the actions that organizations take (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Upper Echelon's Theory, states that executive leaders within an organization have pronounced influence on the culture of that organization. "Organizational outcomes---both strategies and effectiveness- are viewed as a reflection of the values and cognitive bases of powerful actors in the organization" (p. 193). According to this theory, the role of executive leaders and leadership teams are immensely important to an understanding of the organization's human aggregate which manifests in the institutional environment.

Baird (2000) notes that the idea of social climate has a long and important history of reinforcing certain behaviors as normal or acceptable. He notes, "social climate includes normative structures, reward and sanctioning systems, and in general the things that are emphasized and style of life that is valued on campus" (p.65). Within higher education, these norms influence student perceptions of their environment. These perceptions individually filtered through the experiences, background experiences, and knowledge of each individual student. In this way, the student-institution fit is magnified by how sensitive each student is to his or her fit within a particular environment. Baird (2000) references a previous study by Naylor, Pritchard and Ilgen (1980) where they discuss an individual's perception of this social norming phenomenon as assigning "humanlike traits to an entity...even an entire organization" (p. 67). This research underscores the role of institutional environment as an important aspect of effective student retention and suggests that one might gain a sense of an

institutional environment by talking to the people who work within the institutional environment and make organizational decisions.

It is reasonable to extend this cultural experience into the decisions that leaders make within organizations. “Institutional actions, decisions, and communications flow from institutional culture” (Braxton et al., 2014, p. 86). Decisions within particular institutions, will take on the essence or the acted-out values of the institution. As such, moving institutions toward improvement on student success outcomes is highly context dependent. Leaders must understand their environment in order to make change and successfully navigate issues that influence successful organizational outcomes.

Leadership within the context of higher education carries its own set of challenges, including internal and external pressures, planning systems, organizational priorities, and politics. Many of these leadership challenges can be explored by understanding the concept of shared governance, the role of presidents and who occupies the seat of president in higher education. These concepts will be mined for their relevancy to institutional environment and improvement toward retention measures.

Higher Education Leadership

Higher education leaders face unique challenges and dynamics because of the various stakeholders, pressures, and financial variables that must be considered when enacting leadership behaviors and decisions. Kezar et al. (2006) state,

> The need for leadership in higher education has only become more urgent as the fat days with regular [funding] increases are long over, and the days of accountability and assessment, globalization, and competition are here to stay,

providing new pressures for colleges and universities. (p. 1)

This constant change and increased pressure is the new reality for academic leaders.

Presidents have long been familiar with the conflict between distributed and vertical leadership in higher education. Those that adopt too authoritative styles may be resented and ousted by stakeholders. Likewise, presidents who are only distributive in their approach may be seen as weak. Women who occupy the role of president, a small group, face additional layers of this challenge that are steeped in gender stereotypes as discussed in the gender and leadership section. Moreover, the multitude of roles that presidents enact and the status as 'always on' impacts the effectiveness of their leadership agendas (Bowles, 2013). Distributed or process-based leadership and vertical leadership may conflict with one another philosophically yet both approaches have their relevancy in leading academic institutions due to existing hierarchies and expectations of shared governance within higher education (van Ameijde et al., 2009).

The sections below discuss shared governance, the role of the president, presidential demographics and the relationship of these concepts to student retention rates. Each section, though representing vast bodies of research themselves, is inextricably linked to the notion of leadership toward improved student success outcomes.

Understanding Shared Governance

The most common term used to describe the role of faculty in decision making is *shared governance* (Bowen & Tobin, 2015; Halpern, 2015; Taylor, 2013; Tierney & Lechuga, 2004). Tierney (2008) states that governance is merely "the process devised to achieve particular outcomes" (p.135). Shared governance implies that faculty have input

into important decisions on campus. While there are certain areas over which faculty have official oversight (curriculum, programmatic offerings, admissions criteria etc.) there are other times when faculty input is invited rather than mandated through formal governance structures. An example of this type of involvement might be committee work on a special campus topic. In these types of decisions, the participation level of faculty may be varied and an administrative leader could adopt a different style of leadership that is more directive and less shared. Moreover, different types of institutions range in their approach to faculty involvement in decision making.

Tierney (2008) wrote extensively on the notion that shared governance is highly contextual and influenced by environment through organizational culture. He wrote, "the challenge is to understand what cultural elements are vital to the core identity of the organization and those elements to enhance dynamic participation in shared governance" (p.167). Academic leaders do well to note the sensitive topic that is faculty-involved decision making.

Executive or administrative leadership working in tandem with faculty leadership to lead an institution may be shifting. Kezar and Lester (2011) report that based on the literature, scholars agree, "trustees, presidents, and other administrators are increasingly centralizing decisions (away from input form faculty and staff—part of shared governance) and more unilaterally managing higher education institutions as corporations" (p. 12). Principles of shared governance that have long been accepted as important in higher education are being threatened by a new kind of change. van Ameijde et. al (2009) states, "over the past few decades traditional principles of academic leadership and collegial forms of governance have been rapidly replaced by

management principles adopted from the private sector" (p. 763-764). These management principles threaten the distributed leadership paradigm by reversing the concentration of power from grass- roots to a more administrative model.

However, Halpern (2015) advises "A wise administrator will be respectful of the faculty role in governance" (p. 175). Fisher and Koch (1996) determined that the way a president navigates shared governance determines whether presidential agendas are advanced or stalled within institutions. When presidents seek to engage in governance, the role of faculty in making change or responding to leadership is an important topic to consider. Halpern (2015) offered two principles that may guide leaders in shared governance: confer widely and be fair. When leaders approach decisions in this way, it can pay off (Halpern, 2015). Sternberg (2015) stated, "in the end, it may be that different styles work better not only for different situations and at different times, but also for different administrators" (p. 68). In this way, he not only advocates for leadership that is situationally sensitive and informed but also for leadership that is authentic to the leader's identity (Roberts, 2007).

While latitude to act varies by institutional context and strength of the shared governance process, the role of the president is equally paramount to understanding institutional decisions. The next section discusses the changing role of presidents in higher education, including the increasing complexity of the job as well as shifting demographics.

Presidents

Three decades ago, Fisher, Tack, and Wheeler (1988) wrote, "higher education's ability to make lasting contribution to society rests on the shoulders of presidents who

are aggressively committed to developing quality institutions that are financially sound and capable of carrying out their mission," (p.2). Their visionary quote pointed to a future movement toward increased presidential direction in leading institutions. Today's presidents must navigate internal dynamics and a tumultuous external environment of change. Santamaría and Santamaría (2012) state, "it is difficult to provide vision, effective leadership, and successful management under the pressure of constant change" (p. xii). Educational leaders, namely presidents, must deal with external, sometimes hostile, directives and mandates simultaneous to their internal responsibilities of managing their institution (American Council on Education, 2017).

One former president described the role of the president as complex and multifaceted both in role expectations and in job function (Bornstein, 2014). In their landmark study, Fisher, Tack, and Wheeler (1988) found that effective presidents were those leaders who demonstrated certain leadership behaviors such as complete and unabashed commitment to their work, a demonstrated focus on winning, and being thoughtful and deliberate in their decision making (p.107-108). Bornstein (2014) advised that presidents must have leadership legitimacy, managed authenticity, and emotional stability to stand up to the leadership challenge of being a college or university president, noting that legitimacy is established through "competent handling of responsibility and appreciation for institutional culture" (p. 189).

It may be through this knowledge of institutional culture that presidents can navigate the tensions of faculty leadership input and administrative leadership responsibilities. University presidents must rise to the complex challenges facing higher education. One of the most multifaceted problem confronting higher education is how

to equitably move students through the higher education pipeline to graduation, thereby affecting institutional retention and graduation rates for students.

Presidential Demographics

Persons with diverse backgrounds and identities are a demonstrated structural necessity that achieve equitable outcomes for minoritized students on measures of student retention and graduation rates (Tierney, 2008). Zavela and Tran (2016) assert that, "identity is central to our praxis as leaders, and that our work as scholars advocating for increased diversity of leadership in spaces of higher learning is very much informed by our own identities" (p. 94). In line with this reasoning, when identities are not present in the highest levels of organizations, lack of diversity is a liability rather than an asset for leadership teams.

> While race, gender, and social class identities are often thought of as barriers for individuals in or aspiring to serve in leadership roles in higher education, we argue that these identities not only act as epistemic resources, but also as organizing opportunities to find common ground in advocating for students of color and creating strategic spaces that support this goal. (Zavela & Tran, 2016, p. 102)

From this perspective, presidential demographics are a relevant set of data to review.

In higher education, the most common presidential profile has held steady for over twenty-five years. The office of president is conventionally held by a married, white male who is 62 years old, holds a doctorate in education and has served in his position for seven years (ACE, 2017, pg.4). The norm of leadership broadly is that there is plentiful access for white males but all other identities are largely absent from the

profile of a top university leader. Women who do achieve top levels of leadership report notable discrimination on the basis of both their gender and race when they are not white (Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2009).

In their work to profile women college presidents, Wolverton, Bower and Hyle (2009) state, "the road to the college presidency is well-established and travelled quite frequently, albeit mostly by white men" (p.143). They question, "How long women will make the choice between babies and boardrooms," noting the regularity of detours for women along a presidential leadership pathway (Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2009). When race is considered for the profile, all racial minorities make up only 13% of all presidents (Cook B. J., 2012). Women of color make up only 17% of all sitting women presidents (Cook S. G., 2012). Longman and Anderson (2016) determined that for women in Christian higher education, the pathway may be more obscured and leadership barriers may be more overtly gendered, even unquestioned as a pattern of behavior within the organization. In 2015, only 7% of Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) presidencies were held by women (Longman & Anderson, 2016). Moreover, when president's cabinets were surveyed, only 44% of CCCU cabinets had one woman as a member and only 15% had two women as cabinet members. This reality is set against the national backdrop where 26% of all presidents are women (Lennon, 2013). This underrepresentation in the presidency has an uneven effect on the landscape of talent development for leadership modeling at institutions. The 2017 American College President Study marked developing a diverse presidential pipeline as a key finding in need of a solution with increasing importance as student demographics continue to broaden (ACE, 2017). This leaky pipeline in leadership

readiness is only a late manifestation of the underrepresentation of minoritized students in college completion data. Successful graduation of students from diverse backgrounds is a pre-requisite to successful leadership attainment within higher education.

Presidential role in retention.

College presidents are certainly thinking about the issue of improving student retention and graduation rates. When college presidents were surveyed about how they evaluate a successful college presidency, 63% of respondents stated that student retention rates were extremely important and 55% assigned the same weight to student graduation rates (Calderon, 2016). Notably, zero respondents rated student retention of unimportance. This same report detailed that all presidents regularly track these measures and determine them to be extremely important measures for their success as leaders. Sitting presidents rank fundraising and strategic planning as the most important duties of their job, two relatively important tasks for helping an institution make improvements (Selingo, Chheng & Clark, 2017). Likewise, as presidents look to the future of higher education, 38% of surveyed presidents named enrollment management as an important skill for those aspiring to the office of president (ACE, 2017). One president stated, "Presidents need the skill sets of a politician, an academic, and an entrepreneur. This used to be a reflective life, but now you have to drive so many airplanes, and all at once" (Selingo, Chheng, & Clark, 2017, p. 23). This quote signals a change in expectation for what a president can do and how he or she will lead an institution of higher learning.

Scholarship on university presidents has captured their viewpoints and responsibilities, however a gap exists among primary scholarship. Empirical research

centering the role of presidents in retention is scant, however, a new study directly studied the relationship of college presidents' backgrounds and tenure on measures of student retention and graduation rates. Whistle (2014) sought to discover the effect of college presidents on measures of retention and graduation rates. In his study, he concluded that effective leadership is more important than it ever has been, noting that successful outcome measures are critical ways of viewing effective leadership in the college presidency. His study, the first of its kind, revealed that there is a relationship between a president's career background and institutional retention rates. Specifically, for public institutions, when a president has an academic background, retention rates are better. The research also determined that for institutions in this study, graduation rates were fixed and not influenced by the background of the president as academic or non-academic. This lone study is limited in its ability to produce generalizable results for national data samples due to sample size. However, the study is landmark in drawing together the idea of the role of presidents as it relates to outcome measures of higher education, retention and graduation rates. This research is valuable because it suggests that presidents *themselves* matter as institutions seek to solve the complex problem of improving institutional retention and graduation rates.

The Relevance of Culturally Responsive Leadership

Shifting student demographics and disparate outcomes call for change within higher education. One way to do that is by introducing diverse and culturally responsive leaders into positions of leadership. (ACE, 2017). Researchers have noted major diversity in enrollment trends (i.e., racial-ethnic diversity, non-traditional student populations) (Bragg, 2013; Heller, 2005; Kurlaender & Flores, 2005). Bishop (2011)

states, “leaders play a central role in reducing disparities for indigenous and other minoritized peoples” (p. 27). It is imperative that educational leaders address the needs of student populations through their approach to leadership, both in what they do, how they do it, and how they shape their environments through decision making processes (Tierney, 2008).

Santamaría and Santamaría (2016) issued a call for culturally responsive leadership in higher education. Culturally responsive leadership is identified as, “theory and educational practices (e.g., influence, management, administrative) that take in to consideration race, ethnicity, language, culture and gender” (p.4). This consciousness is intended to produce equity for students through an emphasis on expectations for high student achievement and inclusive environments (Santamaría, Jeffries, & Santamaría, 2016). Women may be uniquely situated to respond to the call because of their record of contributions to higher education leadership, including participatory decision-making, team approach, collaboration and inclusiveness among others (Kezar, 2014).

No matter the challenges faced by academic leaders, the role of education as the chief end of the organization remains paramount (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). Educational leadership uniquely centers learning both as a functional mission and as a way of experiencing organizational change (Grogan, 2013). An educational environment that does not move students toward the goal of graduation falls short of its intended purpose. For this reason, understanding the many complex phenomena that impact leadership decisions and actions that lead to focused institutional improvement is an important skill for any person aspiring to a formal leadership position or desiring to enact change within higher education. In order to be

effective in mission achievement, leaders must be knowledgeable of the issues, cognizant of the dynamics, and responsive to the challenges that exist within the context of higher education.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the powerful role that institutional environment plays in helping students persist to graduation. This chapter underscored the importance of institutional action toward inclusive environmental improvement as a means of ensuring equitable degree attainment. Further, this chapter discussed the role that leaders must play in moving institutions forward toward the desired outcome of improved retention and graduation rates by way of understanding their institutional environment as a summative experience of leadership decisions and actions. Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion of higher education leadership as a means of understanding the context of leading in higher education, acknowledging the challenges but calling for culturally responsive leadership that makes a difference in the institutional environment. The literature under review offered hope toward local, institutional action, that introduces effective process-based leadership that manifests itself in equitable outcomes. The next chapter will discuss the conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

This section discusses the formative theories that inform this study. Theories

draw from retention and graduation literature, as well as broad leadership theory. These two fields inform one another and find commonality in the way that environment intersects both arenas.

Formative Retention, Graduation and Leadership Theory

This study is informed by previous research which has pointed to programs that improve student retention, environmental conditions under which students may thrive or fail, student experiences in institutional environments and programs, as well as various theoretical models that have been widely applied within higher education as a means for understanding student attrition phenomena (Fain, 2014; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella and Terrenzini 2005; Tinto, 1975). This section will discuss formative theories for understanding student retention as well as leadership and the relationship of these two scholarly fields. Where these fields of research converge is on the point of environment, where leaders have a primary role to play in shaping environmental conditions and organizational decisions that result in organizational outcomes (Mason & Hambrick, 1984). From that argument, the author selected a theoretical framework that allowed for maximum flexibility and creativity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016) to understand the phenomenon. This chapter reports explicit researcher choices for examining the process of leading institutional improvement for student success outcomes. These choices are grounded in existing literature and intentionally connect two areas of scholarship through the use of a theoretical framework (Astin & Leland, 1991), previously used to investigate minoritized leaders in higher education and their role in making change within their specific contexts.

Several formative theories shape the way institutional leaders think about and

act upon improving student success outcomes. While there are many other ways to think about the phenomenon of student retention, two theories are widely cited and have been updated, critiqued and improved upon. These theories include Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Astin's Theory of Student Involvement. These theories have been widely cited, perhaps for their repetitious appearance as much as for their universal contribution to theory (Braxton et al., 2014). These theories, both sociological in nature, explore the phenomena of student characteristics, institutional environment, student involvement and how these phenomena influence students to persist toward graduation. Through this lens, this approach seeks to understand how a student and his or her environment interact toward a particular outcome, in this case, retention or attrition.

Tinto's theory of student departure posits that the less integrated a student is into the life of an institution, the more likely he or she is to depart from the institution (attrition) due to low commitment to the college or university (Tinto, 1975). It is upon this foundation that Tinto builds his idea of social integration and student departure, pointing leaders to push students toward integration, academically and socially, with the institution as a means of improving student retention. Tinto's model goes on to demonstrate that it is possible for a person to have sufficient social integration and still drop out of higher education due to insufficient academic integration (Tinto, 1975). Tinto observes that the inverse may also be true. A student may be capable and engaged in the academic life of the institution but may still choose to drop out if there is not a balance between social and academic integration.

Tinto, however, did not place the entire burden of success on the institution. He

also included individual student characteristics in his theory of departure, stating, "if one wishes to explain the longitudinal process of interactions that lead differing persons to varying forms of persistence and/or dropout behavior, one must build into the model individual characteristics and dispositions relevant to educational persistence," (Tinto, 1975, p. 93). Tinto's model is an integrated view of how leaders might understand student persistence behaviors and how institutional actions impact that behavior, though according to Braxton et al. (2014) its effectiveness may prove to be greater for residential colleges than commuter colleges.

It is of note that Tinto's theory has been reviewed by a number of scholars who modified his model for different populations, including non-traditional learners (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Nora & Castenda, 1993;). Others critique his model for its lack of applicability to minoritized students, the over-emphasis of the role of self-determination in student success, lack of potency in the integration argument in the broader literature, and finally the lack of discussion of the psychological connection of students to institutions (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, 2014;). Much work has been done since this scholarship that has contributed to a more evolved understanding of retention and persistence phenomena. However, this theory continues to be extensively cited and important as a comprehensive framework for strategy and research, particularly research that is derived from a sociological perspective.

Another historical framework and widely published theory is Astin's Theory of Student Involvement. Alexander Astin (1984) ties together the concepts of student involvement and institutional commitment, distinctively, but related to Tinto in that it

focuses on student integration. Astin (1984) focuses on behaviors that indicate pedagogical involvement in the institution. "The theory of student involvement argues that a particular curriculum, to achieve the effects intended, must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development" (Astin, 1999, p. 522). Astin (1999) goes on to say programmatic effectiveness should be measured by the degree to which it increases student involvement. This theory goes hand in hand with Tinto's Theory of Student Departure in that it helps qualify the benefit of student involvement. Astin (1999) states,

> The persister-dropout phenomenon provides an ideal paradigm for studying student involvement. Thus, if we conceive of involvement as occurring along a continuum, the act of dropping out can be viewed as the ultimate form of noninvolvement and dropping out anchors the involvement continuum at the lowest end. (p. 524)

This theory informs practitioners by approaching students from a student minded theory (persistence) rather than only an institutional based model (retention).

While Tinto and Astin's models approach the student from an environmental or institutional integration perspective, Bean and Eaton (2000) view student retention from an individual, psychological angle. In their original theory, Bean and Eaton (2000) note that previous sociological theories had explored groups of students and their poor fit within the college environment. However, the psychological approach allows for a more individual view of student persistence behaviors. Students enter college with a complex array of personal characteristics. As they interact with the institutional environment, several psychological processes take place that, for the successful student, result in

positive self-efficacy, reduced stress, increased efficiency and internal locus of control. (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p. 58). In this way, the psychological model highlights the way persistence is focused on individual, student decisions.

Bean and Eaton's (2000) study is unique in that it explicitly views individual student characteristics or their cognitive processes and the way in which their unique make-up impacts participation and receptivity to institutional action. The authors describe their own work as interactional. "While interacting with the college environment and its many different features, the student engages in a series of self-assessments that can be described by several psychological processes" (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p. 75). This work goes beyond encouraging the practitioner to know his or her environment to understanding individual students. Similar to Tinto (1975), the authors focus on academic and social integration as a major indicator of student persistence. Each of these theories share a thread of the influence of institutional environment on student engagement as a way to understand what impacts student retention and graduation rates.

While the three previously mentioned theories approach the study of student retention from slightly different viewpoints, they all point to a role of student engagement in the institutional environment as relevant for successful student retention. In short, the premise that social involvement leads to greater institutional engagement is a well-documented phenomenon (Andrade, 2008; Astin, 1999; Bowman & Denson, 2013; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005;). Given the theoretical relevance of environment for the phenomenon of student retention, the question remains, how do leaders shape environments? As the below section will discuss, leaders

shape their environment through the decisions they make, the values they hold, and the process by which they move toward established outcome goals. It is from this logical progression; the chosen theoretical framework will be made plain.

Conceptualizing Leadership

In his influential work on leadership, Northouse (2016) comments on the abundant variety of definitions and theories of leadership. Leadership is both a field of study and an applied practice. As such, Northouse (2016) notes that his aim is to inform the practice of leadership through scholarship. The topic of leadership has at least a 200-year history and privileges a hierarchical, power-centered view of leadership since its conception (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). Widespread diversity in approach to leadership scholarship and practice confirms the lack of consensus around a meta- definition of leadership.

Northouse (2016) refers to the understanding of leadership as having evolved over time since around 1900. Likewise, Kezar et al. (2006), refers to a revolution in leadership paradigm. This (re)evolutionary journey has moved from a focus on leadership as intrinsic since birth, to a mid-century emphasis on behaviorism, to a modern orientation toward processes and groups (Kezar & Lester, 2011; Kezar et al., 2006; Northouse, 2016). While a leader-centered conception of leadership is a common understanding of leadership, the newer paradigm of decentralized and process approaches is gaining prominence in scholarship and practice (Kezar et al., 2006; Northouse, 2016; van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry, & van Meurs, 2009). “Process implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers. It emphasizes that leadership is not a linear, one-way event but rather an interactive event” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). As

van Ameijde et al. (2009) establish, a leader/follower dynamic that is only seen as a cause/effect relationship is an outdated way to understand leadership. In addition to updating the leader-follower dynamic, process-based leadership approaches encompass both the role of context and the practical "way things are done." Nevertheless, modern scholars continue to study leadership theories and approaches that emerged in prior decades. In particular, transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) remains a popular lens for leadership studies, which some have asserted may be a bridge theory between a leader- centric approach and a distributed leadership approach. Similarly, more contemporary scholars have emerged with a form of transformational leadership that is called applied critical leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). This theory interrogates the role of race in leadership and embraces leadership as a process approach. Such scholarship serves as a bridge between a leader-centric paradigm and a distributed leadership methodology. Kezar et.al (2006) determine that leadership scholarship and practice is "moving away from static, highly-structured, and value-neutral leadership frameworks" in exchange for "dynamic, globalized, and process-oriented perspectives of leadership that emphasizes cross-cultural understanding, collaboration, and social responsibility for others" (p.2). It is clear from a review of trends in leadership study, a leader-centric paradigm for understanding phenomenon such as change, organizational behavior and success is evolving. To bring improvement toward outcomes, leaders and leadership are changing.

Kezar et al. (2006) and Heifetz (2007) argue that improvement and change is a leader's role. Moreover, the complexity of issues that exist in today's world call for leadership that can respond to convolution. "Routine responses will not help address

adaptive challenges that are the work of leadership" (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 40). "Heifetz (1994) believes that routine problems do not require leadership; rather problems that are difficult to define should be the focus" (as quoted in Kezar, et.al, 2006, p.40). Higher education certainly faces a number of complex challenges requiring adept leaders to help center attention on such problems, making decisions that move institutions toward improvement.

According to Upper Echelon's Theory, executive leaders make decisions regarding what issues to tackle and what strategies to choose through the lens of their personal experiences and values. "If we want to understand why organizations do what they do, or why they perform the way they do, we must consider their most powerful actors— their top executives" (Hambrick, 2007, p. 334). Moreover, their experiences shape the meaning that they attach to what they see and hear (Hambrick, 2007). While this business theory has not been directly applied to educational leadership, the application is clear when retention and graduation rates are viewed as both organizational goals and performance outcomes for institutions (Juravich, 2012) as is now the case for institutions.

While the study of leadership has changed (Kezar et al., 2006) leaders remain an important part of any leadership process. As Heifetz (2007) noted, complexity has increased, calling for more leadership rather than less in the face of complicated industry challenges. Leadership approaches have adapted to address the changing landscape of higher education, therefore research models that allow for the theoretical flexibility to view related and distinct phenomenon are likewise an essential enterprise. The chosen theoretical framework for this study meets the need for flexibility and

coherent conceptual relationships.

This study shadows the theoretical framework created by Astin and Leland (1991) which was generated to study feminist leadership. The relationship between feminist leadership and this study is connected to the way that women leaders were viewed, in their study, as having a target identity and a fundamentally *different* way of leading, which is through *process*. The authors recommended this theory for future studies of leadership in other applications, such as this current research. This study picks up that recommendation and drives it further through exploring a distinctive change phenomenon and placing particular focus on the leadership process as well as the context in which the change occurred. The similarity between their method and that of this study lies in the original research context (higher education) and the leader identity (female) as well as the leadership approach (process). Based on these conceptual and context connections, as well as the ability of this model to provide a structure for the research plan, this conceptual model is well suited for this research study.

The internal consistencies of Astin and Leland (1991) and the appropriateness for the study of leadership for improved student success outcomes are outlined below. This study adopts a constructivist approach. Both the theory and the epistemology of this study share this commonality. The following description of the social constructivist view of leadership from Kezar, Carducci and Contreras-McGavin (2006) resonated with the aims of this study, "leadership is a social construction; subjective experience is important to how leadership emerges; culture and context have a significant impact on leadership, an ever-evolving concept that has changed over time" (p.16). Moreover,

Kezar et al. (2006) discuss the link of leaders' values in creating organizational culture. In Astin and Leland's (1991) conception of leadership, the leader serves as a catalyst to the process of making change within a given context. Utilizing this understanding of leadership fits the concepts of leadership in this study.

Presenting a non-binary approach, this research is a socio-cultural construction of reality as well as a pragmatic scholarly contribution (David, 2002). Pragmatic scholarship relates the idea of practical application toward a particular field. In this case, this study strives to connect practical application through a scholarly means to the field of Higher Education Leadership. Jenlink (2001) states:

> The ideal of scholar–practitioner leadership envisions a "new scholarship" wherein the practitioner as a scholar of practice, seeks to mediate professional practice and formal knowledge and theory through disciplined inquiry and practice to guide decisions on all levels of educational activity. (p.7)

In line with this reasoning, this scholarship seeks to provide guidance to a particular issue within Higher Education that will inform the practice of leadership within this context.

Next, this study is equity oriented in purpose. Likewise, the issue that Astin and Leland (1991) sought to tackle in their conception of leadership was lack of parity for women in positions of leadership. Likewise, this study seeks to interrogate the issue of equity in retention and graduation rates with the acknowledgement that leaders, namely university presidents, are responsible to make change for minoritized students (Pasque, 2010).

Further, this study is concerned with context in its construction and in theoretical relationship to the literature. This study accepts that change must be effective in local contexts to make a true difference for students in improving their quality of academic success as it relates to retention and graduation from college (Reason, 2009). Moreover, context is central to the study of leadership, the issue of student success outcomes and the chosen methodology of this study. In their analysis of the literature on leadership, Kezar et al. (2006) state, "many have begun to argue that context may be the most important factor affecting leadership" (p. 61). A deep exploration of context as a part of this case study is warranted to understand the leadership decisions and actions in this study. Being able to center context through the conceptual framework, improves the boundaries of the case and theoretical findings of this study by linking context to leadership processes and outcomes.

Additionally, this research has a process-based leadership focus yet considers the role of the formal leader, in this case the president, to be crucial in understanding the outcomes of this work. In their study, Astin and Leland (1991) view leadership as empowerment, acknowledging that empowerment can be a tool of positional and non-positional leaders alike. As they concerned themselves with leadership as process rather than position, they stated that, their study was focused on behaviors and actions that led to change. Likewise, this study investigates decisions and actions there were relevant to bringing institutional change toward equitable retention and graduation outcomes for minoritized students. This framework acknowledges the relevance of the leader, not entirely discarding her in favor of only viewing the process of leadership, rather including her as a catalyst for the change that occurs. This viewpoint is a strong contrast

with "great-man" theories of leadership and notably connected to ideas of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) that empower others through actions and decisions toward shared goals.

Finally, Astin and Leland (1991) assert that women view power differently than men, noting that empowerment toward collective action is the central action of female leaders. The central leader in this study, the president, is a female leader who moved the institution toward united improvement. This type of leadership is conceptually linked to the idea of transformational leadership in which leaders are able to move groups toward shared goals (Burns, 1978). Astin and Leland (1991) outlined four elements of leadership that are displayed in the below table.

Framework Element	Description of Element
The Leader	Person as a catalytic force or facilitator
The Context	Broadly defined as an institution
The Process	Means of achieving outcomes such as communication, collective action, empowerment
The Outcomes	Desired change within an institution that improves the quality of life

Table 1. Conceptualization of Leadership Adapted from Astin and Leland (1991)

Astin and Leland (1991) state:

> According to this conceptual framework, leadership is a process by which members of a group are empowered to work together synergistically toward a common goal or vision that will create change, transform institutions, and thus improve quality of life (p. 8).

This framework provides a relevant conceptual framework because it views leadership as a functional, contextually bound process that results in improvement outcomes that are guided by a catalytic leader.

This research study mirrors the above theoretical understanding of leadership by exploring the *leader*, *context* and *process* of leadership that resulted in improved retention and graduation *outcomes*. Since the desired change within the institution has already occurred, the research questions were designed to understand the leader, the context and the process that contributed to the outcomes. Also, Astin and Leland (1991) wrote that in investigating the process of leadership, they were primarily concerned with how leadership worked. Based on that idea, the questions in this study are also *how* questions, asked to understand the process that led to the outcomes under study. The below table displays the research questions and their relationship to each framework element.

Framework Element Label	Description of Element	Aligned Research Question
The Leader	The College President: Elsa Nùñez	1. In what way did the leader serve as a catalyst for improvement for retention and graduation rates?
The Context	The Institution: Eastern Connecticut State University	2. What is the institutional environment at Eastern Connecticut State University?
The Process	Means of Achieving Outcomes: Empowerment, Collective Action, Communication	3. What was the leadership process? a. How were decisions and actions toward retention improvement empowered? b. How did collective action occur?

		c. How did communication occur?
The Outcomes	Desired Change: Improved Retention and graduation Rates for Minortized Undergraduate Students	N/A- These outcomes were known and the impetus for case selection

Table 2, Research Question Alignment with Theoretical Framework

Conclusion

Introduced by Astin and Leland (1991), this framework emerged as an appropriate structure for understanding the relationship of leadership and student success outcomes. Through this configuration, the role of a leader and the leadership process may be viewed as related within a certain environment, properly balancing distributed and hierarchical leadership. From this perspective, this framework allows a multi-dimensional view of how varied influences pool to power improvements in desired outcomes. The literature on student retention, persistence and completion validate the multifarious nature of improving these measures. Likewise, the diverse nature of leadership study calls for a measure of complexity in applying a leadership lens to any field of exploration. For this reason, a complex framework was required to achieve the goals of this study and allows for deep exploration of this case. The coming chapters will present the research design of the study.

Chapter Four: Research Design

This chapter discusses the benefit of qualitative research for the study of

leadership for student success outcomes, then addresses the research design, methodology, the case study setting, methods used for data collection, methods for data analysis, ethical considerations and the role of the researcher in this project. This organization provides a basis for understanding the unique contributions of this study. Guided by the literature, this design allows for meaningful inquiry within the chosen case. This chapter also discusses the measures taken to provide the reader with a sense of the trustworthiness of this research.

Methodology: Case Study

According to Yin (2011), qualitative research offers many benefits when seeking to understand the rich data involved in a phenomenon. He points out, "the allure of qualitative research is that it enables you to conduct in-depth studies about a broad array of topics . . . in plain and everyday terms" (p. 6). Merriam (2009) lists four characteristics of qualitative research. They are: a focus on meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument, an inductive process and a focus on rich description. Each characteristic of qualitative research has inherent benefits in the way they help readers understand a phenomenon. According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), qualitative research is an important approach when the researcher wants to "take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of phenomena" (p. 5). A holistic approach is related to Merriam's (2009) focus on meaning and understanding of a social phenomenon.

Quantitative research provides important data that promotes an understanding of explanatory or correlation research. In contrast, qualitative research is more emergent in nature rather than being discovery oriented (Merriam, 2009; Stake 1995). As Stake

(1995) notes, a primary distinction between the purpose of quantitative versus qualitative research is that, "quantitative researchers have pressed for explanation and control; qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists" (p. 37). Moreover, qualitative researchers employ distinct methods that contribute uniquely to the quest for knowledge. According to Travers (2001), "there are five main methods employed by qualitative researchers: observation, interviewing, ethnographic fieldwork, discourse analysis and textual analysis" (p. 2). Qualitative methods employ diverse, rich data sources such as participant narratives, institutional artifact analysis and environmental observation, among others.

These data sources hold relevant information for the study of student retention because of their proximity to student experiences and institutional knowledge. From this perspective, qualitative research plays an important role in studying student retention because of the many and complex phenomena that have an impact on retention.

Although quantitative case studies provide valuable data, qualitative studies case studies can uncover the deep knowledge that come from a particular person, situation, or event (Merriam, 2009). Case study has a rich history in the social sciences and educational research, including higher education (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 2009, Simons, 2009; Creswell, 2007). While case study is not restricted to a qualitative approach, Merriam (2009) observes, "qualitative case study is valued for its ability to capture complex action, perception, and interpretation" (p. 44). Yin (2009) observes that case studies can be useful as "adjuncts" to quantitative research because of their superior ability to dig into questions of how and why (p. 16). According to Stake (1995), "case

study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). Yin (2009) determined that case study is an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). With such a rich history and methodological flexibility, qualitative case study provides an essential basis for pertinent research contribution.

Simons (2009) discusses the history of case study and the struggle for legitimacy case study faced in the past. Stake, Simons and others fought for the consideration of case study as an important evaluative research tool for programs and policies (Simons, 2009). The earliest emergence of case study as a recognized research methodology occurs between 1960-1970 (Simons, 2009). Case study has continued to evolve well past its original use as evaluation research to become a well-accepted and broadly used research methodology (Merriam, 2009; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Simons (2009) also states that the use of case study became a powerful tool for representing the voice of multiple participants and stakeholders, a critical step toward diffusing discriminatory power dynamics that can be inherent in the role of the evaluator or researcher.

While achieving broad use as a methodology, confusion still exists related to its practice. Merriam (2009) distinguishes case study as a methodology from its use in different, practice-based forms. Case study is not casework; the meaning of this term refers more to how a social worker might handle each workload instance. She likewise distinguishes this methodology from case method or case studies as a teaching device or

instructional strategy. Finally, she notes that case study is not case history where one works to trace the past to present day. While historical case studies can be a type of case study approach, simply building a history does not sustain the rigor of case study as a qualitative methodology. Stake (1995) cautions attempts to draw precise definitions of case or case studies citing the wide varieties of practices across disciplines for his reticence.

In addition to misperception on the topic of what constitutes case study methodology, concerns exist for what some might describe as limitations of the methodology. The role of the researcher is an issue to address. Unlike quantitative research, which often aims to depersonalize the role of the researcher, qualitative inquiry invites the personal role of the researcher into the process of knowledge construction (Merriam, 2009). The task of the researcher is to make bias and positionality as obvious as possible to the reader. It is not to remove personal touches from the research, rather to make them clear and to be a careful observer throughout the process of interviews and fieldwork (Merriam, 2009).

Moreover, a second concern exists around the issue of generalizability of case study research. (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) negotiates this concern by stating that the goal for case study research is not generalizability for populations, rather for the expansion of theoretical reasoning or analytic generalization (p. 40). When this concern is reframed and the idea of analytic generalizations is presented, case study stands as a powerful research option for constructing theoretical understanding or new knowledge that can inform both practice and policy (Simons, 2009).

As with any methodology limitations exist, however, the presence of limitations

does not indicate that a methodology is without value. Rather, there are many strengths of a case study that validate its use, including qualities of being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. Yin (2009) states that qualitative case studies are particularly valuable for "how or why" questions (p. 13). The feature of being particularistic means that a case study is able to focus intensely on "a particular situation, event, program, or phenomena. The case is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent" (p. 43). Being descriptive is exceptionally valuable because it communicates the ability for the research to be holistic in approach. Understanding coming from a case study is inclusive, or a "complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated" (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). The purpose of this kind of description is to place the reader inside the case so that they are able to see the things the researcher sees. Description, when achieved, allows for the strength of the case study to be heuristic; in other words, it allows readers to understand the phenomena for themselves (Merriam, 2009). Another term for heuristic is naturalistic generalizations, or the ability of the reader to draw conclusions based on his or her interpretation of the descriptive data. Rich description draws out relevant interpretation through the process of making the theory evident by giving a factual report of what one sees (Schwandt, 2007).

Many definitions exist for case study. Merriam (2009) defines case study as, "a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). Likewise, Creswell (2007) defines, "case study research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system" (p. 73). A case must be "bounded"; in other words, a case must have a determinable beginning and end

(Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2007). If there are not boundaries around a case, it is unlikely to be a case and case study methodology would be an improper choice for approach. The bounded system is the unit of analysis, a choice of "what" is to be studied (Merriam, 2009). Simons (2009) states, "The case could be a person, a classroom, an institution, a programme, a policy, a system" (p. 4). Case study, therefore, "is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a real-life context" (p. 21). It is of primary importance that each case is well defined and describes the complexity and context of the selected case.

The ability of a case study to deal with multipart occurrences is a pronounced strength of case study. Merriam (2009) states, "the case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance" (p. 50). Corbin and Strauss (2015) also note that researchers have "the ability to recognize variation as well as regularity" (p. 5). Case study relishes both the normal and the unusual and seeks to describe both as they pertain to the phenomena in focus. Alertness to multiple phenomena within a given case requires a human instrument that is capable of keen, sensitive observations.

Several types of case studies clarify the multiple layers of phenomena and potential data that can be uncovered. Clarification related to why a case is selected illuminates the type of case study constructed. Case studies may be either instrumental or intrinsic (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). Intrinsic case studies are those cases that are of primary interest because the case itself is interesting (Stake, 1995). An example of a fundamentally interesting case might be a teacher as the focus of a case study with the

goal of understanding the particular nature of that teacher. In contrast, an instrumental case study would seek to understand a phenomenon like classroom management and as such, might select the teacher and her classroom as the context for the study (Stake, 1995). Instrumental case studies contribute to a greater understanding of a general issue. For this reason, the case is secondary to the need to elucidate an existing problem. For intrinsic case studies, participant selection is obvious. For instrumental case studies, however, participants are selected for their relative value in uncovering important information related to the phenomena under study. As Stake (1995) notes, instrumental case studies are selected "to understand something else" (p. 3) or what he calls a dominant issue. For instrumental case studies a bounded system is selected to illustrate the issue under study (Creswell, 2007). Case selection and case boundaries are a chief concern in instrumental case studies whereas participant selection is of utmost importance in an intrinsic study.

The role of the context is a critical element to understanding the importance of case study as a methodology, though it is not the only methodology with this concern. Yin (2009) acknowledges that historical research is likewise concerned with context but distinguishes itself from case study in reference to time period. Case study is concerned with contemporary phenomena (Yin, 2009) "case study can document multiple perspectives, explore contested viewpoints, demonstrate the influence of key actors and interactions between them in telling a story of the programme or policy in action" (Simons, 2009, p. 23). Contemporary or current action is the concern of a traditional case study.

While some methodologies have distinct methods, criticism exists that case

study has no particular set of research tools or determinative sources of data (Yin, 1981). However, recent scholarship attests to a more defined set of data sources to be used in case study, primarily six sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artifacts (Yin, 2009). The more common case study has become, the more usual methods have developed. However, one could argue that flexibility strengthens this methodology because of its ability to draw from many rigorous methods in order to underscore the complexity and peculiarity of each case.

Elasticity, however, does not eliminate intentionality in design. Using the planned framework for this research design will strengthen the external validity of this study by appropriately informing theory through the use of case study methods. According to this approach, case study delivers understanding as it provides in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon related to existing theory in a particular field (Yin, 2009). Similarly, the goal for this study is to demonstrate a relationship between existing theory on student retention, institutional environment and the role of leadership to impact the study of higher education.

As described in chapter two, student characteristics and institutional characteristics intertwine to influence retention and graduation rates as an outcome in higher education. Administrative leaders' roles in shaping retention actions and decisions are likewise complicated phenomena because the decisions leaders make contribute to these outcomes as well. With so many elements involved in retention, qualitative research methods are suitable for gaining insight into the complex interplay of phenomenon.

Single Case Study

In order to achieve optimal descriptive results in answering the research questions, this study employed a single case study approach. Single case studies have been common in recent dissertation research when the goal was particular depth (Dollarhide, 2015; Moreland, 2013; Palmisano, 2012; Roberts, 2011; Stich, 2010;). However, it is not their prolificacy that makes a single case study worth exploring. Rather, it is the philosophical match between the purpose of case study research and the conduction of a single case study project. Stake (1995) noted, "A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case" (p. xi). Creswell built a similar argument, "In a single instrumental case study, the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate the issue" (p. 74). It was reasonable to infer, then, that a single case study project met the inherent purpose of case study research.

Defending case study research, Flyvbjerg (2006) outlined five misunderstandings about case study. In particular, he combated a misconception about the value of a single case in inquiry through a thorough argument that the single case is not only legitimate but also important. Some scholars resist single case study research on the basis of what Flyvbjerg (2006) referred to as "conventional wisdom" (p. 222). Resistence is most common from natural scientists but also exists among qualitative researchers who ascribe to conventional wisdom that larger numbers of cases make for greater generalizability (Flyvbjerg, 2006). He restated his conception this way, "Formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development; the force of a single example is underestimated" (p. 228). In this way, a single case study is a defensible approach for an instrumental case study.

Broad generalizations are not the only valuable contribution that case study research can make. This study sought to make analytic generalizations and rather than population generalizations (Yin, 2009). According to Scwhandt (2007) analytic generalizations are used as "evidence to support, contest, refine, or elaborate a theory, model or concept" (p. 5). The significance of this fact is that this case is illustrative of a unique phenomenon that demands the in-depth and immersive exploration that is demonstrated in this design. Simons (2009) stated, "The primary purpose for undertaking a case study is to explore the particularity, the uniqueness of a single case" (p. 3). Given the role and importance of a single case to the case study methodology, the contribution of a single case study dissertation is merited. Nonetheless, concerns exist. To relieve apprehensions over the limitation of a single case study, Simons (2009) advocated for thorough transparency on the part of the researcher. She explained, "It is rigorous exploration of how your values and actions shape data gathering and interpretation and how people and events in the field impact on you" (Simons, 2009, p. 4).

Moreover, the researcher did not wish to diminish the importance of this instrumental case study by discussing the unique aspects of this case in relationship to other cases (Yin, 2009). Creswell (2007) argued that a researcher must make a conscious choice between multiple cases or a single case inquiry. He concluded, "The study of more than one case dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases and individual studies, the less depth in any single case" (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). In the current case, the important role of the interplay between president, environment and retention outcomes for minoritized students created a logical demand for a single institution

program boundary on this case study so as to provide the appropriate amount of depth to understand the complexity of these relationships. Likewise, the methodology required produced rich findings because an in-depth and immersive approach was taken. Throughout the completion of the study, the existence of a single case allowed for a clear focus on the research questions and the nuances of the institutional context for the decisions and actions of the president and her appointed committee. It is important to both the research framework and connection to the literature that this case study employs multiple layers of analysis, including a consideration of the of 1) the institutional environment 2) the relevant decisions and actions that were taken to improve retention and graduation rates 3) the perception among participants of relative importance of various decisions and actions taken. This type of analysis not only required in-depth immersion by the researcher, but involved ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation, to illuminate the knowledge of the diverse participants in a way that grounds their stories in relevant institutional, cultural milieu.

There was much complexity that existed in the construction of the layers of this case. Further, higher education research that is multi-layered and sensitive to the relationship between institutional context and student experience was answer to a previous request for further research. As Hurtado et al. (2012) explained,

> Scholars have been able to advance our thinking regarding this link between microlevel contexts, or individual and macrolevel contexts that constitute larger sociohistorical forces (Alexander et al., 1987; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) however few higher education researchers have incorporated this perspective in the study of institutional level contexts where diversity dynamics play out (p.41).

Hurtado called for researchers to dig into institution level dynamics, which, in turn, creates a niche for this single case study. By studying presidential and committee actions that influenced institutional policy and decisions this study does just that.

In order to make a clear analysis of the findings emerged, a single case study centered on study participants in an institution that achieved outstanding outcomes for minoritized students by strong leadership decision making processes. The introduction of additional cases and cross-case analysis could have prevented the deep view of the environment that this study achieved. While the primary focus of this study was not the environment of the campus, rather the decisions and actions of a president and presidentially appointed committee, institutional environment emerged as a critical finding as well as the frame of this case, as discussed in chapter two. As such, it impacted the descriptions and interpretations of data and was the preferred approach (Schwandt, 2007).

Rationale

Substantial research has established that the way a student experiences his or her college environment has effects, both positive and negative, on retention and graduation rates (Kuh et al., 2005). Many studies have been conducted to establish which retention programs have proved effective broadly in institutions of higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; The College Board, 2009). This study assumed that information about the many effective programs remains readily available and known in most institutions of higher education. With this assumption, one must question why such knowledge has not produced widespread success for students in degree attainment (Braxton et al., 2014; Tinto,

2012). One gap in the literature is that of particular presidents or committees that have made influential decisions that resulted in improving retention and graduation rates for their students. Given the high stakes of the problem of languishing degree attainment for minoritized undergraduate students and the absence of systematic institutional improvement on these rates, the particular relationship of leadership decisions and student retention was an area of scholarship open for interrogation.

Although the topics of retention and institutional leadership have been linked (Ewell, 2005; Whistle, 2014), no case study to date has offered insight into how retention and graduation rates may be improved by leaders through examining their decisions and actions within a particular institutional context. It was assumed that the insights of a president and faculty/staff participants would clarify leadership decisions that contributed to success. Moreover, this study explored the way the institutional environment related to the outcomes. Building on this knowledge, future research may use other methodologies to investigate the topic of leadership toward student retention and provide a rich picture of how leaders may enact a style that is congruent with making an impact in student retention rates, beyond programmatic best practices. To make a difference in student retention, it is important both to use the existing knowledge base and to address the gap that exists in the research.

This instrumental case study sheds light on the problem of leading successful student retention and graduation improvement. As a case study, focused on exploring the issue of retention leadership, this applied research aimed to help practitioners improve the effectiveness of their programmatic efforts to increase institutional retention and graduation rates and open an angle of scholarship into the link between

student retention work and leadership decisions (Merriam, 2009). Toward that end, this study contributed by providing insight into the leadership decisions of one such president and her appointed committee through exploring their work within their institutional environment. To answer the research questions, the researcher searched for a case where there was not a gap for minoritized students in retention and graduation rate outcomes. The chosen case and the context will be discussed in the next section.

Research Case and Site

The boundaries of this case pointed to the selection of a single institution where a leader had led a successful improvement process that made a difference for minoritized students in terms of retention and graduation outcomes by eliminating gaps on these measures between racial groups. Eastern Connecticut State University was chosen because it met the criterion for the phenomenon under study. Due to remarkably successful retention and graduation rates for minoritized students and the observable involvement of a president and a planning committee the researcher determined that this case would meet the parameters of the inquiry, thereby producing worthwhile scholarship.

One of the evidences of the merit of this case was that both the leader and the institution were nationally recognized for outstanding achievement in closing gaps for Latin@ students in the state of Connecticut (Dupont-Diehl, 2012). President Elsa Nùñez has been an outspoken advocate of the need to fix the achievement gap throughout the educational pipeline (Nùñez, 2012). Her advocacy and work have been recognized for their notable effect (Bachman, 2013). Moreover, upon further exploration through the pilot study, it was determined that the improvement on these student success measures

extended well beyond the Latin@ population, positively impacting all students enrolled at Eastern. In short, the presidential focus and organization around retention and graduation rates improvements for students at Eastern resulted in outcome measures success for groups across racial demographics. This reality is a sharp contrast with the broader phenomenon in higher education (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

The context of this case is important for its contribution to the audience's understanding of the study (Stake, 1995). Likewise, the description of the institutional environment is a vital element in producing successful retention and graduation rates (Kuh et al., 2005; Reason, 2009; Santamarìa & Santamarìa, 2016). The importance of local, organizational context of an institution is supported in the literature on student retention as well as on effective and diverse leadership practice. This fact requires the environment or context to be of great importance for understanding these decisions and actions of a president and her appointed committee. What occurs can be analyzed through identified decisions and actions of leaders within the organization (Braxton et al., 2014; Hambrick, 2007).

The campus community knows the university as "Eastern" and as such that term is used throughout the rest of this manuscript to refer to the university. In 2012, Eastern was recognized as having achieved the largest improvement in Latinx graduation rates in the state of Connecticut. Additionally, Eastern ranked number one out of nearly four hundred universities for achievement among Latinx students (Nùñez, 2010). According to a study produced by the Education Trust, Eastern's six-year graduation rate for Latinx students was only 20% for the fall 1998 cohort. By 2010, the six-year graduation rate for Latinx students had risen to 57.8%, closing the gap between Hispanic and White

graduates from Eastern (Nguyen, Bibo, & Engle, 2012). This achievement was set against the prior backdrop of Connecticut's dismal record of academic achievement among minoritized groups.

The local, state context underscores the distinction of this case. The state of Connecticut has the largest achievement gap in the nation between White and minoritized students, even though it is a wealthy state overall (Nùñez, 2013; Connecticut Council for Education Reform, 2016). Achievement gap is a term that is used throughout educational literature to describe fractures in the pipeline to success. Achievement gaps exist throughout the pre-k through higher education pipeline and likewise continue to impact the career pathways to top leadership positions. Career gaps are often referred to as barriers rather than gaps (Stiemke & Santamaría, 2016). These barriers may be attributed, in part to early, systemic, achievement gaps. The gaps in Connecticut are attributed to accountability, funding, complacency and low-expectations in the pre-K-12 system (Connecticut Council for Education Reform, n.d.). It is within this local reality that Eastern operates and is fiscally supported.

Eastern, a four-year institution, is the only public liberal arts institution in the state of Connecticut (Nùñez, 2013). The Carnegie classification system groups Eastern in the category "Master's Colleges and Universities." These are colleges that award at least 50 masters degrees and less than 20 doctoral degrees during the year of classification (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2015). According to the NCES (2017) College Navigator, Eastern currently enrolls just over 5200 students, mainly undergraduates, with only a small number (148) of graduate students. Eastern admits 63% of students who apply. Its undergraduate student profile is

primarily traditional-age, with 89% of students aged 24 or younger. Carnegie describes the undergraduate profile as 4-year, full-time, selective, higher transfer-in. By studying incoming test scores, they define "selective" as those institutions that are in the top two-fifths of baccalaureate institutions in reference to SAT/ACT test score data (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2015, para. 14). The university principally serves in-state students, with 93% of enrollees hailing from Connecticut. Undergraduate students are primarily White (69%), with Hispanic and African-American populations at 9% and 7% respectively. According to data from College Navigator, the NCES's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), and the NCES's Digest of Educational Statistics, Eastern's most recently reported freshmen retention rate was 77%, higher than the national average for public institutions (73.2%), and the six-year graduation rate was 56%.

Notably, when Eastern's retention rates are disaggregated across racial categories, they do not gap as much as the typical college's rates. See below figure 1.

Eastern Connecticut State Retention Rates											
Year of Entry Cohort	**All FTFTF**	**White**	**Black**	**Hispanic**	**Asian Amer.**	**Native Amer.**	**Hawiian or Pacific Isl.**	**Two or More Races**	**Total Minority**	**Minority-White Gap**	**Percent Minority**
Fall 2015	76%	75.7%	76%	75%	73%	N≤10	N≤10	86%	76.3%	0.6%	29%
Fall 2014	73%	71%	79%	75%	71%	N≤10	N≤10	76%	76%	4%	22%
Fall 2013	77%	75%	80%	81%	78%	N≤10	N≤10	75%	80%	5%	27%
Fall 2012	78%	78%	89%	74%	78%	N≤10	N≤10	58%	77%	-1%	23%
Fall 2011	76%	75%	75%	79%	N≤10	N≤10	N≤10	79%	77%	2%	22%
Fall 2010	76%	77%	77%	69%	74%	N≤10	N≤10	67%	73%	-4%	19%
Fall 2009	77%	77%	79%	80%	83%	N≤10	N≤10	93%	80%	3%	17%
Fall 2008	78%	78%	92%	72%	N≤10	N≤10	N≤10	N≤10	82%	4%	16%
Fall 2007	74%	75%	78%	78%	73%	N≤10	N≤10	77%	81%	7%	20%

Fall 2006	74%	74%	77%	77%	N≤10	N≤10	N≤10	N≤10	79%	5%	19%
Fall 2005	75%	75%	78%	72%	72%	N≤10	N/A	N/A	74%	-1%	17%
Fall 2004	78%	78%	84%	89%	71%	N≤10	N/A	N/A	84%	6%	16%
Fall 2003	75%	76%	73%	70%	N≤10	N≤10	N/A	N/A	69%	-7%	13%
Fall 2002	75%	75%	73%	68%	N≤10	N≤10	N/A	N/A	71%	-4%	13%

Figure 1. Eastern Connecticut State University Retention Rates of First-time, Full-time Freshmen by Ethnicity, Adapted From Institutional Research

This figure displays equity across racial/ethnic groups. Notably, the last column displays that while overall percentages have remained relatively stable, the percentage of minority students, as the table names them, is steadily increasing as a percentage of the freshmen cohorts. This means that the institution is ensuring diverse enrollments while also managing to decrease gaps across the groups as reflected in the second column from the right.

More specifically, graduation rates for White students at Eastern are 59% and African-American graduates are close behind at 55%. The national gap between these two groups is 22.3 percentage points (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2016). The highest graduation rate figure for students at Eastern is for those who are classified as two or more races, at 67%. From an outcomes perspective, Eastern students are successful and this trend has improved since Nùñez began her presidency, a point that Eastern attributes to her leadership (Office of the President, n.d., para.1).

These outcome measures are in line with stated institutional direction. The institution's vision statement reads, "aspiring to be a public liberal arts college of first choice, Eastern Connecticut State University will create an unparalleled college

experience for its students and achieve national distinction for its academic programs" (University Mission, n.d., para. 2). The institution has set for itself a goal of being a premier liberal arts college that is nationally known. This vision is coming true in recent years, as Eastern has been recognized by a number of national organizations. According to the Eastern website the university has proudly achieved a U.S. News and World Report ranking as one of the top 35 public regional universities in the North as a Tier One institution; a fifth year in a row "Great College to Work For" from the Chronicle in Higher Education; President Obama's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll; and The Princeton Review's list of Best Colleges in the Northeast.

Participants

This study employees purposeful sampling. According to Scwhandt (2007), participants selected through this sampling method are chosen for their relevance to the research question. President Nùñez provides valuable knowledge that is crucial to the understanding of this study. To gain insight into the phenomenon, this study views at the president of the institution as a participant due to her inherent proximity to answering the research questions. As such, multiple interviews with this participant were conducted.

According to Merriam (2009), "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). This sampling method works well for case study research because it focuses on the participants' unique contributions to knowledge about the phenomenon being studied. Based on this premise, this study identified faculty, staff and administrator participants who could

provide information about their role in the strategic planning processes and experiences in the institutional environment.

There are twenty-eight participants These participants include the university president, Dr. Nùñez, as well as faculty, staff and administrators relevant for gathering data to answer the research questions. Participants are grouped based upon their job titles.

Participants are classified as administration if they have a director title or higher. Within administration, the titles director, vice president, associate dean and president all existed. However, of the fifteen participants in this classification, only four hold the title of associate vice president or higher. This notation is relevant to communicate to readers that this study had administrative participation but was not overly representative of administrative bias, rather the voices of faculty and staff were also included. Departments included are academic administration, admissions, financial aid, student activities, student affairs, housing, development and the academic services center. These participants provide a broad view of the decisions and actions that are relevant for contributing to the remarkable retention and graduation rates at Eastern. Moreover, each participant contributes on a germane level in the strategic planning process.

Participants are classified as faculty if their job title and job functions reflected professorial duties of teaching, research and service. It is notable, however, that there are four faculty members who hold administrative duties and also taught in the classroom. These duties include chairing a department, presiding over faculty senate and serving as co-chairs over sizable portions of the strategic plan. At Eastern, each of these responsibilities are rotational on a set number of terms and during such service

faculty rank and teaching duties are only reduced rather than eliminated. Due to the rotational nature of these duties and the on-going responsibility for disciplinary teaching, they are considered university service for the purposes of this study and therefore, these participants are classified purely as faculty. Of the nineteen academic departments at Eastern, nine of the departments were represented by one or more faculty participants. These faculty members were selected due to their deep participation in the strategic planning process or merited participation in exemplary program review, an Eastern assessment process for departments who wish to compete for research funding.

The label of staff was utilized when the participant was non-faculty and did not hold a director title. Staff members interviewed included personnel from admissions and advising. Table 3 displays the numbers of classified participants.

Classification	**Number of Participants in Study (N=28)**
Administration	13
Faculty	12
Staff	3

Table 3. Participants by study classification

Taken all together, the participant pool had a noteworthy number of years of service at the institution. The years of service for each individual ranged from one year at the shortest and thirty-nine years at the longest. Table 2 displays the participants clustered by number. The relevance of this observation is that these participants were able to provide historical background to many of the actions and decisions taken at

Eastern. Many of the participants were able to comment on their observations of change between presidents, having served under two or more presidential administrations. These observations were valuable in answering the research questions because they gave a unique view of decisions and actions and their relative importance in the view of the participants.

The table is divided into four categories for years of service. Category years were determined by grouping the participants in a way that would display the number of participants relative to years of experience with fewest to most institutional knowlege. The researcher chose to split the years between 11 and 12 to display those participants who had served at Eastern prior to the inauguration of President Nùñez's administration.

The first category displays the number of participants with less than four years of service, determined to be newer to Eastern. The second category displays participants with five to eleven years of service. This group included the president in the years of service. The third grouping are the largest group with thirteen participants serving between 12 and 20 years. Finally, the fourth category were those serving more than 21 years at Eastern. This distinction was made to demonstrate those participants with nearly an entire career served at Eastern.

Number of Years of Service	**Number of Participants (N=28)**

0 to 4 years	4
5 to 11 years	7
12 to 20 years	13
21 or more years	4

Table 4. Participants by years of service

Table 4 demonstrates that this data emerges from a group of participants with, primarily, a long tenure at the institution. Forty six percent of the participants have between 12-20 years of service. The total number of years of service for all the participants combined was 419, with the average years of service being 15 years. The median for years of service was 14, with fifty percent of the participants serving more than fourteen years and fifteen participants serving fourteen years or fewer. Notably, 17 participants, more than half, served longer than the president, creating the possibility for the interviews to provide data related to her decisions and actions that were distinctive to her presidential agenda, not a carryover from a previous administration.

The next section provides important background information about the president of Eastern. This particular background information was deemed necessary to include due to the relevance toward her chosen actions and pertinence to her presidential agenda. Moreover, due to the public identification of Dr. Nùñez as a participant, this background information was permissible to include.

The Leader: President Nùñez

Dr. Nùñez graduated from Montclair State College with a Bachelor of Arts, a master's in English from Fairleigh Dickinson University and a doctorate in Linguistics from Rutgers University (Office of the President, 2006). Nùñez began her career in

academics as a faculty member, gaining tenure at Ramapo State University, the College of Staten Island and the City University of New York (CUNY). Additional leadership experience at CUNY includes Dean of Faculty, Dean of Academic Affairs and Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. Prior to being appointed President of Eastern Connecticut State University, Nùñez served as Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs for the University of Maine system. In 2006, Nùñez was appointed president of Eastern Connecticut State University. She was formally inaugurated and installed on April 12-13, 2007 and continues her service there today (Office of the President, n.d.).

President Elsa Nùñez knows the challenges of poverty and the hope of educational attainment first hand. Nùñez was raised in poverty in a home where English was a second language. Nùñez was a first-generation college student whose parents held education as an important value. As a first-year college student, Elsa attended Montclair State College. It was during her time at Montclair State College that Elsa met an instructor who would fundamentally alter her life's trajectory (Nùñez, 2013). Nùñez notes the importance of that mentoring relationship in her own success in education.

During her tenure as president, Nùñez built a program that aimed at closing the achievement gap at her own institution, including elements that are noted best practices for student retention. In addition to personally creating an outstanding program, she focused her presidential agenda on improving the institutional profile and bolstering undergraduate retention and graduation rates. She mobilized this agenda through an extensive strategic planning process that involved faculty, staff and administrative stakeholders and decision makers from across the institution.

This next section will provide specific notation of the data collection process as well as the sources of data determined to be relevant to this study. This reporting includes the position of the researcher as a participant, as well as an outline of document, interview and environmental observations. The data collected supported the effort to answer the outlined research questions and purpose of this study.

Data Collection

As the process from methodology and case selection were iterative, so too were decisions on data collection. Clarity on data sources emerged as the study unfolded in the field and through participant identification of various, relevant institutional documents during their interviews. Conducting case studies in this tradition involves engaging with stakeholders throughout the process, documenting their perspectives and judgments, negotiating meaning and interpretations with them and using accessible methods and language and communicating to audiences and beneficiaries beyond the case. (p. 36)

The researcher participated in the data collection as a participant observer with "dual citizenship" in the study (Schwandt, 2007, p. 220). This idea relates to Simons (2009) description of her preferred role as an egalitarian researcher within case studies, whereby she researches alongside the participants. Simons (2009) advises that the researcher carefully consider the role he or she will assume as a part of the research study. The relationship the researcher adopts in reference to research participants must consider one's interview style, skillsets in reporting approach and the willingness of one's audience to receive certain types of reports.

Yin (2009) offers important tactics for data collection methods to ensure

construct validity throughout the data collection process. He notes that utilizing multiple sources of data strengthens the findings of a case study. Likewise, the establishment of a chain of evidence or a clear audit trail is an important aspect of clear and reliable case study research (Schwandt, 2007). Written documents available for review from the institution, as well as interviews, artifacts and the researcher's field notes create the corpus of research data. Each of these sources of data provides critical information for the study.

Documents

Gaining access to non-public data was an important element to data collection. While many documents are publicly available on the Eastern website, there were likewise additional institutional documents related to the planning process and participant information that are only accessible through the participants. Nùñez and other participants named particular documents during their interviews that would be helpful to inform the answers they gave. These documents were provided directly from the participants or a link was provided to find the documents on the Eastern strategic planning website.

Document review begins by mining the institutional website for all available institutional speeches. Web searches of news articles featuring important information on the awards related to the identification of the institution and institutional leader are used as well. The purpose of reviewing the documents and publicly available news information was to understand the leadership style of Nùñez and to gain insight on the accolades she has achieved related to student retention and graduation rates during her leadership tenure at Eastern.

Interviews

To gain access to the institution, the president's schedule, faculty/staff/administrative participants and the campus grounds, the researcher sent an email seeking a phone call appointment with the president to discuss the research study. Due to a snow day at Eastern, Nùñez allowed me to call her on her cell phone while she was at home. The goal of beginning with a phone call was to establish a relationship with the president at Eastern. Simons (2009) recommends a phone call to be able to gauge initial reaction and receptivity to the study. The initial phone call revealed an overwhelmingly welcome opportunity to conduct this research. Following that favorable call with the president, an access letter outlining important details (see appendix B) was sent through the gatekeeper who was the president's assistant and could ensure that access was gained in line with relevant Eastern permissions processes. The researcher submitted research questions to the gatekeeper who worked with the president to determine those faculty, staff and administrator participants who were most relevant for interviews during the research trip. The researcher also worked with the gatekeeper to secure a space for interviews during the campus visit. Once access was granted and participants were identified, an email was sent to each of the participants by the gatekeeper (see appendix C) outlining the goals of the study. The researcher's vitae was also included so the participants knew with whom they were speaking. Confirmation emails were sent to each participant in order to ensure their interview times are secure in their schedules and to notify them of interview location.

Simons (2009) recommends that the researcher establish her own relationship with the participants. This was done through brief conversation at the beginning of each

interview whereby the researcher answered personal questions. Moreover, the participant and the researcher connected over relevant connections to the researcher's home state. Since the case site and the researcher's home state are so geographically distant, this topic provided interesting but non-invasive questions. Participants reacted with interest and asked questions about The University of Oklahoma, the degree granting institution with oversight of this study, the state of Oklahoma and related any information they knew about Oklahoma. Participants were provided with a button that depicted the state flag of Oklahoma, another point of interest for connection.

Based on the researcher's understanding of existing leadership theory, it is only possible to understand and classify the leadership approach by gaining access to those impacted by the leadership influence. For this reason, interviews with participants and (see interview protocol appendix D). The interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the decisions and actions that participants viewed as contributing to student retention. The interview questions focused on the scope of retention actions and decisions at Eastern, how those decisions or actions were enacted, a request for the participant to describe the Eastern environment and inquiry into their role and that of the president in the planning process.

There is an additional, lengthy interview conducted with President Nùñez (see interview protocol in appendix E). This interview is equally important to the participant interviews. Given the influence of Nùñez's background on the creation of the program and on her leadership of the organization's environment, interviewing Nùñez is a critical element of the design. The researcher needs to understand more deeply how personally invested President Nùñez is in the operation of this program. Moreover, the

interaction of the researcher with President Nùñez during the interview produces observations related to leadership style. It is important to collect information not just related to how others perceive and experience her leadership but also how she perceives and plans her own leadership approach.

Environmental Observation/Immersion

Extensive field notes from campus serve as the context for the case study. This time spent within the environment is an important part of creating a rich, descriptive understanding of the campus experience (Schwandt, 2007; Stake, 1995). To capture the unique cultural elements of campus, the researcher employed ethnographic case study methods to collect data that will help readers better understand the context. Institutional culture must be kept in the foreground of thought as data is collected. Magolda (1999) advocates for ethnographic fieldwork for student affairs professionals in order to better guide practice in their work (Magolda, 1999). He further argues that this approach is relevant because of the important role that culture plays in the student experience in higher education and because of the role of culture as a lens for ethnographic research (Magolda, 1999). The role of culture in ethnographic research creates a natural rationale for its use in this study because of the need to understand the campus environment as a whole. His advocacy for this approach shapes the type of participant observation that will be employed by the researcher.

Ethnographic fieldwork methods provide observations and narrative information from diverse participants and plans to compare their experiences against the story the institution tells about itself related to diverse student engagement and belonging (Schwandt, 2007). Magolda's (1999) research question, "tell me a story that would

sensitize me to what it is like to be a student," will be employed as an opening question in the semi-structured interviews (Magolda, 1999, p.13). This question was slightly altered and used with staff to gain an understanding of what it is like to be a part of the Eastern environment. Magolda (1999) asserts that this method "provides interviewees maximum degrees of freedom to set the agenda for our discussion" (p.13). This is important for participant interviews in that it uncovers raw feelings and experiences about their involvement in Eastern culture. These multiple sources of data were used to produce multiple lines of inquiry to strengthen the reliability of the findings of this case (Yin, 2009).

Data Analysis

The sections below provide a categorical explanation of the methods of data analysis and the assignment of meaning to pieces of the data. This explanation will guide the reader to understand how each data source was handled as well as the rationale for using each chosen method. Steps were taken to organize the data throughout the process so that data were accessible and clear for the analysis phase of the study. Bloomberg and Vlope (2016) provided invaluable templates for the organization and labeling of data prior to collection that assists in manageable reference during this phase. Their recommendations include labeling, keeping multiple copies and modes of copies, chunking the data prior to qualitative analysis and backing up data in several locations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Much of this was achieved using google docs as a source of organization, allowing for easy ways to divide and analyze the data in multiple ways. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) note, "Analysis is essentially about searching for patterns and themes—that is, the trends that you see emerging from

among your findings (p.238). The below sections describe the process by which these patterns and themes were identified and interpreted.

The table below is an example of the method of initial coding to the final theme formation.

Final Theme	Grouped Codes- Merging for Meaning	List of initial data codes
Institutional Health	Working Label: Collaboration and Cooperation...working together Synonyms: synergism; working together; unity; teaming;	Collaboration Cooperation Collegial Communication Collaborative Collaborative Strong leadership- positive- VPs talk to each other Collegial and collaborative Collegiality Collaborative Collaborative Confidence in competence of others (*I put this here because I think competence helps cooperation and collaboration) People try to do the right thing "For" each other Joyful serving Engaged environment Good work environment
Clear and Defining Presidential Narrative	Retention as a meeting topic: COFE, State of University, Expanded Cabinet, Faculty meetings	Actions motivated by articulation of retention improvement (institutional

		reputation, academic
	Retention identifiable among participants as presidential topic	focus, institutional visibility) Presidential (re)focus Inquiries on actions toward retention
	Personal passion toward topic	Gives Voices to Retention Inspirational communication toward retention Communicates retention dream Major presidential concern Very motivational on retention Motivational Energizes the base

Table 5, Example Coding Table from Data Analysis

Interview Analysis

Interview data informed the ability to answer all four research questions. To do so, initially, the researcher verbatim transcribed all of the interviews. Transcription is "the act of recording and preparing a record of a respondent's own words" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 296). Transcripts were themed using open coding, looking inductively for themes that emerged from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Merriam, 2009; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The codes that emerged from the interview data were compared with each interview transcript and then drawn together through axial coding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Merriam, 2009), allowing for emergent themes where category connections began to appear. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) remark, "Coding well requires that you reflect deeply on the meanings of each and every piece of data. And coding well requires that you read and reread as you code and recode" (p. 200).

Initially, the interview transcripts were chunked by interview questions so that each participant answer could be compared with other participants. The quotations remained labeled by participant so that the answers could draw from any relevant positional perspective (i.e.., Faculty or staff). If background information for the participant may have informed the examination of their answer, this information was likewise available to the researcher. This method allowed for constant comparative analysis of the interview data (Merriam, 2009). Further, this process provided an opportunity to look for "recurring regularities in the data" (Merriam, 2009, p.177)

Raw interview data, once chunked, were labeled with open codes (Merriam, 2009). Some of these codes were exact phrases or words of participants, while other codes related directly to the research that informed this study. These codes were listed into a table that displayed all of the codes by research question. This action provided the researcher an opportunity to begin to form categories from labels that had been grouped together. This next step of grouping codes together is often referred to as axial coding or analytical coding (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). This step goes beyond trying to describe the data and into the process of beginning to assign meaning to the data in a way that begins to point to consequential importance toward answering the study questions (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), "Categories are conceptual elements that 'cover' or span many individual examples (or bits or units of data you previously identified) of the category" (p. 181).

From these categories, each category was considered for whether or not it cut across the data, forming a true finding. The categories, already grouped by interview question, were formed into a findings statement that sought to fully answer the research

question. As Categories contained sub-categories that help describe the overall category. These sub-categories or sub-themes are discussed fully in chapter four and analyzed for meaning in chapter five. interview data were the primary source of data, document analysis and environmental immersion provided opportunity for triangulation of the findings. These procedures are described below.

Document Analysis

Document and artifact analysis provided descriptive evidence to support the case study. Schwandt (2007) defines description as "giving account of that which we perceive" (p. 64). In case study, it has been determined that establishing a "rich" or "thick" description is part of the purpose of the methodology (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Stake R. E., 1995). According to Schwandt (2007) a "thick" description has an "interpretive characteristic" as opposed to just collecting the details of a case (p.296). The case description is relevant for the methodology as it provides readers the ability to see through the lens of the researcher.

The documents (publicly available strategic planning documents, speech transcripts, news articles etc.) and artifacts (brochures, pictures of campus, institutional social media) were mined for their relevance in answering the research questions pertaining to Nùñez's leadership approach and to the environment at Eastern. This analysis is guided by research questions. This analysis employs emic and etic perspectives. Neyland (2008) defines an emic perspective as how an organization would describe itself whereas an etic perspective utilizes outside criterion. This study employs both because it is interested in gaining understanding of how the participants and institutional environment are viewed by insiders. However, these findings are viewed

by what has previously been discussed on the topic of leadership. The analysis is primarily emergent because a single theory of leadership did not provide the basis for analysis nor did one emerge as prominent throughout the study (Charmaz, 2014).

To achieve analysis, the researcher engaged in textual analysis for organizational brochures and institutional social media. Textual analysis is a process by which the researcher will read the document and report what 'story' the document is telling, providing evidence from the document (i.e., descriptions of content, headings of content, etc.) to assign meaning to the data (Neyland, 2008). This data will tell us what the institution thinks about itself related to student success outcomes and environmental norms related to minoritized students, providing insight into cultural nuance of the institution. This data was incorporated into the description of the setting as well as the analysis of the environment that was provided through the interview data.

Institutional documents that recorded Nùñez's leadership in the institution or those that referred to working toward students' success on measures of retention and graduation were examined. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) note that every piece of data is purposeful. The strategic planning documents were used to understand the extent to which the actual strategic plan was centered on student retention and equitable attainment. A count was conducted of the number of performance measures that were tied to improving student retention and graduation rates. Each document was also mined for relevance in answering the research questions related to the institutional environment or recording specific actions toward student retention and graduation rates, in addition to providing necessary descriptive data to ensure trustworthiness.

Participant Observation Analysis

Participant observation is used to confirm patterns that emerge related to the environment and interactions of participants with the phenomena under study (Stake, 1995). Participant observation is the "notion of 'being there,' of witnessing social action first hand" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 219). Some analysis happens, in an on-going way, with the choices that are made related to data collection and the skeptical approach that the researcher must adopt so that common things might appear strange for the sake of research (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Neyland, 2008; Stake R. E., 1995). Participant observation analysis begins with the review of field notes seeking patterns in the observations (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Neyland, 2008; Schwandt, 2007). This step-in analysis is what Yin (2011) refers to as disassembling the data. Disassembly involves assigning codes to the observations that make ready a more robust labeling in the reassembling process (Yin, 2011). Direct interpretations serve to analyze findings where appropriate (Stake, 1995). Schwandt (2007) defines interpretation as "the act of clarifying, explicating or explaining the meaning of some phenomenon" (p.158). While research must interpret the meaning of codes and categories, it is also possible to interpret observations directly, an activity that is probable in data that surfaces from participant observation data. For Yin (2011), interpretations represent a fourth phase of data analysis.

Observations are used to corroborate what the participants say about what it means to be an insider at Eastern. Data analyses are substantive and relate to the case framework, aiming to understand the environment of Eastern and the relationship of the environment to both the program and the leader. Qualitative analysis employs both inductive and deductive methods (Merriam, 2009). This study likewise moves back and

forth between both approaches to analysis because of the many layers of the case.

Document analysis, interview analysis and participant observation were triangulated to improve the trustworthiness of the study. Using constant comparative analysis, the data were compared for internal consistency of themes. This constant comparative analysis allowed for the confident creation of the major findings of this study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important to ensure the trustworthiness of this study (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Schwandt, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011;). Each participant will be provided a letter prior to participation that outlines the purpose of the study as well as the intended use of the data. Aside from Nùñez, each participant has a pseudonym to guard his or her identity. Nùñez does not have a pseudonym because of her status as a public figure that is nationally recognized for her work. The data itself identifies Nùñez with the awards that are attached to her personal identity and public duties as a state college president.

In addition to the need to protect participant identities and ensure data privacy, the researcher also has an ethical obligation to reduce data distortion and misinterpretation (Stake, 1995). To fulfill this duty, protocols exist that lead to a trustworthy study. These include the provision of sufficient descriptive detail, ample narrative examples that demonstrate findings and member checking once data is gathered (Stake, 1995).

Validity, according to Schwandt (2007) is the idea that a study is "cogent, well-grounded or justifiable" (p. 309). The constructivist paradigm, among others, distances itself from this term due to its relationship to "truth" and "objectivism" (Schwandt,

2007). Trustworthiness is the best descriptor of validity in a constructivist case study in the field of education, because it is important for any relevant findings to be applied in practice. Truth, in this sense, is not universal; rather it is an "accurate representation of the phenomena" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 309). Merriam (2009) notes, "Most educators conducting qualitative investigations do not want to wait for the research community to develop consensus as the appropriate criteria for assessing validity and reliability, if indeed that is even possible" (p. 212). Trustworthiness communicates that the research findings would be an appropriate recommendation to follow for policy makers or practitioners (Merriam, 2009). However, Merriam (2009) chooses to discuss the term in reference to the conventional terms of validity and reliability because of their easy identification.

Merriam (2009) explains that validity is highly context-driven. To ensure that the reader gains a rich sense of context, the program and its institutional context are described in detail. This context serves as a backdrop for the voices of the student and staff participants describing their experiences in the program and with Nùñez, shedding light on her leadership style. Their perspectives serve to bolster the internal validity of the study while also being a primary data source. Their stories and experiential narratives provide credibility to the findings because the stories are compared with one another for themes and codes. The stories are triangulated against collected documentary data and the researcher's observational field notes. Scwhandt (2007) reports that triangulation is the process of checking one's interpretation against "multiple data sources, multiple investigators, multiple theoretical perspectives and/or multiple methods" (p. 298). Triangulation ensures that findings are accurate, unbiased

and reflective of the true meaning of the data.

These multiple data sources were triangulated to ensure that the researcher conclusions were trustworthy and maintained internal validity (Schwandt, 2007). As the researcher pushes for the right amount of information throughout the data collection process, Merriam (2009) notes that she seeks a saturation point with the data. Saturation is reached when the researcher finds herself seeing the same kinds of data emerging over and over. The length of time to saturation will vary for each study. For this study, a period of two weeks is planned to allow enough time for interviews and member checking, as well as the opportunity for the researcher to gain a sense of the case context in sufficient, immersive detail.

Related to trustworthiness is the issue of consistency, which occurs when the results are congruent with the data collected (Merriam, 2009). Thus, the primary way to determine whether or not a study is dependable is to provide a sufficient quantity and explanation of the data in the audit trail to demonstrate each finding (Schwandt, 2007; Merriam, 2009). The reader should see what the researcher saw at the time of collection. "Just as an auditor authenticates the accounts of a business, independent readers can authenticate the findings of a study by following the trail of the researcher" (Merriam, 2009, p. 222). Likewise, the data must provide sufficient detail to allow the reader to see and apply any of the findings to his or her particular situation. In qualitative research, this type of application is known as transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research does not seek broad generalizations. As Stake (1995) noted, "Seldom is an entirely new understanding reached but refinement of understanding is" (p. 7). Although this particular case may not provide lessons that

could be widely applied for every leader in higher education, each reader may determine how this study transfers to his or her own situation based on the detail provided and the rich description of the case and the findings. These findings might provide basis for strengthening generalizations that readers may have already concluded based on other grand generalizations (Stake, 1995).

Role of the Researcher

According to Merriam (2009), "Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding [and] the researcher as the primary research instrument of data collection and analysis" (p. 39). As such, it is important to acknowledge researcher reflexivity and positionality. Reflexivity is the process of critical self-examination whereby the assumptions and biases are evident (Schwandt, 2007). Merriam (2009) notes that all of the power of what to report lies in the hands of the researcher, which raises an important ethical concern, "Both readers of case studies and the authors themselves need to be aware of biases that can affect the final product" (p. 52). In this study, my interest in the topic and position within higher education are relevant to the topic. It is therefore important for the reader to understand my point of view. Moreover, a better understanding of the researcher should increase the trustworthiness of the findings. For that reason, it is important that I make explicit my biases and interest in the topic.

For nearly a decade and during the research, I served as the Vice President for Student Engagement and Success (VPSES) at a small, private liberal arts college in an urban environment. Our admissions standards were very low and the profile of our students often resembled that of a community college student. Additionally, I taught a

college student success course called “Becoming a Master Student” in which all of the conditionally admitted students and students on academic probation must enroll. Conditionally admitted students are those who do not meet institutional admissions standards. These students must apply to the college through an alternative system that includes committee review.

In my roles, I saw dozens of students begin college each semester with hope in their eyes and dreams in their hearts about getting a college degree. However, at the end of the semester, those same students had a burden of failure on their shoulders. Their efforts were not rewarded with passing grades and many of them have once again experienced academic failure. Whether their failure came from lack of skill, absenteeism, issues of social fit, or just a sense that college simply is not “worth it,” the students leave the school. Some students transfer to other colleges, but more of them simply end their education.

As Nùñez did for students at Eastern, I would like to find an effective way to create change for the students. Stake (1995) noted that, “observational interpretation of those phenomena will be shaped by the mood, the experience, the intention of the researcher” (p. 95). It is thus important that the reader of this study understand that a practitioner is conducting this research. My personal experiences shaped the journey to the research question and guided me to this particular case study. The tone of this writing will take on an advocacy tenor at times due to the great deal of personal experience I have had in leading retention efforts and interventions at my own campus.

Finally, my racial and gender identity as a white woman interested in studying minoritized students must be explained. As a white woman, I have not experienced

systematic bias on the basis of my racial identity. For this reason, I must pay careful attention not to 'other' students from minoritized backgrounds and thereby participate in a type of colonizing or commandeer the stories of the students. The best experience I can bring is having listened to the lived experiences of students with whom I have worked. Having advocated for minoritized students in various situations, including intervening with the city on a discriminatory police incident with students at our institution, provides a small glimpse of the traumatic experiences that minoritized students regularly face. I actively resist any notions of White-savior. Rather, it is important to confer power, through my position, on the lived experiences of the minoritized students with whom I work.

My identity as a woman in Christian higher education may be considered a target identity. As Longman and Anderson (2016) discuss, women in higher education are often held back by biases that are culturally and theologically supported. Moreover, these biases often go without criticism. As such, these biases inhibit the progress of women like myself. While I have been able to break the glass ceiling in my institution, it has only been through the sponsorship of a strong, male mentor. Without that support, I would likely be experiencing a barrier to promotion.

Summary

This chapter sought to provide the readers with a chance to follow the procedures for data collection and analysis and view them as employed in a trustworthy manner. The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate a sound understanding of the chosen methodology and its appropriate use for this study. Further this chapter should provide a basis for the reader to determine that the analytic generalizations of the

findings that will be reported in Chapter Four are sound due to the responsible and thorough application of the reported methods in this chapter. By reporting researcher positionality, it should be clear to the reader what the interest of the researcher is and in what ways that might inform the formation of this study. Chapter five reports the relevant findings of this study and provides the supporting data to help readers gain a resonate sense of meaning from the data.

Chapter Five: Findings

...so you are a freshman at eastern and your cell rings and it is your aunt calling you and she is crying and she tells you that your mother and father have died in a car

accident and you have to go home. And you go home and they're dead and you're the oldest of three siblings and you graduate on time. How can that happen? When you ask the student, how, what happened? When you ask the student, she'll say. It was because of the group I was in. The dormitory group. The people in her dorm. Of course, her family but just talking about Eastern…the people in her club. She belonged to an organization, community service. And they all helped her and told her you can't drop out of school because your brothers and sisters need you to graduate and they took care of whatever the financial was. So that is an example of a community, her faculty members, psychological counselors got involved. Everybody came in to help her get through the four years and she graduated on time. Would that have happened at some other school? Probably. But it speaks volumes of the community here and how it rallies. You know there will be a fundraiser and everybody goes out for the fundraiser. There is a sense of community. ~President Elsa Nùñez

The brief vignette above captures the spirit of the institution described in this case. The goal of Chapter Five is to present the findings of this research, answering the research questions, thereby achieving the overall purpose of this study. The chapter provides a detailed description of the institutional setting to help the reader gain a sense of the case. The description provides necessary background for the reader to view the university as well as a rich description of relevant and normal details that situate the context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Following the thick description of the setting, the chapter outlines research findings. This case study purposes to provide insight into what presidential and committee actions contributed to sustained excellence in undergraduate student retention and graduation rates without exception for minoritized students. This data provides relevant findings that illuminate presidential and presidentially appointed committee actions that influence undergraduate student retention.

Understanding Eastern: Description of the Setting

Eastern Connecticut State University or "Eastern" as it is more commonly known to community members, is located in Willimantic, Connecticut, a small, historic burgh of just over seventeen thousand people (2010 Census) nestled in the hills of eastern Connecticut (Data USA, 2018). Running through the center of town is the Willimantic River, the former life of the town's economy. In the late 1820s, Willimantic was home to thriving industry through the American Thread Company who's mills drew from the hydropower of the Willimantic River. The thread company quickly became the preeminent thread manufacturer nationally, supplying thread to factories and retail shops throughout the country. The soaring gray stone structure of the American Thread Company is reminiscent of a time when even industrial architecture existed to beautify cities. Likewise, the frames of striking Victorian houses still stand, covered in chipping paint, roofs in disrepair, displaying a shadow of former glory. These homes are the pervasive architecture in Willimantic. Though clearly aged, a drive through the city reveals a community rediscovering itself through revitalization of a growing art culture in Willimantic. In fact, Eastern is participating in this renewal. Several alums have established local eateries and work on the city art projects. Many of the historic homes near campus have been restored and are used for campus service buildings, refurbishing the local infrastructure.

Established inside the historic architecture and renewing vigor of Willimantic is the beautiful campus of Eastern Connecticut State University. According to faculty and staff, the physical growth of the Eastern campus mirrors the emerging regeneration of the town. According to faculty and staff, the picturesque buildings on Eastern's campus

are the legacy of the former President Carter who served as the president of Eastern from 1988 to 2005.

The legacy of gorgeous buildings and campus landscape is immediately noticeable. After winding through the hills of Connecticut, visitors to campus turn onto a two-lane road that leads to the grand entrance of campus. In the spring, during the timing of this trip, the entry is lined with colorful low-bed flowers that accent the stone and brick marquee displaying the university's name. Just inside the entryway stands the institution's most imposing and well-known emblem, the Foster Clock Tower. The imposing clock tower serves as an icon of this public liberal arts institution. The clock tower is just one of the notable features of this 182-acre campus. As a residential university, there are thirteen residence halls with the capacity to house 2,654 residents (Fall 2015; Master Planning Document), nine academic buildings, including a beautiful new fine-art building that was dedicated during the dates of this research trip. Additionally, there is a spacious and bustling student center, three administrative and service buildings, as well as multiple sports fields that accommodate Eastern's fifteen NCAA Division III sports teams.



Student Center, (Original Photo)

The campus is organized around a main quad where students gather between classes and for various campus engagement events. Among and between all of the buildings are sidewalks lined with trees and flowers.



Quad-view from Academic Success Center Building (Original Photo)

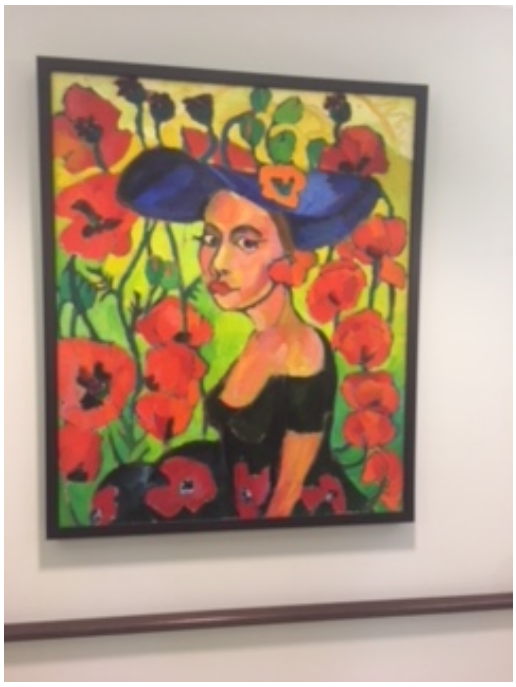
The campus master plan has been developed to improve the experience for student learning and to support the liberal arts mission of Eastern (Eastern Connecticut State University, 2016). "A core goal for the Plan is to improve the setting and facilities to support Eastern's unique mission as CSCU's Liberal Arts public university" (ECSU, 2016, p.11). This physical legacy paved the way for the current president, Dr. Elsa Nùñez to focus on building the brand of Eastern Connecticut State University.

A notable and enjoyable feature of campus is the amount of artwork that has been curated, commissioned, or created to adorn the walls of nearly every building on campus, including the president's office where a unique and striking bronze sculpture of a Japanese crane stands while you wait to be seen. According to the president, art throughout campus underscores the liberal arts mission. To this end, the newly dedicated fine arts building displays a commissioned work that spans the length of the entry lobby, a feature that is visible from the public roadway.



Commissioned Art newly installed, April 2017, in Fine Arts Building (Original Photos)

Dr. Nùñez deeply believes in the importance of exposing students to culture, even sponsoring trips to New York to various museums. However, for basic exposure, students and employees alike must only look around as they pass through the hallways of their academic buildings or to visit Gelsi-Young and take in the vibrant colors of a Russian woman surrounded by poppy's outside of the President's office.



Institutional Art, Located Outside President's Office, Country of Origin, Russia (Original Photo)

Drawing from the life that the arts can bring, Eastern has transformed itself into a premier Public Liberal Arts. The institution has a very distinct identity as "The State's Only Public Liberal Arts Institution," a mission that is underscored curricularly and co-curricularly. One example of Eastern's commitment to strengthening this institutional distinctive is the importance of undergraduate research participation. Students are able to engage in undergraduate research with faculty both on and off campus. They are

encouraged to participate in the annual undergraduate research conference held on Eastern's campus, called CREATE, which occurred during the research trip for this study. During April 2017, over four hundred students presented research as a part of this conference. This initiative was founded to engage high-achieving students at Eastern while underscoring institutional identity as a leading liberal arts institution.

It is imperative that Eastern remains distinctive in its institutional identity to maintain brand power due to their competitive recruitment location, surrounding market saturation and state funding challenges. During interviews, administrators compare Eastern to well-known private liberal arts institutions, such as Wesleyan, as well as the multiple other institutions that compete for students along the east coast of the United States, a hub for American Higher Education. There are thirty-four colleges in the state of Connecticut alone (Free4u.com, n.d.). Moreover, Connecticut has recently been cited as having the third fastest shrinking high school student population (Thomas, 2016). According to the Connecticut State Department of Education, 76% of high school graduates attend college, only 58% attend college in the state of Connecticut, a reality that increases the competitive nature of the market (Division of Finance and Administration of the Office of Higher Education, 2016). Equally, located just eight miles down the road from Eastern in Stores, Connecticut, is the state's flagship institution, University of Connecticut, enrolling just over 23,000 undergraduate students in 2016 (UCONN Fact Sheet, 2017) compared to Eastern's approximately 5000 undergraduates (Eastern Connecticut State University, Facts at a Glance, 2016). This geographical and numeric reality poses a threat to Eastern's enrollment, a considered opinion held by many administrators, including Dr. Nùñez.

Despite the pressure of competition, Eastern faculty, staff and administrators have a tremendous amount of pride in being a part of the institution. The institution has been recognized as one of the best colleges to work for in the Chronicle of Higher Education. “It is gratifying to know that our employees continue to value the positive working atmosphere we share on our campus,” said Eastern President Elsa Núñez. “The ‘Great Colleges to Work For’ recognition is not only a symbol of the common purpose found among our faculty and staff, it represents the welcoming and supportive environment that our students experience every day.” (Rouleau, 2017). These surveys rely upon the feedback of faculty and staff and institutions from every institutional type compete for recognition on this list of outstanding colleges. Against this well planned and engaging backdrop and with employees who enjoy the work they do, Eastern has differentiated itself as a leader in equitable retention and graduation rates.

As a part of a pilot study (Appendix A), it was discovered that while many institutions have a gap in retention and graduation rates when aggregate data are disaggregated across ethnic groups, Eastern Connecticut University does not have a gap. This is a fairly unique status in higher education, where large gaps exist in aggregate data, between Asian and Caucasian students and other ethnic groups, namely, Black and Hispanic students. These questions were designed to explore this unique phenomenon at Eastern and discover what decisions and actions contributed to this case. It was necessary, as well, to understand the environment that surrounds those decisions and actions, as such decisions and actions are a product of the institutional environment.

Research Findings

Organization of the findings follows the construction of the theoretical framework: Environment, Leader as Catalyst and Leadership Process (Empowerment and Collective Action) that led to the improved student success outcomes. The research findings highlight four major themes: 1) presence of institutional health, 2) a clear and defining presidential narrative shaped action, 3) empowerment transpired through an elevated strategic planning process and 4) collective action through effective shared governance. These findings emerged as primary themes that serve to answer the study's research questions. The findings were enlightening toward the end of understanding the decisions and actions that contributed to the retention and graduation rates at Eastern. This research further serves to illuminate the institutional environment of Eastern. The key themes are described below with relevant supporting data to demonstrate each finding.

Finding 1: Presence of Institutional Health

The goal of the first research question was to understand the Eastern environment as a way to consider the institutional setting within which the student success outcomes improvements occurred. What emerged as a primary finding was that the environment presented evidence of institutional health. Health manifested itself in the way the participants described their membership in the community (a sense of belonging) and in the terms they used to describe the environment (open, collegial, collaborative) and their ability to navigate systems (open communication and the ability to innovate). This finding rose in prominence through the relevance the participants communicated to the actions and decisions that improved student success outcomes

Each of the participants was asked "Can you describe the Eastern environment for me?" or a clarifying question that was, "Can you tell me a story that would sensitize me to what it is like to be a part of Eastern?" Often, there was a follow-up request from the participant to differentiate between the environment a staff person would experience or that which students experience. Some participants were able to answer the question in a straightforward manner, without need for clarification from the researcher. The answers to this question were grouped together and then the researcher labeled each of the participant quotes, looking for patterns in the data. Sixty-six data labels were grouped, analyzed for relationships and then three final sub-themes emerged from the analysis. These themes were then conceptually grouped into the category "presence of institutional health." What is meant by this theme is, that the Eastern environment is a university community that exhibits characteristics of institutional health in which members sense they belong to a family and where students are the center of the organizational system.

Institutional Health

Institutional Health was a term created by the researcher to describe the data that developed from participants descriptions of the Eastern environment. This terminology emerged through a process of content analysis of the data labels. The relationships of the terms were examined to understand their internal commonalities and distinctions. The label institutional health was crafted by the researcher to allow enough space for the uniqueness of each of the data labels that comprise this categorical theme. These labels were interrogated for their internal relationship to one another because of the researcher's sense that there was a relationship, however, it was undesirable to lose

the unique descriptors of this category by over-synthesis. To achieve this aim, the labels will be explained as a way to better understand the category. Then the category will be demonstrated through participant quotes that express the ideas behind the labels.

Many labels were explored to determine the meta-relationship of each of the category data labels. The list of data labels included: collaboration, cooperation, collegiality, opportunity, inclusivity and openness. Each of these terms represent multiple data. Each of these ideas represent aspects of the working environment among faculty and staff that to the participants best encompassed the Eastern environment. These codes are in harmony with the researcher's own observations of collegiality among the participants and the open and collaborative way departmental work was described. A few participant quotes demonstrate these observations well.

> Um, I would say the *collegiality* is the most important thing. I think the faculty are well intending and trying to do the right thing. And in my mind honestly, I'm surprised we do as well as we do. (Faculty Member)
>
> well, it's a great place to work. I think we have demonstrated that with the Chronicle survey. It's *collaborative* environment. I think folks you have probably talked to have a good number of years working so that's a good thing and maybe not dependent on the individual. There is a reason people stay. Good environment. (Administrator)

Several participants described the environment as "positive" or a "good place to work" when describing the Eastern environment. As they further clarified what is meant by positive or good, they used words that communicated a sense of satisfaction with the processes in place for decision making and the role of executive administrators in that

process. What was absent was any sense of resentment or negativity toward other groups. One administrator clarified:

> There is no organization that doesn't have stresses. There is no organization that doesn't have ...they used to say the 20/80 principle. You know 20 percent of the people give you 80 percent of the problems. I think you can revise it and say at Eastern to 2/98 at Eastern. 2% of the people give you 98% of the problems. That's how I feel about it. (Administrator)

There was a sense that intentional inclusivity was a part of what creates an environment of togetherness. One faculty administrator reported that the environment had been objectively tested for this quality as well,

> well, one of the things we did at Eastern, is we considered the climate here to be very inclusive but we hadn't done was to assess systematically whether that was true or not. So, a few years back, we actually did a campus climate survey to see where we were in terms of inclusion. So that survey gave us the data to tell us where we were. We found out we had a very inclusive environment where people believed that the administration was accepting of diversity and as a whole wanted people to succeed. (Administrator)

This survey seemed to reinforce what he already felt was true and gave him confidence that it was a "true for most" statement.

Participants experienced the institutional environment as exhibiting an openness to ideas, solutions and people. This notion was distinguished by the fact that participants expressed a sense of being valued for individual differences among employees. A sense of openness emerged from data labels where participants described

experiencing a freedom to create or make decisions that lead to organizational improvement. This freedom to exercise their ideas and voice in organizational processes and departmental decisions resulted in a sense of freedom to try and fail without fear of negative consequences. Openness also exhibited itself in terms of openness to individual differences to the extent that diversity among ideas and backgrounds is experienced as a positive part of the Eastern experience. Researcher observations included the detail that the participants were all from diverse backgrounds and experiences, including being from various parts of the United States as well as outside of the country.

Another aspect of institutional health is the role of open communication and opportunity within the institution. Participants reported a sense that administration had established open communication channels, opportunities to participate in institutional change and the ability to create new things without fear of retribution for failure.

> Ok, first of all, I think an important part of it is the way they open channels of communication. So, I mean, the way that we resolved conflicts and you know conflicts are not bad in themselves, just the outcomes and the outcomes I mean are directly dependent on how you deal with that conflict so a conflict can be very positive. I cannot say every conflict ended up in a positive manner. But very many because of that open communication between management and faculty but it also happens between faculty and administrators, between faculty and students ok? It is a way that we resolve a lot of conflicts with communication. (Faculty)

This openness seemed to create freedom to act. Administration did not appear to be a stumbling block for approval of decisions, rather processes existed for the good of collective action to move forward as long as there was alignment with institutional priorities as revealed in the strategic plan. The need to work collaboratively together was not just something that administration did through processes, but also seemed to be a way of working that characterized expectations for cabinet level communication and relationships.

> And we have strong leadership and they get along for the most part. I have been in environment where that has not been the case. That's Dr. Nùñez. Her leadership style where she has created a culture where the VPs need to speak to each other and not necessarily get permission from each other. If I'm the VP of finance and I'm going to make a decision that impacts student affairs, I'm going to talk to Ken. Or if it's something in academics, I'm going to have a conversation with Dr. Pachis. I think we are responsive. We provide opportunity for professional development and growth. It's an environment where if you come up with an idea you just run with it if it is going to improve retention if it's going to save us money. So it's an environment where you can create a lot of things. And so, folks will come up with ideas and run with it. If they work, they work and if not, you retract and do something else. (Administrator)

The following two sub-themes build on the idea of institutional health with more specificity a to the participants' actual experiences within the environment.

Sense of belonging to a family. Organizations can take on human-like characteristics by adopting the social characteristics of its most common members. This

phenomenon is called the human aggregate (Baird, 2000). One of the most common human experiences is that of family. This term, "family" was expressly used by seven of the participants as one of the initial descriptors of the Eastern experience, making this term a type of invivo code. The term sense of belonging is found in the literature that is tied to student retention and employee engagement (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2010; Park, 2000; Hausman, Schofield & Woods, 2007). The idea of sense of belonging and family are inherently tied together as an expectation of that type of unit.

When discussing this feeling of being a part of a family, participants described an experience of being known and valued, a part of a close-knit or bonded community, where they experience and give genuine love and care for others. This was a sense that they described as true for students, faculty, staff and administration. While not every family unit fulfills this need for connection, these two data labels were tied together in a conceptual, ideal relationship of nearness, connection and personal belonging that is the expectation of a family and the psychological reality of sense of belonging. There were three participants that hedged their comments with the note that not every person feels the exact same way about the environment, the overwhelming impression among participants was that Eastern is a family. One administrator put it this way,

> …when I first started teaching at Eastern, I felt very comfortable. It had a very homey sense to it. That there was a value to you. And I worked at many universities through Ph.D. So, I worked down in Louisiana, Manhattan, public schools, private schools. And this was the first time that I felt like I had a place. Whether I was teaching or an administrator, is that there was something that

> people saw in me was valuable. That there was a way I could serve the university. (Faculty Administrator)

Sense of belonging is the psychological sense that a person is accepted as a member of a community. Parks states, "everyone needs a psychological home, crafted in the intricate patterns of connection and interaction between the person and his or her community" (2000, p. 115). This sense of belonging was pervasive among participants in that so many of the participants talked about a strong impression of being known, connected and valued by other members of the community. The sense of belonging was not specific to a certain level of employees (ex. Faculty or Staff), rather, it was a common answer for many participants, regardless of their institutional rank. Belonging to a family was the way they described their own experience in the Eastern environment as well as the way they described the experience for students. One faculty member said it this way,

> I think, in a lot of ways, Eastern is…a family…Sometimes a dysfunctional family [laughter] but a family nonetheless. You know, we cooperate, we work together, we are small enough that you pretty much know everyone no matter where you go...It's not like the giant universities where you know I could tap dance on the plaza and people wouldn't know who I was or why. Here, it's different. (Full Professor, Economics)

In many of the interviews, this sense of belonging to a family was directly tied to the student experience as well. Several participants reported that students experience this sense of family through their relationships with faculty or campus leaders in the classroom or in casual interactions around campus and at events. One staff member

reported the experience for students and their biological families as being one of connection. She stated, "[prospective] families that come through [admissions] that see Eastern see it as warm and Eastern is like a family. That's it. Like, really, point blank. You come to Eastern and it's like a warm place. (Staff). In this way, this sub-theme has come to truly characterize what it is like to be a part of the Eastern environment.

Students are the center of the university system. A pervasive response among participants when discussing the Eastern environment was the importance of how "student-centered" Eastern is as an institution. This was interpreted as institutional health because of its relevance to the purpose of the institution. The regularity of this discussion among participants supported the idea of student well-being in the environment. Ten of the twenty-eight participants described the environment as *focused* or *centered* on students. This terminology of students at the center of a "system" came directly from one of the participants, when talking about the importance of the environment, said,

> It's happening in the environment. Because we have to, we have to…. but it all comes down to the same thing because we see a student as the main component of our system but in a way, we nurture them and by nurture, I don't want to say we are there all the time. But we provided the terrain and we fertilize it so it can grow, healthy. For those years and we try as much to do that. So, I guess we are not 80% success. And we keep on trying...we never, even if you get to 100%. Then the other problem is how do we keep it 100%. It's a process. It's a living process. (Faculty)

The concept of students at the center of a system was reinforced by the centrality of student success or improving the quality of education offered to students in the strategic plans. Students are a driving force for work at Eastern.

Many of the interviews pointedly stated that the Eastern environment is one where students are the center. One interview named them as the "customer." It was not said as a way to diminish the importance of students, rather just a reality that there is clarity around who the employees are there to serve. One observation I had was that there is seems to be a genuine desire for students to succeed. One faculty member stated,

> I see it as a very student focused, very family like environment. And that sounds like a cliché but it does and it's not just the faculty it is all of the supports too. And the bottom line is trying to help the students be as successful as they need to be with the broad range of skill sets they come in with. (Faculty)

There does not seem to be a forced compulsion to make students the center, rather the systematic reality that students are the center and the institution, in almost all departments, has organized around that reality.

The Leader as Catalyst: A Clear and Defining Presidential Narrative Shaped Action

When a leader serves as a catalyst, they are the impetus for the change that follows their action. In this study, the president served as a catalyst by initiating actions and utilizing existing strategic planning processes to focus the institution on improving student success outcomes at Eastern Connecticut State University. A recurring observation was how often in formal and informal ways, it could be observed that this

president had a clear narrative that centered on the improvement initiative she had envisioned for the outcome measures. This observation, noted by many participants, stood out as an important finding that shaped the actions of the institution, resulting in sustained and notable change on student success outcome measures.

Finding 2: Clear and Defining Presidential Narrative

One of the primary catalytic acts was the clear narrative in which Dr. Nùñez engaged that defined the institutional conversation on retention and sparked actions. A narrative is a way of making meaning within an organization through story-telling and other dialogic approaches to framing a strategic conversation (Baker & Boyle, 2009; Denning, 2004). The data revealed that President Nùñez had a clear and defining narrative related to institutional improvement on measures of retention and graduation rates that compelled institutional action. The term "narrative" was well fitting for this theme because of how often participants reported the influence of a presidential speech, conversation on the topic, item on an agenda that reflected the particular focus of retention. The term narrative was also chosen because it was related that President Nùñez's personal story was influenced the way her focus on student retention is shaped. Finally, narrative was an appropriate label because of the intentionality of her choice to focus on student retention and access as a part of her legacy and personal values. These ideas will be further explained below so this them becomes clear to the reader.

President Nùñez's narrative was centered on retention and served as an intentional part of the actions as she led the institution toward sustained improvement on measures of retention and graduation rates. The importance of the clear presidential narrative was a theme that emerged from multiple interviews with various faculty

members and administrators. The message of the president was an important part of many participant's answers to the very first interview question, "Can you describe the scope of retention efforts at Eastern?" For this reason, this finding emerged as a major theme as it set the tone for many of the data. According to one faculty member,

> "It [the scope of retention efforts] has ramped up considerably, and the focus on it has ramped up considerably in the last year or two as the focus externally has ramped up. And that's one of the biggest markers. Internally it has been a focus, partially because it is just the right thing to do, but also, it's for every student we retain, that's one less student we are to recruit the next year so that stability pays off a ton. So that's been a focus of the president since she has been here. So it's been, one of those sorts of things we worked on." (Faculty)

The presidential narrative is an intentional, rather than accidental message. President Elsa Nùñez chose to focus on student retention as her personal leadership legacy. In her words, "I said to myself, Elsa, when they put you in the grave, what do you want to be known for? Improving student retention." In explaining her chosen legacy, she stated,

> So, Eastern has about the same standards as UCONN (University of Connecticut), thirty percent of our students overlap with UCONN. But they choose Eastern because we are small. UCONN is a huge university, R1 University, and [students] like the feeling of small. And every seat that we have is very competitive, we have high admission standards. The question for me was, *is that going to be my legacy?* We are very high in US News and World report, we are in the Princeton Review, we are in the Best Colleges to Work For,

> we win a lot of awards. But the issue of access was heavy on my mind. How do you get students to come into Eastern that might not qualify based on the standards? And you can't ask the faculty to lower the standards. That would be terrible and nobody wants to lower standards. And the question became, how do you create pathways into Eastern that otherwise might not exist for those students?

Further outlining her plan for her presidency, she described the now existing scope of retention efforts. Each of these efforts did not exist prior to her work on improving student access and retention at Eastern. She synthesized her focus as being comprised of four things: living on campus, social norm of getting tutoring, intrusive academic advising and practical engagement in a group for every student. These four elements were well documented in the interviews as well as the analysis of available institutional documents and presidential speeches. She further expounds,

> And so, my legacy is they should come to Eastern and graduate. That's the retention piece. It doesn't help me if they just come to Eastern and they just leave with all their loans and then their loans come due. It is very depressing to see them you know, fail out, if it is not academic, it's financial, they haven't figured out how to pay their tuition, so, that's the long-winded answer. The legacy will be that people from all walks of life, have gotten a first-class education at Eastern. It doesn't matter, where you come from, we have children… We have people here who are children of doctors and lawyers. (President Nùñez)

The vision that gives birth to the narrative is educational access and graduation.

This focus is drawn out in a number of ways, including meeting agenda topics, reflective reporting at the departmental level and memorable, fact-based focus on four-year graduation goals. Likewise, the focus on action toward student retention occurs in presidential speeches at University Meetings, discussion items at senate meetings, strategic planning meetings, agenda items at president's cabinet and president's expanded cabinet meetings. Each of these occurrences underscored the importance of this finding. This finding was demonstrated in the following data:

> It's not really enough if you don't work and nurture that student relationship with the university. And that's probably the biggest. And you know President Nùñez is always reinforcing that. Whether it's the faculty senate she is talking to or even, when we have the university meetings, we have the...it's always, what are we doing for students? What is your office doing to make the student interaction better? (Faculty Member)
>
> Her agendas are very strategic when she puts them together...And on her agenda, under her leadership, she is infusing the conversation throughout the year. (Administrator, RE-Meeting: Expanded Cabinet)
>
> there is always room in the agenda for new business. Um, if retention isn't on there. But retention is usually on there in some facet, I would say 3 out of 4 meetings. [laughing]. Or something goes back to that. (Departmental Director, Expanded Cabinet)

This finding reflects a sort of expectation that has formed among members of the Eastern community. Community members believe they will be expected to think about and discuss student retention at any point in the year.

This focused presidential narrative not only seems to rally the institution to a common goal, but also has demonstrated ability to evoke behavior change among members of the community. According to one administrator, "well she indicated when we break 100 in the rankings... so it's a goal of hers and really all of us at senior levels and it really trickles down. *We all speak the language of retention*. (Administrator)

The ability for all levels of the institution to "speak the language of retention" was something that rang true in each of the interviews. Every person, regardless of their role at the institution could speak to multiple levels of retention work, including personal involvement, departmental actions and institutional actions that contribute to the scope of retention efforts at Eastern. These levels of actions and effort to increase focus on retention, on the part of the president, produced the following:

> you know, I think we started talking about retention. When I was a junior faculty, you know, we didn't talk about it, we didn't think about it. When you don't talk about it it's like, you know, I don't know how many I signed in a semester. I used to think that you know it was the best students who left and it was the worst students who left but we didn't really have a clear idea and it was just like "oh yeah, you're doing great, goodbye." But I think it's also changed the way we run programs. It's an awareness that, at least within my department, that we have to compete, not only with other departments, for the good students, but we have to compete with entities outside the university. Um, I've had students who, against better advice, transferred to UCONN, who come back and are like, "you know it's different there?" and we are like, "Yes" and we talk about all the reasons it is different. But you know, so as a department, we really

> need to focus on having our students be successful and talking about who we want to graduate and what skills they want to have and how we set them up for success. (Faculty)

From the view of faculty and staff, this effort to focus the institution on improving student retention, was clear and related to her vision to leave a legacy.

> She's a visionary. She has definite goals in mind. There are things she wants to accomplish at this university before she decides to retire. Um, you know she is um she really sees what Eastern can be and she tries very hard to push us in that direction. (Departmental Director)

The visionary and on-going nature of the presidential narrative was one of intention and authentic style. According to President Nùñez,

> so my leadership style is engaging with people in the conversation, not through formal means all the time. Through informal means and getting them to talk about it. I think too many times, presidents have a list of things and they mention it in a speech and think it's done. And what I've learned is I've been talking about this for 12 years. I'm never have stopped talking about it. Formally, informally, on committees, with alums, with faculty, with staff. Uh, with faculty that have retired, I like to talk to them, they are very wise people. And I think that's my leadership style, I think if I hadn't been consumed by it, it probably wouldn't have improved. (Dr. Nùñez, President)

The role of a clear presidential narrative was a critical element of the institution's ability to organize around clear goals. President Nùñez's vision to improve access, retention and graduation for students at Eastern was one that was reinforced regularly by her

consistent narrative. This narrative is related to the next three major findings that related to the process by which the institution moved toward sustained improvement on measures of success outcomes. The leadership process was evaluated for evidence of empowerment, collective action and communication, as the theoretical framework designated.

Leadership Process: Empowerment and Collective Action

The theoretical framework presents the leadership process by viewing the issues of empowerment and collective action. These two elements emerged as major findings and are discussed below. The process by which leadership was enacted is an answer that is weaved throughout the participant quotes and described in the major finding of a strong strategic planning process, effective shared governance and a common language of retention. This was not something that was known prior to conducting the research but allows the researcher to give the clearest narrative to the reader. According to Astin and Leland (1991) the process by which leadership occurs is best described by examining empowerment, collective action and communication. Viewing these three organizational activities as a way of understanding the leadership process revealed several relevant findings for this study.

Leadership was enacted through presidential and committee decisions and actions. These decisions and actions allowed the research to explore the influence of collective action, empowerment and communication as a means of understanding improvement on retention and graduation outcomes. Data analysis revealed that the president engaged in a clear and defining presidential narrative that guided institutional actions. Secondly the data report that the president and committee elevated the role of

strong strategic planning processes to focus on student success and institutional distinction, moving the institution through collective action toward agreed upon goals. These two findings will be discussed below and participant quotes will be used to illustrate the themes.

Finding 3: Empowerment Transpired Through an Elevated Strategic Planning Process

One of the primary leadership decisions that President Nùñez utilized was to complete her presidential agenda through a thorough process of strategic planning. After arriving on campus during the fall 2006 semester, Nùñez spent about a semester scanning the institution and understanding the Eastern environment, including state economic and political influences. Not long after she took office, the economy of Connecticut experienced tremendous financial strain in the wake of a larger recession in the United States. Into a difficult funding environment and without an existing structure of strategic planning at the institution, in January of 2007, Nùñez embarked on an intensive strategic planning model that involved more than two hundred and fifty members of the campus community through committee work and input mechanisms.

According to the strategic planning document, the focus of improving the institutional profile and reputation of Eastern Connecticut State University was a pivotal piece of the strategic planning process; boldly stating that the institution was intentionally transforming the institution into a leader among a particular type of institutions, as well as an institution of first-choice in the Connecticut University System. The title of the first strategic plan was, “Eastern: A University of First Choice.” The plan spanned the years of 2008 to 2013. According to the plan, this short statement

was emblematic of the president's larger vision for Eastern to emerge as a model for public liberal arts education. The strategic plan was organized around three main elements in the process, where the steering committee or the Committee on the Future of Eastern (COFE), 1. Began with the core mission of the institution—the education of students, 2. charted a course for the institution, which better aligns Eastern with the external community it serves, 3. Created an image of excellence which increases external knowledge of Eastern's mission and strengths. Through a thorough and systematic process, the plan guided the institution to create goals, assessment, measures and funding approval processes that worked in harmony with shared governance to implement the strategic plan.

At the center of this plan was the intention to improve Eastern retention and graduation rates. According to Nùñez, this institutional improvement was to be her leadership legacy. Increased retention and graduation rates would improve the institutional profile of Eastern and were aligned with the vision of Eastern as a first-choice institution. When the plan began, freshmen retention was 74% and six-year graduation rates were 48%. Those rates had been fluctuating between 74% and 78% for retention and 41 to 48% for graduation rates for the past four years, according to the national data center (IPEDS). The institution is currently engaged in a second, five-year strategic plan that spans 2013 to 2018. Nùñez stated that if her term as president continues, she will engage the institution in a third, 5-year strategic plan.

In seeking to uncover the decision and actions of a president and a presidentially appointed committee, a strong strategic planning process emerged as a relevant finding. Moreover, the nature of the process, including its strong focus on student success were a

central finding. This finding is inherently related to the first finding of a clear presidential narrative focused on retention. This relationship was expressed well by early interviews with academic administrators and faculty members who began to discuss retention efforts by discussing efforts to improve "student success." Upon further investigation, it was clear to the researcher that this discussion of student success was an intentional part of the overall strategic planning process that mobilized the entire university to work on the issue of student retention via the role of improving student success in a variety of ways.

The president's choice to use a committee structure was an important part of the pervasive nature of decisions and actions on the campus that related to student retention and graduation success. The actions of the president herself and her appointed committee worked together to produce a strong strategic planning process. The overarching goals of the plan include maximizing the value of the Eastern degree, increasing 4-year graduation rates, greater emphasis in high impact practices and strategies to ensure that students are immediately prepared for a career after they graduate. The introduction of the plan states:

> … the goal of the new 2013 Strategic Plan is to provide students with rigorous and afford- able academic programs and pre-professional experiences that prepare them for careers and graduate school. The plan promotes a diverse campus culture through which students are inspired by outstanding faculty and motivated classmates, develop a lifelong network, take on leadership roles and become responsible and engaged citizens. Eastern continues to advance its position as a university of first choice, attracting students, faculty and staff who value its mission as a public liberal arts college.

The below table displays the objectives that the planned addressed as well as any critical performance measures related to retention that the institution used to evaluate the effectiveness and progress of the plan.

Committee I: Academic Direction	Committee II: Articulate Eastern's Vision Statewide	Committee III: Addressing the Achievement Gap	Committee IV: Diversity and the Workforce	Committee V: The Role of Graduate Education at Eastern
Sub-Committees: Student Success; Academic Quality; Student Life				

Table 6. Summary Table of 2013-2018; Strategic Planning Committees by Topic

The committees worked on various objectives that pertained to their topic or sub-topic. The number of faculty, staff, administrators and students that were involved in the strategic plan was tremendous. See Appendix G for a full listing of plan participants. Each person is named and listed with their position within the university. Below is a summary table that lists the number of participants by each category. The same convention used to analyze report participants in this study was used to divide the participants in the strategic planning committees. There was a total of 85 persons formally named to the strategic planning committee called the Committee on the Future of Eastern (COFE). The 2013-18 COFE was named COFE II because it was the second formal plan that Dr. Nùñez had initiated at Eastern. See below in Table 7.

Staff	Faculty	Administration	Students
15	36	31	3

Table 7. Number of Strategic Plan Participants by Categorical Classification

The Plan was organized through the committees as well as five main objectives that were all tied to performance indicators, most of which were related to the retention and graduation of students and their successful preparation upon graduation. These

performance indicators were benchmarked and tracked bi-annually in a report that was published to COFE.

Objective I: Maximize the Value of an Eastern Degree	Objective II: Ensure that Programs are Relevant, Effective and Challenging	Objective III: Expand Integrative Learning on Campus and in the community	Objective IV: Ensure that Students, Staff and Faculty Achieve their Full Potential	Objective V: Increase Public Awareness of Eastern's Unique Mission and Community
Number of Performance Indicators Related to Retention or Graduation of Students:				
22 of 23	1 of 4	7 of 7	3 of 4	4 of 13

Table 8. 2013-18 Eastern Connecticut State University Strategic Plan, Objectives and Performance Measures
Note: Adapted from ECSU Achievement of Performance Measures Report, January 2017.

As the table displays, the strategic plan was heavily organized around student success where retention and graduation rates were used as performance measures for committee work. Moreover, every objective had one or more indicators that can be tied to programs or practices that are related to improved retention and graduation of students. The work of the plan to track and tie progress to established goals indicates that this plan was a working document that impacted university actions and decisions throughout the organization.

In reviewing the five available strategic planning documents and comparing them with interview data and speech transcripts, there were six aspects or sub-themes that emerged from the documents and named as fundamental among participants. These aspects include: clear and agreed upon goals and objectives, input orientation to planning, shared governance applied throughout the planning model, transparent

structure, funding relationship to planning and dedication to responsiveness. Each of these elements surfaced through the interviews with participants and were further confirmed in the strategic planning documents provided by participants and additional strategic plan documentation through public access on the university's strategic planning website.

Finding 4: Collective Action Occurred through Effective Shared Governance

The final interview question evaluated administrator perceptions of the outcomes of the decision and actions that aimed to improve retention. By analyzing comments and observed perceptions of the way the participants discussed the answers to the research questions, collective action emerged in the role of effective shared governance. The interview question was, "In your opinion, what was the most successful decision or action aimed at improving student retention?" All participants were able to answer this question from their perspective. Dissonant answers were drawn from the question where they were asked to describe the decision-making process. Finally, participants were asked directly to describe perceptions of decisions to improve retention. These answers mainly elicited answers like "I think they are positive" or "I think it depends on your role" however, among faculty members there was a strong sense that the role of shared governance allowed for negative perceptions to be aired during decision making processes, resulting collective positivity when decisions were finalized and enacted. The presence of clarity in the goals, decisions and actions, as well as the ability of all employees to speak intelligibly on the topic of retention. was also taken for positivity in perception among faculty and staff.

Collective action toward agreed upon goals. The strategic planning process that elicited the actions, was not a top-down endeavor, rather, investigation into what the process was around strategic planning revealed a process that involved more than two-hundred members of the university community. Likewise, clear and agreed upon goals and objectives guided the strategic planning process resulting in positive perceptions of decisions and actions. This level of involvement produced collective action. Similarly, the clear goals and objectives that emerged from this were owned by those who were responsible to enact such decisions.

> if you asked anyone, what is the university's retention goal? They would say, ok, we are shooting to get above 80%. We are hovering at 78-79% right now and we are trying to get above 80. (Departmental Director)

For one senior administrator, this clarity transcends strategic planning goals. Rather, he reports that intelligibility exists among community members as to the institutional identity and mission. This particular administrator has a length of service with the institution that more than doubles that of the president. He states,

> At least they know this person is taking care of this, this person is taking care of that. It could be that, um, that #1 we are a rather small institution, that we are lean at the top, actually we are lean all over. And that we have a very clear mission. All those things help...I always tell people if you want to know whether Eastern has a clear mission and clear direction, go to one of our sister institutions and ask them what eastern is all about. And you may want to do it just for the heck of it. I'm confident they will be able to articulate what we are all about. I am confident they will be able to tell you. If you ask them what their

institution is all about, they will be less confident in articulating what their institution is all about. (Academic Administrator)

Each of these statements demonstrate confident lucidity among community members as well as specific goals that have influenced institutional action in the strategic planning process.

In addition to clarity, there appeared to be ownership at the departmental level for actions that influenced movement toward the goal. This level of action was interpreted to be an indicator of agreement.

> we did a retention outline in terms of outlining everything that housing is a part of that impacts retention. And in that I think we came up with 15 or 20 things that housing is doing alone that contributes to retention. (Departmental Director)

This level of departmental consciousness indicates a lucidity among the Eastern community of what is important, as well as a sense that the plan is active and owned by members of the community.

The number of people involved in the process could have produced something that did not reflect top administrator's priorities, however, the wide-spread involvement of community members appeared to influence the level of consciousness among members of the various arms of planning that produced a plan that helped the institution move in collective action toward a shared goal. Collective action was apparent through a wide-spread, input-orientation in the plan. The following data best illustrate this point.

> I think it was more the result of the long-range strategic planning where everyone was invited to be involved at multiple levels and it became one of the areas that was identified as a weakness or a place we could improve anyway. So

> it became an initiative that we could improve upon over the next five years. So going and getting the grant funding in order to make it happen and then, picking some people, I think when, at that stage the administration tends to choose people they want to get things moving done whatever. (Faculty)
>
> Well we have a strategic plan so, um, one of the things that, one of Dr. Nùñez's strengths is that is, is, is getting all of us involved in the planning process and then staying the course...Here, since she got here, we're actually in our second strategic plan. And hundreds of people were involved in the planning process and we didn't just sit around as a group of 300 people in a room and kind of ideas bubbled to the surface. There were very targeted teams of people, working in committee working on very specific projects, or rather goals and objectives, (Staff)

Shared governance model in planning. The data demonstrated a robust commitment to shared governance at the institution. In fact, the shared governance model is applied thoroughly to the strategic planning model. This shared governance orientation seemed to influence perceptions of actions as acceptable prior to their implementation.

> Under Dr. Nùñez, we are very much about shared governance, shared information, where high level policy decisions that are made are made after a period of consultation. A committee is formed to work on the decision, the committee communicates status, progress, where they are with the rest of the community, the community is invited to give input and then the decision is usually sent to the university senate. So there is the sense that when we adopt a

> strategic plan that commits us to resources, it's not coming out of Gelsi-Young and it says "here it is" "here is what we are going to do for the next 5 years" it really comes from the campus where people have a lot of opportunity to comment and talk about what our priorities should be. I mean it's very clear that the president has the final decision as she should, right? She is responsible for everything that happens here, but she is very willing to negotiate and compromise. (Faculty)

One of the structural examples of shared governance includes the use of faculty as co-chairs as the leads on strategic planning committees, including the lead committee, the Committee on the Future of Eastern, or COFE. This structure is aimed at creating structural buy-in and input that improves the ability of the community to work together throughout the creation and adoption of actions. According to President Nùñez,

> I required that a faculty member co-chair with me. Because I believe you cannot do this work without faculty buy-in. When the faculty get difficult, you just aren't going to get…they may pay lip service to it, but they won't do it. So I was very much involved in the planning process but I wasn't always the driver. The driver often was the co-chair or another faculty member

For President Nùñez, this decision was critical to the success of the process. There is inherent risk on both sides of the decision to mix faculty and administrative leadership. Embracing true shared governance invites feedback that might be contrary to what administration desires. From another perspective, top-down administrative decision may meet resistance that impedes implementation as was reflected in the above quote by President Nùñez. One administrator stated:

> the president decided that the leaders of the strategic planning process should be faculty members and some people are afraid to let faculty members because they are afraid that faculty members are going to go into all crazy ways. But the interesting thing is when faculty members get involved they are trying to become even more fiscally conservative than what management is. (Administrator)

Shared governance, at the structural level, was a critical part of the success of the plan as well as improving cross-university collaboration. However, perceptions of faculty members exceed structural commitment. Rather, perceptions of her leadership is that shared governance is something in which she really believes and something to which she is deeply committed. One faculty member illustrated this point in the following statement,

> she doesn't lean on us and say, I want this, this, and this. You know, mostly she says to the provost and she says to the senate, "this is what I want you to consider, this is my dream, this is what I wish." And then we, as a shared governance entity discuss is this viable for us and how? You know? I don't know if we have ever said no to her, um, but it's always an ok, it's a great dream, how do we get there. (Faculty)

Another faculty member attested that her approach to shared governance through the strategic planning process garnered respect for the president's leadership. He stated.

> Those decisions came from COFE and actually gained the president a lot of respect because a new president could have been very concerned that what they produce is not in line with what she wants and so she may…that could have

> caused conflict. But it didn't, it worked and so the second round, when we were probably in a better place, then she basically came up with her initial goals for her round of strategic planning to see how we would achieve those goals. So it is really the overarching guiding principles if you will. (Faculty)

President Nùñez's genuine approach to shared governance appeared to both inspire commitment to the plan and produce a depth and width of action that contributed to the success of the plan.

Transparent planning structure. A transparent planning structure that drove decision making in the leadership process. What is meant by this is that the structure of the strategic planning process was intentionally and methodically visible and directly measurable to approved actions throughout the university. Methods for making processes clear includes cross-university committee structure, leveled committee work and feedback loops that determined approval. Several participants stressed the how funding for initiatives is a process that flows through the planning structure, rather than outside the structure. It was stated that funding approval was an important part of what helped this structure establish and maintain success.

At the top of the strategic planning structure, there is a committee called COFE or the Committee on the Future of Eastern. This committee helped steer the planning process and is comprised of the president and a faculty co-chair, senior level administrators, faculty members and director level personnel. This committee serves as final approval for initiatives proposed by the various committees that steer each of the strategic planning initiatives. One of the outcomes of working in this structure is that approval for decisions is clear for the university community. According to the President,

> I have been here twelve years, so there are two plans. If I stay longer, and this plan, the second plan is finished, we will develop a third plan. But I believe in planning and I believe that it is made, it has de-politicized my presidency, in fact, if you said to me, Elsa, why don't you invest in this, I can say to you, "Jessica, it's not in the plan." Say, we should be doing this, and I say "oh yeah, we are, it's in the plan." So the plan has we've got this budget and you've got this plan, and if you tick and tie as we say in Maine, there are elements of the plan in the budget. (Dr. Nùñez)

This committee works to say yes to as many things as possible that coincide with the plan. While there was skepticism toward how the first strategic plan would work, as the process began to work and decisions were truly vetted by the plan, buy-in followed. On faculty member stated it this way,

> now I think they see the benefit because if my department wants something, a new faculty line, right, the provost, before I ask for that line, I know the provost is going to ask, "how is that line going to contribute…to the mission and the plan?" because that is how we are allocating resources. So, it's not, everybody asks for a line. Everybody will ask for a line but you've got to justify what it will mean for moving the mission and the plan forward and so it's a great way to very transparently allocate resources." (Full Professor, Political Science)

Moreover, the way in which this approval is communicated back to the committees or departments requesting approval creates clarity in the university for where a decision is in the process of approval. Once COFE meets on a proposed decision or action, a letter is issued that outlines approval and funding. One COFE member states it this way,

> And then if whatever decision was made, a letter would be written by the president with a budget attached, to the committee, to say here is what you proposed, here is what has been decided and here is the timeline for implementation. So it wasn't PAC sitting and deciding what we were going to do. We were really waiting for these to come in and then sharing them as they came in, and then communicating all the decisions back down. And that's what changed the culture...There was this real sense that the work was paying off, that they were being heard and that those initiatives were being adopted. (Faculty)

During the first planning cycle, COFE met every other Friday for two years. This meant that the committee could respond to requests on a bi-monthly basis, avoiding undesirable lag time in the approval process. According to the president, this process of responsiveness and vetting decisions through a transparent planning process is critical to the success of current and future planning. For this reason, she focused her work on ensuring that this aspect of the planning process works. President Nùñez states,

> That is really, Jessica, important, for you to put in your head, this idea of a president planning with a team of people, with the faculty and staff going forward, has to be where the financial resources go, because you can't just have a plan and not invest in it, on the other hand you have limited resources so you can't invest in everything, so getting a community to say, these are the things we are going to invest in, basically has been most of my work. So, I was very much involved in both planning processes. (Dr. Nùñez)

This effort to ensure that the university community sees that the planning process is clear and working the way it is supposed to seems to pay off. As a part of the data

collection, multiple levels of employees participated in interviews. One of the interviews that was not on the schedule but emerged as a part of the observation process was with an employee who does not sit on COFE. Rather, he participates as a member of a subcommittee. According to this employee, the design to utilize the planning process as a funding approval mechanism is working. He states,

> Strategic Plan drives our budgeting process so if, if, what we don't have is, I mean obviously President Nùñez isn't just kind of saying, "You guys do it and let me know". There were things that she wanted to get done in the strategic plan and she had enough conversations (Staff)

A working approval and funding strategy that is clear to the community is intentionally present and helpful for concentrating university actions into engaged movement.

To further underscore transparency and action in the planning process, the entire plan was assessed by a faculty member that was not a part of the approval process. The first plan was assessed for implementation of the stated initiatives and found to have been implemented at a level of 94%. This means that 94% of the planned actions and decisions had been implemented during the five-year plan.

The result of this level of responsiveness and transparency is that the community learns to believe in the process and work together toward improvement. According to one faculty member,

> So that's the first round of strategic planning. It was a massive effort, that made a lot of improvements to the university, not least of which was changing our culture. So, we went from a culture of kind of some separation, silos, to a culture where all of the office in the departments across campus kind of worked on this

together. So that helped. We went through that plan, and we implemented it, almost fully. (Faculty)

This massive effort provided a great deal of clarity in the process from which the collective action and empowerment could occur. The pervasiveness of these actions and the ability for any level of employee to communicate in depth on their knowledge of institutional action indicates that the process of involving broad stakeholders and transparent structures to organize towards improvement was an important aspect of advancing the outcomes.

Summary

The four primary findings of this research demonstrated that this case is instrumental in illuminating how an institution approached retention improvement through systematic institutional decision-making processes where the president was a catalytic figure in the process. These key findings provided in this chapter demonstrate that a president and her appointed committee were able to make a substantial difference in undergraduate retention and graduation rates by focusing a strategic planning process on this necessary improvement. Such focus was demonstrated through a clear presidential narrative and a strong strategic planning process that was positively perceived in its structure due to clear goals, shared governance and transparent decision making. These decisions were well situated within a healthy environment where community members have a sense of belonging to a family and in which students are the center of the university system. These findings will be discussed for their academic relevance and practical implications. Recommendations for future research and research limitations will also be examined.

Chapter Six: Discussion

Chapter six discusses the findings from chapter five. This discussion is based on relevant literature that provides a basis for the researcher's conclusions. Following the discussion is a short description of future research and recommendations for practitioners as well as limitations.

The significance of this study is that it addresses a research gap to provide a deeper understanding regarding the influence of leadership processes in effective student retention efforts for minoritized students. This study also holds a unique space, in that while exploring the influence of leadership decisions on student retention and graduation rates, it likewise explores the relationship between those two elements inside a unique organization. This case selection approach was grounded in relevant literature yet is a new way to view the elements of retention and graduation rates, leadership decisions, and institutional environment as a related, theoretical construct.

The purpose of this single case study was to explore the influence that presidents and empowered committees have on institutional retention rates through their decisions and actions. It was hoped that through this study, findings might emerge that would inform presidents and institutional leaders of how they might engage with the important issue of improving student retention and graduation rates within particular institutional contexts. This chapter will demonstrate that findings did contribute to the study of institutional leadership for student retention. The findings, when used as analytic generalizations, answered the desired research questions and provided a foundation for future inquiry.

This research used qualitative, constructivist case study methodology as a means of collecting rich data to support the stated purpose. The study was conducted by performing in-depth interviews, participating as a participant-observer and exploring institutional and other publicly available documents. Participants in this study included 28 unique participants as well as the researcher's personal observations. The data were chunked by their relevance to answering research questions, then coded, analyzed and organized into data tables for further comparison. Categories and subcategories were created during this process of analysis and organization was complete when categories could no longer be overlapped and condensed.

Findings from this study were aligned to the research questions to provide the reader with the ability to make judgements of the data. These findings will be discussed at length in this chapter, pulling from relevant literature to provide interpretive insights for the reader. The purpose of this chapter is to provide relevant discussion of the findings to contribute insight into these findings through a reconstruction of the data in view of pertinent literature.

This discussion draws from higher education literature on leadership and student retention as well as some business literature. The implications of these findings are intended to contribute new knowledge related to the practice of leading institutions toward improvement on measures of student retention and graduation rates in a way that is equitable and positive. This chapter concludes with a discussion of future research that may be conducted to further explore the important relationship of institutional leadership and improving student retention.

As discussed in Chapter Five, the major findings of this study indicated that the Eastern environment was constructively connected to the ability to produce improved measures on institutional student success outcomes. Further, the president acted as a catalytic leader in several ways. The themes demonstrated the relevance of the theoretical framework as a way to view leadership toward student success outcomes. For relevant review, the themes are 1) presence of institutional health 2) a defining and clear presidential narrative 3) empowerment transpired through an elevated strategic planning process and 4) collective action occurred through effective shared governance. Each of these themes emerged from the data in a way that was meaningful for fulfilling the overall purpose of this study.

Finally, these findings correspond to each of the research questions that were outlined from the research frame and will be discussed below in relation to the literature that informs their importance.

The Eastern Environment Encourages Success

Kuh et al., (2005) assert that *the* challenge in front of college leaders is to help more students attain their educational goals" (p. ix). This is a challenge to which Eastern has risen, based largely on the environment they have fostered and their system of success they have organized. Many of the decisions and actions that impact retention ad graduation rates at Eastern reflect what research has identified as relevant institutional conditions for student success. These include out of class contact with faculty, a clear and focused institutional mission, respect for diverse talents and cultural differences and higher standards for student performance. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, where campuses exhibit positive working relationships,

that are "cordial, and helpful" (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 241) there is evidence of a supportive campus environment. Campus administrators who are "responsive and supportive" and faculty and staff who are "accessible and helpful" influence environments that exhibit higher student success indicators (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 261). Similarly, Elliott and Healy (2001) noted that successful institutional retention rates are highly related to how satisfied students are with the campus climate and student centeredness of their college experience. The findings in this research study reflect the established ideals for environmental conditions where students have a better than expected chance to succeed. Taken together, established research and this study highlight the importance of the institutional environment to positive student retention rates.

The first finding from this study was that the Eastern environment exhibits characteristics of *institutional health.* As discussed in chapter five, that term was my own and was created to capture the way that participants described their experience with the Environment at Eastern. While environment is well established as having influential impact on student retention, it was not the focus of this study. Therefore, the primacy of the Eastern environment in the findings was a surprising outcome of this study. It only emerged as such based on the prominence of environment in relationship to the issue of student retention and the idea that leaders actually shape environmental conditions within organizations (Hambrick, 2007). According to Kuh et al. (2005, 2010), culture is tantamount. As they revisited their original deep schools five years after the original study was published, they reflected:

> Ultimately, it is about the culture…a focused mission, institutional will, money, talent, and more are necessary yet insufficient to foster student success. Sooner or later, studies of high performing entities conclude that distinctive features of the organization's culture are key to its effectiveness." (p.272)

Similarly, institutional environment is necessary but insufficient to understanding the total achievement of Eastern having progressed toward equitable outcomes. While programs and initiatives are important as a means of removing barriers to successful degree attainment for students, institutional environment surrounds each initiative that leaders enact. It is therefore, crucial that leaders investigate ways in which their institutional environment supports or impedes students' successful navigation of persistence toward their degree.

Institutional Health Matters

Healthy organizations produce healthy outcomes. One of the first emergent findings from this study was how consistent the data labels were among participants as I analyzed their descriptions of the environment. After reviewing all of the responses and the codes I had attached to them, it was clear to me how "healthy" the environment was. The term institutional health is my own. I have searched journals and other scholarly resource sites to determine if the term had somehow emerged from literature that I had read at an earlier point in the research, however, I cannot find that specific term attached to any study of business or higher education study. However, Tierney (2008) alluded to this idea in his work on organizational culture in higher education. He stated, "I give great credence to the idea that participants' perceptions of problems, solutions, the environment, and a host of other variables go a long way toward determining the health

of the organization" (p. 20). In this work, he relates faculty and staff perceptions about the college environment to the relative well-being of that setting. This connection directly relates to how this study utilized participant perceptions as a means of investigating environmental conditions at Eastern. In this study, what is meant by institutional health is that for the participants view Eastern as a "great place to work" where collegiality is common. When asked, "describe the Eastern environment" the term "family" would often emerge from the participant either as a first response or through the course of their answer to that question.

The relationship of this term to the study of student retention may not be immediately obvious. However, when institutional health is viewed in terms of campus climate, atmosphere, or environment, the relationship of a healthy environment and improved student retention become clearer. Students experience the institutional environment through the human aggregate (Baird, 2000). The human aggregate is manifested in their experience with faculty and staff with whom they interact on a daily basis as they move from class to class, in the residence halls, in the student support and services center and in the student union.

Moreover, the way faculty and staff experience the environment translates to how they interact with students on campus. This was evident through participant comments in this study. Participants in this study who referred to their personal experience with the environment and the student experience described a similarity between Eastern as a family for faculty and staff and that same reality for students. Participants who had also been students at Eastern were able to articulate the similarity of experience between their student and staff perceptions.

Therefore, institutional health promotes sense of belonging among staff members who are able to authentically pass this on to students they serve and teach. Students remain and persist at institutions where people genuinely care about their success and actively work to remove barriers for their ability to persist to a degree. This is particularly true for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Researchers and practitioners ought to pay careful attention to the role that environment plays in improving student retention and graduation rates. The experiences of faculty and staff are tied to those of students in the institutional environment. Therefore, it is relevant for leaders to focus on improving the health of their organization as they seek to focus on critical performance measures such as retention and graduation rates. Positive outcomes for institutions cannot be produced when the environment in which decisions toward those outcomes are made is poor. Likewise, where the environment surrounding decisions and actions is healthy, progress can be made, unencumbered by institutional conditions which are disorderly for growth and change.

Leaders' Values Influence Actions

The second finding from this study was *the president engaged in a clear presidential narrative that guided institutional actions.* This finding will be discussed both in terms of the power of the presidential narrative as well as the personal values that influenced the content of the narrative. It is established that the values of senior leaders influence organizational actions. This study reinforced this theory.

As is asserted by Upper Echelon's theory, "if you want to understand why organizations do what they do, you must look at the most powerful actors" (Hambrick, 2007). This theory purports that the values and backgrounds of an organization's most

powerful actors (executive leaders) will influence the strategic actions of the organization. In the case of Eastern, this theory holds true. It was clear from Dr. Nùñez's own statements that her deep values lie in equitable educational attainment for all students. Her values guided strategic planning actions and organized her presidential agenda. From that perspective, it would seem that if an institution wants to improve student retention and graduation rates, it would behoove them to hire a president who values that kind of improvement. However, this conclusion would fall short of a deeper examination of why this value was embraced and able to be realized at Eastern.

In addition to her personal value of attainment, it is potentially her value of input orientation that undergirded the focus and successful actions toward improvement on measures of student retention and graduation rates. It was clear through talking with Dr. Nùñez and other participants that the President's leadership approach of open dialogue and being bent toward gaining stakeholder input was an authentic leadership action. One participant noted that collaboration and patient listening were such a consistent part of the way that Dr. Nùñez leads that it must be central to who she is, stating that leaders cannot put on an act without the act breaking down under pressure. This leadership approach appears to be very in line with her personal value system as well as her experience. When I asked her about this observation, she noted that working *with* faculty is the only way to go. Her past experience as a faculty member informed her approach to shared governance which went well beyond going through the motions to achieve her agenda. This authentic approach to shared governance may have contributed to the acceptance of her vision for the institution. It was evident from talking to faculty members that Nùñez was well respected and her vision for Eastern

was something they willingly embraced even if they did not initially want to engage in early institutional changes.

This finding is in harmony with the work of Fisher, Tack, and Wheeler (1988) who established that effective presidents approach leadership with a distinct tone of respect toward those that they lead. They state, "effective presidents recognize that respect from faculty and administrative staff makes leadership possible" (P. 68). Likewise, President Nùñez believe that it was not helpful to coerce actions from the institutional stakeholders, particularly faculty, to achieve her presidential agenda. Rather, she gave and gained respect from those that she worked with, even applying collaboration to decisions where she had legitimate and positional authority to act without it.

Dr. Nùñez' leadership approach to implementing relevant improvements within the Eastern environment was in line with what research would deem to be effective presidential leadership. It is important for presidents to understand their organizational culture as they seek to enact decisions and actions. Tierney (2008) writes, "The role of college presidents in understanding and interpreting the environment to different constituencies becomes increasingly important. In particular, how leaders communicate and interpret institutional goals and values focuses the participants' comprehension of the environment" (P. 13). However, it is worth considering the idea that this approach may also have been highly conducive to the existing organizational culture of Eastern.

I anticipated discovering characteristics of a culturally engaging campus environment (Museus, 2014). However, after interviews with participants and directly asking Dr. Nùñez about her approach to equity, she stated that she focused on socio-

economics, rather than race, as a means to close the gaps that existed among students on measures of student retention. When I asked her why, she stated, "Because it is a stand-in for trouble." By this she meant that poor White students and poor Black students have the same barrier, finances. She set out to remove that barrier as much as she could, leveling the playing field for success from an affordability standpoint.

While Dr. Nùñez states that she did not focus on race for students, it was clear from interviews with participants that diversity was a high-value when it came to hiring faculty and staff. In fact, according to one long-tenured administrator, there was an intentional plan to diversify hiring pools that included funding for recruitment of personnel from various parts of the country and world, intentionally dissimilar hiring committees and mandatory racial diversity in candidate pools for final selections. It was related that there had been more than one hire that did not take place because departments had not done due diligence in presenting a diversified candidate pool. When asked whether or not this practice had impacted student retention, there was an emphatic 'yes' from those who were involved in the decision-making processes. A shared perspective was that students gravitated toward faculty members who had some form of common racial heritage as them. Several stories were told of staff and faculty members who initiated non-mandatory clubs, in addition to their job responsibilities, to provide support for students from minoritized backgrounds. While Dr. Nùñez did not set out to make a difference *only* for students from minoritized backgrounds, it is clear that she did what it took from a structural standpoint to provide the support necessary for students to thrive at Eastern no matter their story prior to attending Eastern.

The Power of a Presidential Narrative

What a president talks and writes about gets noticed. Tierney (2008) refers to these as literacy and speech events. While literacy and speech events occur throughout the organization, the role of president affords opportunity and venue for frequent and influential perspective sharing. According to Kuh et al. (2005),

> Whether presidents are new to their campus or have served for an extended period, when they and other senior administrators make student success and institutional priority, the focus of attention of others at the institution, as well as resources, tend to follow. (p. 335)

This quote is emblematic of the findings of this study. It was clear that because Nùñez chose to focus on helping students successfully navigate and graduate from Eastern, the organization followed suit. Tierney (2008) writes, "how leaders communicate and interpret institutional goals and values focuses the participants comprehension of the environment" (p.13). Taken together, these concepts conclude that focused attention and communicated priorities structure institutional environment and organizational goal attainment.

This reality is powerful for leaders. Can it be said that institutional retention and graduation rates languish because leaders are focused elsewhere? Perhaps not. However, a strong presidential narrative is memorable and influential in that it can shape decisions making, funding, institutional vision and organizational culture.

Strategic Planning toward Student Success

The third finding from this study was: *The president and committee elevated the role of strong strategic planning processes to focus on student success and institutional distinction, moving the institution through collective action toward agreed upon goals.*

This finding will be discussed first in terms of the connection of the president's vision expressed in her narrative because vision precedes strategic action. Next, this finding will be discussed in how the elevated role of strategic planning encouraged creative, departmental actions and reinforced the notion that retention is everyone's responsibility.

It was apparent from interviews with the study participants the president's top priorities were clear. Referenced through many interviews was the idea that Dr. Nùñez leveraged every opportunity, large and small, to talk about how Eastern is a place where students come, thrive and graduate. That consistent narrative painted a picture in the minds of listeners of who Eastern is and what Eastern does. Whether she was giving a speech, monitoring the strategic plan, or organizing a meeting agenda, retention was always of utmost import in her mind, and therefore in the minds of the people with whom she was speaking or meeting. "Without the firm, visible, continuing commitment of senior leaders, it is all too easy for institutions to waffle on its commitment to student success" (Kuh et al., 2005, p.335)

Consistent discourse on the significance of helping students graduate from Eastern reinforced a language of retention that began with Dr. Nùñez and emanated among faculty, staff, and administration alike. It was clear from the participant interviews, that at Eastern, retention really was viewed as "Everybody's responsibility" and every participant could speak fluently on the topic.

> In strong institutions, leaders at all levels share a sense of vision and purpose. Those at the top of the organizational chart are crucial actors, but colleges cannot thrive over the long term when a single person or a small group carries a

> disproportionate share of the load. Instead, people throughout the organization need to see themselves as part of the leadership team. (Felton, Gardner Schroeder, Lambert, Barefoot, 2016, p. 7)

This quote underscores the role that "everyone" has to play in leading retention. However, this diffuse approach to leadership can have dismal impact on moving the needle on lag measures like retention or graduation rates where by the time the measures come, actions to impact those measures have already taken place.

This gap in actions and impact is where the elevated role of the strategic planning process and its central focus on student success is of particular relevance. The strategic planning process provided formal and informal ways for the community to participate in shaping the outcomes. Moreover, performance indicators were established for plan measurement so that progress toward stated objectives and actions were specific, measurable and actionable. Additionally, faculty and staff members were encouraged to attempt creative solutions at the departmental level to make progress toward the stated goals. If these actions were budget impacting, financial provision was tied directly to whether or not the initiative would successfully influence the shared and stated goals of the institution. This level of participatory planning infused faculty and staff members with the notion that they were indeed responsible for student retention encouraging personal agency toward actions that might make a difference toward these outcomes.

Actions, Decisions and Shared Governance

The final finding from this study was: *The actions and decisions were enacted by faculty and staff through collective actions and shared governance that resulted in*

perceptions of ownership and a language of retention and student success. This finding will be discussed for its relevance to shared governance in higher education and the resulting ownership that comes when actions and decisions work in tandem with existing systems. This section will discuss ways that properly functioning systems may promote sustainable improvement efforts for student retention and graduation rates.

The way leaders within organizations enact decisions and actions matters. Existing systems can serve to impede or speed up organization goals such as retention and graduation rates. Shared governance is a power within institutions of higher education. Administrators who work *with* rather than *against* the shared governance model have a greater likelihood of success toward desired outcomes. Tierney (2008) writes, "Governance provides the foundation upon which organizations may prosper or fail" (p. 171). It was clear in this study, that the administrative leaders, notably the president, both understood and respected the processes in existence at Eastern. Had that reality not been true, it is unlikely faculty members would have been engaged in her vision for improving retention and graduation rates of students. That is not to say that the faculty member may not have inherently cared about improvement on the same measures, rather to say that had Dr. Nùñez approached working with the faculty differently, there could have been a political battle over power rather than a successfully organized effort toward improvement. Tierney (2008) writes, "the way in which a college's or university's actors create the culture of the organization determines a host of issues pertaining to the faculty's role in governance" (p. 121). Administrators seeking to enact change within higher education will do well to understand local, institutional decision-making models, noting the benefit of a sound system, and pursue

transformation that leverages effective processes. Temporary improvement or change, however, is not the desired goal when equitable outcomes is at stake.

Systemic Improvement and Permanence

Many leaders work to ensure that the change that they enact toward goals leaves a mark on the organization they serve, long-past their time of service. While strong-man theories of leadership have been popular among leadership theorists, distributive approaches to leadership have been a preferred approach in current scholarship (Kezar et al., 2006). One reason for this preference is that it is a more inclusive and process-oriented approach to organizational achievement that is not limited by a celebrity leader. In this study, it would be a fair question to wonder to what extent will educational attainment remain an institutional priority once a new administration takes charge. However, the depth of adoption within the organization has created a systemic and cultural norm where one could assert that educational attainment has become somewhat of an operating principle at Eastern, redefining the institutional habitus for years to come. While charisma and input orientation may have influenced the level of ownership adopted by the faculty and staff, the systemic integration and cultural adoption may provide systematic improvement permanence.

Buy-in. Institutional health manifested itself in faculty and staff buy-in toward institutional decisions and actions. Based on the level of ownership for organizational goals that was found among participants, genuine ownership among staff and faculty may be considered a health indicator for colleges and universities. The degree to which faculty and staff members buy-in to what is stated as the institutional agenda implies agreement that will likely lead to more creative and authentic actions toward those

goals. Creative and unique solutions to complex problems throughout an organization influence overall benefit to the organization. It is not, however, disconnected innovations that make a difference. Actions and decisions must be connected to a particular vision because collective action produces exponential results. Leaders within higher education should seek to establish authentic buy-in and ground level ownership of institutional goals to experience the healthiest level of transformation within their organization that transcends their leadership agendas. Indicators of successful actions may include adoption in existing processes, common language and activity that transcends leaders.

Processes. The way organizations enact decisions is meaningful. Existing systems can serve to hinder or hasten organizational goals. Moreover, these processes need to be informed by and connected to the vision that the institution has for itself.

> Isolated actions, no matter how effective or purposeful, are not enough. Instead, a college needs a shared, aspirational vision for both student learning and for the institution's future. Schools have mission statements and strategic plans, but too often these do not animate the work of individuals or groups across campus. To thrive, everyone in the institution must be asking, how does my work contribute positively to our student learning? (Felton, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert, Barefoot, 2016, p. 10)

Prevalence of consistent cross-campus work groups and deep faculty and staff participation in the strategic planning process supported the clarity that came from participation in this process as well as the proper systematic relationship between vision, goals and action steps. The evidence of successful, pervasive and inclusive

strategic planning indicates that the change that has occurred at Eastern may be something that can be sustained because existing systems managed to authentically participate in planning processes. Moreover, the evidence that grass-roots actions and departmental engagement exists on institutional level priorities suggests that the existing systems have been created to maintain improvements that have occurred.

Language. Language that is shared by community members indicates a deep understanding of organizational goals and agendas, where everyone senses they have a role to play on the team. In the case of Eastern, there was a shared language of retention. Participants, no matter their organizational rank or position of power, were able to speak a language of retention. By this, I mean they were able to discuss what the organization as a whole was doing as well as what their department was doing to work on student retention. In most cases, participants were aware of where their department was on measures of student retention as well as the overall institutional measure. When actions and decisions permeate to the level of language useage, adoption has occurred. In this case, the "language of retention" that the participants could speak was a reflection of the narrative of the president, their shared participation in the planning processes and their own creative actions toward the collective vision.

Implications

Based on this research, there are several implications for research, practice and policy. These ideas are listed below and emanate from the findings and discussion above. These proposals precede the future research section because they stand alone based upon this research, even though they could be reinforced by future research.

Research

Almost no research in the body of work that comprises persistence, retention and completion address the role of leadership in shaping these outcome measures. This gap is a rich opportunity for new scholarship as leadership is a broad lens and improved retention and graduation rates are desirable improvements that higher education leaders wish to realize at their local institutions. This research only began to draw upon a theoretical relationship between the two fields of study. Further study could include leadership style, program level leadership and many other established leadership theories that might be applied as a lens to understand how to move institutions toward improvement on these outcome measures.

One particular finding of this research might additionally offer the possibility of deeper scholarship. The idea of institutional health as a relevant condition for positive student success outcomes is related but not identical to the research on "Conditions that Matter" for positive student retention (Kuh, et.al. 2005). Further developing the idea of institutional health and potentially indicators of health and non-health would be worthy scholarship that might produce relevant and practical recommendations for improvement.

Finally, the notion of leader priorities as expressed in their narrative emerged as a unique finding for this research. The idea that what a leader expresses through formal and informal means may shape the outcomes of institutional improvement has broad implications that could be applied to more than just the study of student success outcomes. The role of a presidential narrative was not a pre-existing notion as it pertains to student success outcomes. This finding produced some additional curiosity for me as

a researcher and possibility for others as they seek to elucidate the relationship of leaders and student success outcomes improvement.

Practice

Leaders should focus on the health of their organizational environment. Good decisions will not prosper in poor environmental conditions. Based on this study, indicators of health include working governance systems where faculty and administrators work *together* toward organizational goals. Next, there should be creative, department-level solutions aligned with organizational goals and leadership that encourages collaboration across the university.

To foster optimal institutional health, leaders should focus on cultivating a sense of belonging among faculty and staff members. However, this focus should not dictate the central focus of the institution, rather it should occur as a professional and humane disposition toward those valuable employees that enact and provide the valuable educational experience for students.

To this end, leaders should place students as the primary center of the university system. Institutional mission will inform this focus. Leaders should measure and fund initiatives that are centrally aimed at student success. Leaders should talk and keep talking about successful student retention and graduation rates. This language should become common and accessible throughout the campus to the extent that any level of employee can speak knowledgably about their role in retention and graduation initiatives. A consistent discourse, particularly a presidential narrative, that is focused on successful student persistence toward degree attainment permeates institutional

actions and decisions. What presidents and senior leaders value and discuss moves groups to action.

Finally, leaders should utilize inclusive planning models where input orientation from a broad array of stakeholders influence institutional outcomes toward stated goals. When initiatives are measured according to stated performance measures and funding flows through the model, the opportunity for institutional improvement is powerful. Based on the findings of this study and the above analytic generalizations, this study has met its goal of contributing new knowledge to the student of leadership toward improved student success outcomes for minoritized students.

Policy

Government measures must move beyond first-time, full-time freshmen to fully capture the range of student enrollment patterns and to accurately represent institutional success or non-success measures. As the measures have become increasingly public, there has been no progress in the development of explanatory or performance indicators that are related to the measures, leaving families ill equipped to interpret these measures. While reporting these measures is a requirement for every institution, this reporting has failed to propel improvement. If additional, related measures, based on known improvement elements (ie. Environmental factors) were developed then these measurements may have more impact on institutional performance on critical student success outcomes.

Limitations of Study

As with any study, there were limitations to this study that included a limited number of participants and additional dynamics at play within the institution that might

inform the study of leadership toward improved student retention. One such dynamic is the ability to deeply study the culturally engaging campus environment theory (CECE) as the main focus of the study. According to Museus (2014), there are two main pillars in this model which are that these environments: (1) exhibit a greater sense of belonging, more positive academic dispositions and higher levels of academic performance and ultimately (2) be more likely to persist to graduation" (p. 210). While there were examples of this model evident on the campus, this research was not designed to fully demonstrate that the model did or did not exist on the campus. Since there are similarities to this model with the existing environment at Eastern, and non-focused comments from participants included the relevance of diversity activities toward retention, it is likely that this institution could be used as a model for the CECE. However, the study was limited to the focus of the study and did not provide adequate time to explore this likely theoretical link.

A second limitation in this research is that it is not sufficient to yet build a theory of student retention leadership. If this study could be repeated for institutions that also have managed to close the gaps between students from all racial backgrounds, the results could be compared and new knowledge could be gained toward building a theory of leadership toward improving student retention. Similarly, this institution was limited by geographic location and institutional type. A liberal arts institution and a public research institution have very different dynamics that contribute to or produce barriers for leaders seeking to make institutional improvements on measures of student retention and graduation rates.

Future Research

It is recommended that future research investigate this same phenomenon at other institutions where gaps do not exist for minoritized students. A multi-case study would strengthen the theoretical possibilities related to the role of leadership in influencing student retention and graduation rates. This study was limited by its ability to dig into the student level perceptions of environment and decisions. Adding the element of student perceptions would further strengthen the ability of this research to discuss the institution from a 360 viewpoint.

An additional topic to explore, emerging from this research is the idea of presidential narratives. As I sought to provide literature background as a basis for this analysis, presidential narratives were not a prominent topic in higher education literature. The following questions are some that would be worth explore as a means to understanding the impact of presidential narratives. To what degree are presidential narratives clear? To what degree are they implemented? To what degree are they embraced by university communities? What difference does this make? While the application to higher education leadership literature is immediately apparent, when applied to the retention literature, importance increases. As this research suggest, if a president stays consistently focused on one thing, it can shape an entire institution. This idea carries possibility for making a true difference in closing gaps in attainment that have languished for far too long in American Higher Education.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that the university strategic plan was a vehicle for the achievement of the president's espoused leadership legacy, which was to make a

difference in student retention and graduation rates at Eastern Connecticut State University. It is clear that institutional culture is imminently important for student and institutional success on measures of retention and graduation rates. Healthy culture is aligned with healthy outcomes. Leaders shape this culture through the decisions they make, the initiatives they fund and what they raise up as important through their leadership narratives. The degree to which leaders are able to systemize their focus and involve frontline employees may bear relevance on the sustainability of such actions. However, when such actions and initiatives become integrated into the institutional environment that it becomes "the way we do things" rather than just what we do, these actions have risen to the level of cultural norms and may transcend who occupies leadership seats. Leaders must take seriously their role in shaping their local context through the decisions and actions they make as well as upon what they choose to focus.

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Appendix A: Pilot Study

Pilot Study (Excerpt)

Prior to the collection of data for this research study, a case study was conducted in order to ensure that the case meets the qualifications of the boundaries of this research study. Initial research laid the foundation for this inquiry and solidified the research approach to be employed in this manuscript. The following section gives a brief description of the pilot study and relevant data that emerged to help refine the research questions for this inquiry. The purpose of including this information is to make plain the amount of data that was already reviewed prior to designing the plan for data collection and analysis as outlined below.

Hearing a speech at a professional conference by President Nuñez of Eastern Connecticut State University prompted the researcher to consider the connections between leadership and retention programming success. Prior to hearing Nuñez speak, the question of effective leadership and retention programming had remained unconnected in the mind of the researcher. Yet after listening to Nuñez tell her personal story of leadership, the role of the achievement gap in her state and her program that made an impact in the lives of minoritized students at her institution, interest in the nexus of leadership and retention study began.

Initially, to make sense of the pilot study data, the researcher created a chronological narrative of the program by reviewing researcher memos taken during Nuñez's keynote speech at the 2013 Higher Learning Commission Conference, Nuñez's own notes for this speech, and a video of Nuñez giving a similar speech at Worcester State University in 2010. The chronological narrative included Nuñez's personal story

of educational attainment, her relationship with her mentor, the program elements, and her own report of how she decided to identify participants. In reviewing that narrative, the researcher drew a preliminary analysis about Nuñez's motivation for creating the retention program and her personal connection with program participants. The researcher used constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of the two speeches to create the foundation for an initial understanding of Nuñez's story, program, and leadership style. Analysis of this data occurred simultaneously with its collection. Merriam (2009) writes, "collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research. In fact, the timing of analysis and the integration of analysis with other tasks distinguish a qualitative design from traditional, positivistic research" (p. 169).

Ten speech transcript documents, university website information, a book chapter all by Nuñez, and detailed research notes were collected for analysis. The process for analysis during the pilot was iterative throughout the study, with the printed speech transcripts and research notes being revisited. The ten speech transcripts that were available on the Eastern website served as a rich source of data. An important decision was made in the theming process for the pilot study about which of the speeches would serve as the main focus. Primary focus was placed on speeches that had been given at Eastern Connecticut State University, because those speeches were the most similar to one another in context and would allow for the best comparison. This decision limited the speeches to six of the ten for coding. This decision also provides connection to the research study because the context for the case is Nuñez's leadership of a program situated on Eastern's campus.

The researcher did not choose to eliminate the initial two speeches from the Higher Learning Commission Conference or the comparison speech at Worcester State as a form of reference data because those speeches revealed the context of Nuñez's program, which was the basis for the researcher's initial interest in Nuñez's leadership style. They also provided critical data for building the chronological narrative. However, these two speeches were not themed or coded as a part of this analysis.

While reading each of the six Eastern speeches, the researcher kept research notes about Nuñez's leadership style. These notes included direct quotations that stood out as examples of emerging analytical observations. In a second review of the speeches, open coding (Yin, 2011; Merriam, 2009) was used to begin to form initial categories for understanding Nuñez's leadership. Open coding, also known as level one codes, may use the wording of the document or interview (Yin, 2011). As Charmaz (2014) discusses, coding serves the purpose of data collection and assigning meaning to that data. These initial codes (Yin, 2011) were checked with a research team member. His confirmation of the coding on a select number of speeches helped ensure the dependability of the findings (Schwandt, 2007). After the initial codes were written, a third review of the speeches helped solidify the early findings. After a fourth, personal review of the speeches, the researcher made an exhaustive list of all the themes that had emerged from each of the speeches. Notes were made on the actual transcripts of the speeches in order to maintain connection between the initial codes and the larger categories or second-level codes (Yin, 2011) that would emerge, connecting sub-themes with the larger categories. Through a process of reassembling, the exhaustive list of 119 codes was organized into six groups of related themes (Yin, 2011). Axial coding

(Merriam, 2009) was used to group the themes into more succinct categories. Axial coding are those categories that come from grouping open codes as they are related in meaning (Merriam, 2009).

From the axial codes (Merriam, 2009), three main themes emerged to classify the leadership style of Nuñez: transparency, inclusivity, and student-focused. The actual names of the themes emerged from the researcher's perspective (Merriam, 2009). The research team peer-review process allowed for strengthened dependability of emergent themes (Schwandt, 2001). Three processes that supported intercoder reliability improve the study's internal validity: peer review, the initial observations of the in-person events, and the review of the documents that were available for analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Appendix B

Email to Gatekeeper

February 3, 2017 at 2:33pm

RE: President Nùñez

Dear [redacted],

Thank you for your email. I am a current doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma and would like to talk to Dr. Nùñez about the possibility of coming to Eastern to study her retention program. The purpose of this study would be for my dissertation. I think a 15-20 minute phone call would be sufficient. I am available on the 8th of February from 8am-10am CST. Does she have any time during that block? Thank you in advance for your help. I look forward to speaking with her. Please let me know if there is any information she needs from me prior to the call.

With Gratitude,

Jessica Rimmer

Appendix C

Email to Participants from Gatekeeper Outlining Goals

Good Morning everyone,
Below are questions that Ms. Rimmer asked me to share with everyone that she will be interviewed this week.
Thank you,
[redacted]

How did the president and a presidentially appointed retention committee considerably increase retention rates for undergraduate students at Eastern Connecticut State University? In order to answer this research question, the following sub-questions will need to be addressed:

- What is the institutional environment of Eastern Connecticut State University?
- What were the decisions and actions of the president and presidentially appointed retention committee, including organizational processes and discussions that surrounded decision-making?
- How were decisions actualized/enacted?
- What are administrator perceptions about the outcomes of the decisions?

--
Jessica Rimmer, M.Ed.
Vice President for Student Engagement and Success
Title IX Coordinator
Mid-America Christian University

[redacted]

[redacted]
Institutional Advancement
Office: [redacted]

"Success should not be reached alone, but together."

Ways to Support Eastern

Appendix D

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Faculty and Staff

1. Tell me a little about your educational background and how long you have served at Eastern.
2. What is the scope of retention efforts at Eastern?
3. What, if any, role have you had in retention efforts?
4. Can you describe the process for decision making as it pertains to making decisions that are aimed at improving student retention?
5. In your opinion, what has been the most successful decision or action that the institution has taken to improve retention?
6. What is President Nùñez's current involvement in the work of retention?
7. If you were in charge, is there anything you would do differently than what is already happening to improve retention.
8. How would you describe the Eastern environment? (Alt.) Can you tell me a story that would illustrate what it is like to be a part of Eastern?
9. Is there anything I did not ask about that you think I need to know?

Appendix E

Interview Protocol with President Nùñez

1. You described the desire to leave a legacy as a driving reason for focusing on student retention. As a president, you could pick anything, why did you pick this issue for your leadership agenda?
2. Why did you choose to form a strategic planning committee? Recently I understand there is a new retention committee. What is your goal with that committee?
3. How do you make choices about the committee compositions?
4. What role do you play in the planning process?
5. Is there other work that takes place outside the committee work to improve retention?
6. What is the scope of retention work at Eastern?
7. From your perspective, what makes this work successful?
8. Can you tell me about the way that the work of the committee impacts decisions around funding retention initiatives?
9. What are you most proud of from the work on retention?
10. Did you encounter any barriers to success in this work?
11. How would you describe the Eastern environment? (Alt.) Can you tell me a story that would sensitize me to what it is like to be a part of Eastern?

Appendix F

Eastern Connecticut State University; 2013-2018
Strategic Planning Committee by Position and Initiative

Chart Constructed from Publically Available Documents on www.easternct.edu/

Committee on the Future of Eastern (COFE) Co-Chairs:

Elsa Nùñez, President
William Salka, Professor of Political Science

Committee 1: Academic Direction and Quality	**Committee 2: Articulate Eastern's Vision Statewide**	**Committee 3: Addressing the Achievement Gap**	**Committee 4: Diversity and Workforce Development**	**Committee 5: The Role of Graduate Education at Eastern**
Subcommittee I: Student Success	**Co-Chairs:** *Edwin Harris*, Director of Enrollment Management *Edward Osborn*, Director of University Relations	**Co-Chairs:** *Ann Anderberg,* Assistant Professor of Education *Kimberly Armstrong Silcox*, Director of Center for Community Engagement	**Co-Chairs**: *Lourdes Ardel*, Director of Human Resources *Wendi Everton*, Professor and Chair of Psychology Department	**Co-Chairs:** *Hari Koirala*, Professor and Chair of Education Department *Elizabeth (Libby) Scott*, Professor of Business Administration
Co-chairs: *Gloria Colurso*, Professor and Chair of Biology Department *James Diller*, Assistant Professor of Psychology	**Members** *Gregory Ashford*, Financial Aid Coordinator *Christopher Brechlin*, University Assistant/Systems and Assessment Coordinator, Center for Community Engagement *Branko Cavarkapa*, Professor and Acting Chair of Business Administration *Joseph McGann*, Director of Institutional Advancement *Michael Palumbo*, Technical Support Analyst, Information Technology Services *Michael Pernal*,	**Members** *Kenneth Bedini*, Vice President for Student Affairs *Emily Blanford*, Winthrop Hall Director, Housing and Residential Life *Charles Chatterton,* Associate Professor of Health and Physical Education *Carmen Cid*, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences Hope *Marie Cook*, Associate Librarian and Head of Library Curriculum Center *Madeleine Fugère*, Associate Professor of Psychology *Clifford Marrett*, Interim Director of the Center for Internships and Career	**Members** *Stacey Close*, Interim Associate Vice President for Equity and Diversity *Kimberly Dugan*, Professor and Assistant Chair of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work *Susan Heyward*, Director of Academic Advising Center *Joshua Idjadi*, Assistant Professor of Biology *Gregory Kane*, Assistant Professor of Health and Physical Education *Cara Bergstrom-Lynch*, Assistant Professor of Sociology,	**Members** *Kathleen DeFranco*, Assistant Bursar Christopher Dorsey, Associate Director of Admissions *Peter Drzewiecki*, Associate Professor and Assistant Chair of Environmental Earth Science Department *Jaime Gómez*, Interim Dean of the School of Education and Professional Studies *James Howarth*, Vice President for Finance and Administration *Peter Johnson*, Associate Professor of Math and Computer Science *Doncho Petkov*, Professor of

	Executive Vice President *LaQuana Price*, Assistant Director of Admissions *Carrie Robinson*, Constitution Hall Director, Housing and Residential Life *David Stoloff*, Professor of Education and Director of the Center for Educational Excellence	Development *Yaw Nsiah,* Professor of Biology *Niloufar Rezai*, Interim Director of the Child and Family Development Resource Center *William (Bill) Stover,* Director of Family and Community Partnerships for Windham Public Schools *Nancy Tinker*, Director of Facilities Management *Carol Williams*, Associate Dean of the School of Continuing Education	Anthropology and Social Work *Leslie Ricklin*, Professor of Education *Heidi Roberto*, Administrative Assistant to Director of Library Services *Kemesha Wilmot*, Assistant Director of the Center for Internships and Career Development *Janice Wilson*, Associate Librarian *Laura Worthington*, Energy Technical Specialist for the Institute for Sustainable Energy	Business Administration *Catherine Tannahill*, Associate Professor of Education *Jeffrey Trawick-Smith*, CSU Professor of Education
Members *Catherine Cocola*, Student *Amy Coffey*, Associate Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences *Candice Deal*, Assistant Professor of Business Administration *Stephen Ferruci*, Associate Professor of English *William Gammell*, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Institutional Effectiveness *Edwin Harris*, Director of Enrollment Management *Anita Lee*, Associate Professor of Health and Physical Education *Joseph Tolisano*, Chief Information Officer				
Subcommittee II: Academic Quality				
Co-chairs: *Ross Koning*, Professor of Biology *Dimitrios Pachis*,				

Professor of Economics				
Members *Patricia Banach*, Director of Library Services *Rhona Free*, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs *James (Drew) Hyatt*, Professor and Chair of Environmental Earth Science *William Leahy*, Associate Executive Director for Institute for Sustainable Energy *Denise Matthews*, Associate Professor of Communication *Elizabeth Pelletier*, Student *Russell Sampson*, Associate Professor of Physical Sciences and Assistant Director of Wickware Planetarium *Sudha Swaminathan*, Professor and Associate Chair of Education *Huan-Yu (Alan) Tu*, Associate Professor and Assistant Chair of Math and Computer Science				
Subcommittee III: Student Life				
Co-chairs: *Jeffrey Calissi*, Associate Professor of Performing Arts *Jennifer (J.J.) Cobb*, Assistant Professor of Theatre *Carlos Escoto,* Associate Professor of Psychology				
Members *Christopher Ambrosio*, Assistant to the Director of Student Activities *Sarah Bartosiak*, Student *Chiaku*				

Chukwuogor, Professor of Business Administration *LaMar Coleman*, Director of Housing and Residential Life *Kenneth J. DeLisa*, Vice President for Institutional Advancement *Walter Diaz*, Dean of Students *Jeffrey Garewski*, Chief and Director of Public Safety *Jeffrey Konin*, Director of Intercollegiate Athletics *Martin Levin*, Director of Student Transition Services *Xing Liu*, Associate Professor of Education *Paul Serignese*, Assistant Director of Housing and Residential Life *Michael Stenko*, Director of Alumni Affairs				